

Newsletter September 2019

In this newsletter article, we shall explore the mystery surrounding the existence of iniquity that prevails in the very presence of a holy all-powerful God who explicitly opposes it. The Apostle Paul specifically spoke of this mystery in his second letter to the Thessalonians: **“For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only he who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way”** (2Th.2:7). It must be stated at the outset that this is a very complex subject, which in many ways is beyond human understanding. That said, we shall risk a rather simplistic discussion of this mysterious enigma in hopes of understanding it from our frail human perspective. For that reason, it is not possible to be dogmatic about various aspects of this article beyond that in which God’s Word is absolutely explicit. As Paul exclaimed, **“O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out”** (Ro.11:33)!

We shall first define “iniquity” and then determine its source. Following that, we shall examine God’s extreme effort to eradicate it. God’s efforts have not come about through a single instantaneous act, but instead is being accomplished through a long and painful process that He has orchestrated over time.

Inasmuch as God is holy, just, good, and omnipotent, the question immediately arises regarding how iniquity can simultaneously exist in his exalted presence. This mysterious conundrum is commonly referred to as the Theodicy, which has been described by theologians and biblical scholars in various ways much as follows: 1) “The vindication of divine goodness and providence in view of the existence of evil.” 2) “A defense of God’s goodness and omnipotence in view of the existence of evil.” 3) “An explanation of why a perfectly good, almighty, and all-knowing God permits evil.” and 4) “A vindication of God’s goodness and justice in the face of the existence of evil.” Yet, none of these statements fully explain this strange coexistence. Thus, let us more closely examine the phrase “mystery of iniquity” that Paul used in Second Thessalonians Chapter 2 verse 7. The English word “mystery” is derived from *musterion* in the Greek, which literally means to “remain silent concerning an important matter.” Many mysteries were hidden from mankind through God’s silence in the Old Covenant, only to be later revealed within the New Covenant. The Gospel was one such mystery (cf. Ro.16:25), as was the mystery concerning Christ Himself (cf. Ep. 3:4). The Apostle Paul also spoke of the mystery of faith (cf. 1Ti.3:9) as well as the mystery surrounding how a man and woman become one flesh within marriage (cf. Ep.5:31,32) and the ultimate mystery of the triune Godhead: **“And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory”** (1Ti 3:16). While the New Testament sheds considerable light on these mysteries, the mystery of iniquity remains an unresolved conundrum.

The English word “iniquity” is derived from *anomia* in the Greek, which is a broad legal term that includes any transgression or violation of God’s law and divine will (i.e. sin). Iniquity is not a created thing, but describes the corruption of that which God had previously created as good. For that reason, God vehemently hates iniquity. Synonyms for iniquity include, a dark state of mind, willful lawlessness, wickedness, immorality, and many other evil thoughts and acts of every imaginable sort. That defined, we must now seek to determine where and how iniquity had ever come about in God’s perfect universe.

In eternity, before the heavens and the earth were created, God had created a multitude of magnificent angelic beings, and chief among them were three archangels who are named in Holy Scripture as Gabriel, Michael, and a third named “Lucifer” (Hebrew, “bright son of the morning”). This definition found within Lucifer’s name likely means that he was the most prominent and most beautiful of the three, and also that He was the first to have been created. Therefore, Lucifer enjoyed the closest possible relationship with God. These three angelic spirit-beings were created of pure spirit that had been taken from God’s own substance. In that sense, they were more god-like than any other of God’s created intelligent beings. Each archangel commanded a loyal host of subordinate angels holding lesser rank under their direct supervision. All three were faithfully subservient to God with fierce loyalty and faithfulness and were perfect in all their ways – until a hidden fault of iniquity was suddenly discovered in Lucifer.

We read of this terrible discovery in Ezekiel’s prophecy, wherein God said to Lucifer: **“Thou wast perfect in thy ways from the day that thou wast created, till iniquity was found in thee”** (Eze 28:15). Therefore, we find that iniquity had its origin in Lucifer, the highest ranked of the three archangels, whose pride in his personal beauty and favored position with God had so corrupted him that he saw himself as equal, even superior, to God, his Creator. We read of Lucifer’s willful determination to usurp God’s sovereign authority in the five “I wills” of

Lucifer found within the text of the prophecy of Isaiah: **“How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! *how* art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations! For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north: I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High”** (Is.14:12-14; emphasis added).

In response to Lucifer’s willful iniquity, a war was waged in Heaven by the archangel Michael (cf. Da.12:1), accompanied by all the loyal angelic hosts, against Lucifer, who was aided in his rebellion by his fallen angels (i.e. demons). Lucifer could not prevail against Michael and his heavenly hosts that vastly outnumbered his evil forces two-to-one (cf. Re.12:4). Due to the high and powerful position Lucifer had once occupied, God was loath to instantly destroy him, for there was as yet none to replace him. Having lost this war against the hosts of God, Lucifer capitulated to Michael’s victorious forces. He and his demons were expelled from Heaven (cf. Re.12:7,8) and cast down to a newly-formed desolate earth (see below). Even so, Lucifer was still required to regularly stand before God to report his activities on earth (cf. Job 1:6,7). After his fall, Lucifer is commonly referred to in Scripture as *Satan* in Chaldean, (“the accuser”); in Hebrew, *Abaddon* (destruction); and in Greek, *Apollyon* (the destroyer), and by various other descriptive names such as a great dragon, the old serpent, and the devil: **“And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him”** (Re.12:9). To avoid any possible confusion, we shall hereafter refer to Lucifer in our dialog as Satan, for he continuously attempts to justify his own iniquity by accusing others of secretly harboring his own fault (cf. Job 1:9-11).

Even before this great war, God through his omniscience had devised a complex plan to thwart all future efforts of Satan and his subordinate angels who opposed his will. In the beginning of this elaborate process, God created the physical heavens and the earth (cf. Ge.1:1), on which He had incarcerated Satan. Even so, through subsequent acts of his creation, which took place over five days, God carefully prepared the earth to be a perfect habitat for what would one day become his crowning glory – a fully sanctified and perfected human race to share in his glory, and which would provide Him the means He sought for the ultimate demise of Satan’s iniquity.

Upon this same earth, in which Satan had been previously incarcerated, God prepared a guarded place, a garden (i.e. an Eden), as an abode for the first man. So it was that on the sixth day, Adam, was created by God (cf. Ge.1:26,27). Unlike the angels and other spirit-beings that God had previously created, Adam was created to inhabit a physical material body, which was composed of the same elements contained in the earth itself (cf. Ge.2:7). In that sense Adam was created to be a little lower than the angels, who consist of pure spirit (cf. Ps.8:4,5). When first formed, Adam’s physical body was still and lifeless, until God breathed the spirit of life into it. It was at that very moment that Adam became a living soul, composed of body and spirit, yet uniquely formed into the image of his Creator.

Having no past history or innate knowledge, Adam was created completely innocent – he was a morally blank slate. God had said, after surveying all that He had created that it was “very good” (cf. Ge. 1:31), The Hebrew word for good, *tobe*, describes the positive acceptability of a thing or activity for its intended purpose. Therefore, it is important for us to understand that “very good” does not equate with perfection, nor does Adam’s initial innocence indicate that he was a perfect being. Inasmuch as Adam was created in the image of God, his Creator, he was given some, but certainly not all of the extensive attributes of his Creator (cf. *God’s Communicable Attributes*, CRC Book I pages 93-101). There is none beside God, nor could or would God create his equal, lest any of his divine sovereignty be relinquished to a creature. Unlike the Creator, the creature is subject to corruption through pride and self-gratification, which leads him to desire every form of iniquity. This fact is substantiated by the fault of self-pride that God had discovered within the beautiful archangel, Lucifer.

Because God saw that it was not good that Adam should live alone upon the earth, lest his uniqueness immediately corrupt him, God created a companion for him in order to keep him humble (cf. Ge.2:18). Eve was not created directly from the dust of the ground as was Adam, but was taken out of Adam’s side (cf. Ge.2:21-23). Her soul, although separate from Adam’s, was initially dependent upon Adam for life. Their lives were inseparable and fully intertwined by God, thus constituting the first marriage of a man and a woman together as one flesh. For a time all was tranquil, as Adam and Eve lived in harmony together within an innocent state of faithful obedience to their Creator. They jubilantly ate of the abundant fruit of the trees of the garden – including the fruit of the tree of eternal life, which God had provided for their perpetual existence.

Nevertheless, God would not allow this innocent childlike state to continue, for a state of total innocence also meant that Adam and Eve were completely ignorant as well. Although, they regularly walked with Him in the garden, they could have no intimate knowledge of Him or his ways, nor could they communicate with Him concerning anything of eternal significance. They were essentially automatons that acted and reacted automatically, not with reason born of personal knowledge. Being totally naive, they had no sound understanding of the goodness that they enjoyed, for they had no understanding of anything to compare it against. While breaking down this wall of innocence would prove disastrous for Adam, it was imperative for God to do so in order to develop a future redeemed mankind that would fully know Him, and would freely choose to serve Him out of an abiding love of all that He is and for all that He had done on their behalf.

To facilitate that necessary end, God had placed a tree in the garden, which bore a fruit that when eaten would provide Adam with a sudden “knowledge of good and evil” (cf. Ge.2:9). This tree was located at a very prominent place near the very center of the garden. Adam was informed by God that the eating of that fruit was strictly prohibited, and warned him that should he do so, it would bring death upon him (cf. Ge.2:17). This was the only prohibition that Adam had ever faced, and the consequences of failing it would be unthinkable – death. The tree in the garden did not simultaneously produce evil and good fruit, but instead produced a single fruit that when eaten gave an enlightened awareness and knowledge of good and evil. Good and evil are two paths of thought and conduct that are in direct opposition one to the other. Therefore, to eat of the fruit of that tree demanded that a choice be made of one over the other. Inasmuch as the two paths were antithetical to the other, it would prove impossible to simultaneously select both, or to alternate back and forth from one to the other. Evil corrupts good, and good obliterates evil much as light obliterates darkness; in the human mind each continuously wars against the other. Heeding God’s warning, it is quite probable that Adam, with Eve at his side, had both carefully avoided even looking upon this fruit; therefore, they were not tempted by it.

Following the warfare in Heaven in which Satan was soundly defeated, he had been cast down to the earth as we have observed. So it was that Satan was able to enter the garden, albeit in the physical form of a serpent. We know that Satan could not have “sneaked” into the garden without God noticing him, for God is omniscient. God had to know; therefore, God must have permitted it to obtain evidence of Adam’s integrity in the face of enticing temptation. We note, however, that Satan, did not approach Adam, but instead approached Eve, whom he correctly considered to be the more vulnerable of the two, inasmuch as she had been taken out of Adam.

“Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden (Re.3:1)? Here we find that Satan, having taken on the form of a serpent, started by cunningly asking a question in the form of a statement, with which he knew Eve would agree was largely true. **And the woman said unto the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden: But of the fruit of the tree which *is* in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die”** (Re. 3:2,3). To Eve’s credit, she readily saw the fallacy in the serpent’s statement that had included “every tree.” She then told him of God’s prohibition against eating the fruit of that one particular tree. Inasmuch as God had not prohibited Adam from merely touching the fruit, she may have already been tempted to do so, but had been restrained by Adam.

“And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die: for God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil” (Ge.3:4,5). Here we find Satan outright lying to Eve about the death penalty God had firmly established; stating instead that God knew if she partook of it, her eyes would be opened such that she would become as “a god” knowing good and evil. Eve yielded to this temptation, and then she enticed Adam into partaking of the outwardly-pleasant fruit (cf. Ge.3:6). Immediately, both their eyes were opened to the existence of evil as an alternative to good, which they were incapable of reconciling. Adam and Eve could no longer claim innocence or ignorance, for they had been infused with Satan’s iniquitous desire for evil. They attempted to cover their naked shame with fig leaves, and then they tried to hide from the face of God (cf. Ge. 3:8), whose judgment was both swift and sure: **“Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire *shall be* to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee. And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed *is* the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat *of* it all the days of thy life”** (Ge.3:16);

Satan's iniquity spread like a fire out of control to consume all of Adam's race, such that all men must now endure physical death, as God had prescribed for Adam's blasphemous act of disobedience. Adam's iniquity was quite evident in Eve's first child, Cain, who was so infected with Satan's iniquity that, in an act of jealous rage, he murdered Able, his younger brother. For a time, Adam's race was allowed to continue on without divine intervention – until it finally reached a depth of sinful corruption so great that God determined to destroy mankind in a great universal flood (cf. Ge.6:5-7; 7:11-22; Newsletter, August 2015). Out of that perverse early generation, God chose to redeem one man, Noah, with his immediate family, in order to establish a new beginning for the human race (cf. Ge 7:23).

Satan survived the deluge completely unscathed inasmuch as he is a spirit being without physical substance. He immediately renewed his blasphemous rebellion against God by again spreading iniquity throughout the post-antediluvian human race, by first corrupting Noah through Ham, his youngest son (cf. Ge. 9:21-24). The Scriptures then chronicle two momentous events in which God sought to restrain the human race from their sinful iniquity. He called forth Abraham out of egregious idolatry (cf. Ge. 12:1,2). Through the faith He imputed to him, God established a great nation from a ragtag people that He freed from cruel bondage in Egypt. He sought to halt the spread of iniquity within that chosen nation, Israel, by establishing a strict legal system, the basis of which were ten written commandments that He gave to Moses. God also established a ceremonial law along side those commandments through which the death penalty for transgression of the law was demonstrated by the sacrifice of animals. It demonstrated how a man's iniquity could be imputed to another in order to provide an atonement acceptable by God. First, God established human judges (cf. Jd. 2:16 ff.), but when that failed to sufficiently curb man's evil passion for iniquity, he gave them kings to sternly rule over them. Israel failed to live up to God's high legal standard despite warnings of God's spokesmen (i.e. prophets) He sent to them. Each time Israel fell into iniquity, they were severely judged by God, after which the remnant repented and were restored by Him – only to fall again. For the blood of bulls and goats could never provide a permanent atonement for mankind's sin (cf. He.10:4); it required the sacrificial death of a fully righteous man. Yet, among all the descendants of Adam none could be found, for all men were and are infected by iniquity from birth (cf. Ps. 51:5).

Lastly, God sent his divine Son to Israel, He having taken on the form of human flesh through incarnation in the womb of a human mother named Mary (cf. Lu. 2:10-14). Israel rejected and cruelly crucified Him; thus bringing to an end the sacrificial system, which ultimately led to the total destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple in AD 70. However, iniquity's eradication will ultimately be accomplished by God in a sanctified remnant of mankind, purchased by the sacrificial blood of His incarnate Son. Even as Eve was taken from the side of Adam, out of the riven side of Jesus Christ came forth his beloved Church, which is far more beautiful and incorruptible than Adam's Eve. Even so, Satan immediately sought to corrupt her with his evil passion for iniquity.

In the days in which we live, the mystery of iniquity is still very much at work; inasmuch as, Satan who "holds fast" to men's minds and propagates his iniquity will continue to do so – until he is eventually taken out of the way (cf. 2Th.2:7). In last month's analysis of world conditions (Newsletter August 2019), we described how this iniquity within depraved individuals has fully infiltrated our many temporal churches, our families and societies as well as our national governments from the very top down. As the final seven years of the last days looms up before the world, even those of us who are securely in Christ must be on constant guard against any hint of iniquity born of a false sense of pride in self. We must always remember that apart from Christ, we are but as the dust of the ground, for even our faith in which we take our stand has been given to us only by and through Him who died for us (cf. Ro.12:3). It is He and He alone that we must trust for our salvation, not ourselves.

We mortals are but pawns in this great war against iniquity; but for those of us who shall overcome in Christ, the reward is very great indeed (cf. Ro. 8:35-39). For, it is He **"Who hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began"** (2Ti.1:9), The resurrected and glorified Christ is presently poised to replace Satan at the right hand of God when the last seal of his inheritance is broken open (cf Re.11:15); and in the eternal ages to come, his sanctified remnant of mankind will replace all of the fallen angels that had been under Satan's command. As the glorified remnant of mankind takes their rightful place in Heaven, Satan and his demonic angels will be cast into the eternal lake of fire located in the vast depths of outer darkness. The mystery surrounding God and iniquity will thus be resolved, as the source and existence of all iniquity is forever eradicated from God's perfect universe through His perfect justice. © Arthur J. Smith September 2019