

The Letter Of Paul To The Ephesians

*⁷In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, ⁸which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight ⁹making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ ¹⁰as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.
(Ephesians 1:7-10. ESV)*

Message 13

The Mystery Of Christ

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Ephesians 3:1-13

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Introduction:

Open your Bibles this morning to Ephesians 3:1-13. This little paragraph represents something of a sidebar in the flow of Paul's letter. Look at verse 1:

¹For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles— (ESV)

Paul is going to start a prayer on the basis of what he has just said in chapter 2 verses 11-22 but then as he hears himself speak and as he imagines his people hearing this he realizes he needs to set the table and so he begins a digression or a side bar. He doesn't pick up the prayer again until verse 14. Look quickly at verse 14:

¹⁴For this reason I bow my knees before the Father ... (ESV)

And off he goes with his prayer. So all of what we have in verses 2-13 is a sidebar as Paul realizes he needs to help us connect what he just said in 2:11-22 with what he had previously introduced in the eulogy of chapter 1 which is going to form the basis of his prayer in chapter 3; and so here he slows down and connects the dots. He explains to them in patient detail the mystery, the means and the marvel of the plan of God in Jesus Christ. Let me read to you now the full text of this sidebar and then we'll pull those things out for you as we go. Hear now the Holy, inspired and inerrant Word of God:

¹For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles—²assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God’s grace that was given to me for you, ³how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. ⁴When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, ⁵which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. ⁶This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

⁷Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God’s grace, which was given me by the working of his power. ⁸To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, ⁹and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, ¹⁰so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. ¹¹This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, ¹²in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him. ¹³So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory. (Ephesians 3:1-13. ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

The Mystery

The first thing Paul wants to make sure they’ve understood is what he means by the term “the mystery”. Paul already introduced the idea of mystery back in chapter 1:

⁷In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, ⁸which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight ⁹making known to us **the mystery of his will**, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ ¹⁰as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. (Ephesians 1:7-10. ESV)

Paul already told us that God had a plan from eternity past to bring all things in the universe back into orbit around Jesus Christ as centre through the plan of redemption. He had a plan to bring people into right relationship with God and with one another and to restore peace to all the cosmos. Paul calls this plan “a mystery”. In the Bible a “mystery” is an open secret that can only be understood by supernatural revelation. This plan was there in the Old Testament but it was obscured by sin and ignorance. The fact for example, that God meant to bring in people from all nations was not unknown in the Old Testament, it was just unseen. It was there however, think of Isaiah chapter 2:

² It shall come to pass in the latter days
that the mountain of the house of the LORD
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be lifted up above the hills;
and all the nations shall flow to it,

³ and **many peoples shall come**, and say:
“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob,

that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.” (Isaiah 2:2-3. ESV)

There you have it! All the nations, MANY PEOPLE shall come and learn the ways of God and walk in his ways. How is that a mystery? It is a mystery because no one seemed to see it. The Jews did not exactly understand their mission as being to go and reach the nations. They called the nations dogs and wanted to have nothing to do with them. In Jesus’ day a popular Jewish prayer was: “Thank you God that you did not make me a woman. Thank you God that you did not make me a slave and thank you God that you did not make me a Gentile dog.” That isn’t the prayer of a person who understands God’s desire to reach the nations. It was there, but no one saw it! But now in Christ that mystery has come to light. Like a mighty rushing wind from heaven blowing away the sands and revealing long lost treasures so now the Gospel shines the light on the eternal purpose of God to reconcile the nations to himself! That was what Paul was saying in chapter 2:

¹³But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility (Ephesians 2:13-14. ESV)

Before moving on Paul wants to make sure they understand what the mystery is. The mystery is that now in Christ the nations are being gathered into the house of God. Through the Gospel – the Good News of what God has done in Jesus Christ to secure our salvation – his life, death and resurrection – through the Gospel God has opened a way home; a way back to peace with God and fellowship with one another. Look at chapter 3:6:

⁶This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

The Gentiles are being gathered in as full partners in God’s house. That’s the mystery, that’s what was hidden in plain sight in the Old Testament with respect to the eternal will of God.

The Means

Secondly now Paul wants to make sure we understand the means. Its wonderful to know that a way home has been opened and that this way home, once obscured by darkness has now been

well lit by revelation and truth, but how will we get people near enough to benefit? If an inter-dimensional portal has been opened in the desert somewhere and is now well lit with flood lights, the question still remains how we will get people to know of it and to go through it?

This is where Paul connects the Gospel to the Great Commission. Look at what he says in verse 7:

⁷Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power. ⁸To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, **to preach to the Gentiles** the unsearchable riches of Christ (ESV)

How are we going to shine the light on the way home that God has opened up for all the nations through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus? Through preaching. Preaching is the ordinary means by which the extraordinary purposes of God are accomplished. Now, before you tune out and give yourself an out clause because you are not a preacher I want you to notice two very important things. First of all I want you to notice the word that Paul uses in verse 7. He says: "Of this Gospel I was made a minister" now, in English that sounds like Paul was saying: "Of this Gospel I was made a pastor" because in English we use the words "pastor" and "minister" as synonyms, but that's not what Paul says. He uses the word *diakonos* from which we get our word "deacon". Of this Gospel I was made a deacon. The word means "servant" in fact it is a word often used in Greek culture to describe the servants who bring food, what we would call waiters and waitresses. Paul is saying that he is a waiter serving the nations from the bounty of God's table set forth in the cross of Jesus Christ. Now, here is why that is important. If Paul said: "Of this Gospel I was made an apostle" then we could tune out because Paul would have been talking about himself and not about us, but he doesn't say that. Not all Christians are apostles of the Gospel but all Christians are servants or deacons of the Gospel. Turn and look at the person next to you. Chances are that person is not an apostle. But – if that person is a Christian then they are a deacon, they are a servant of the Gospel and so are you. Paul is saying to his readers: "I've been recruited as a waiter and so have you. We are servants of the Gospel with a message of God's goodness to proclaim".

We also know that this is a job not just for the apostles and pastors because of what Paul says in verse 10:

¹⁰so that **through the church** the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. (ESV)

Through the church. Not “through the apostles”. Not “through the elders”. Not “through the pastors”. Through the church. God’s plan – God’s chosen ORDINARY MEANS for bringing the nations back into fellowship with himself and with one another - is a Gospel preaching church. Let’s stop there and ask the very important question:

How Is The Gospel Preached “Through The Church”?

1. The Gospel is preached to the people and by the people

In this passage it can’t be denied that Paul has a unique role. He talks of himself as bringing this message to the Gentiles and he addresses this church as “you Gentiles” so it is clear that he and they understand Paul as having preached to them the Gospel. But it is equally clear that Paul includes them in the call as the church to preach the Gospel. What he brought to them, they now must bring “to the nations”. This is how it works in the church. Pastors bring it to the people and the people bring it to the nations. I preach the Gospel to you – I try and show you week after week how all the law and the prophets point to Christ so that you can take that and bring it to your neighbours in this city Monday to Saturday. Believe it or not, this actually seems to work. If you were here last week you know that we took a break from our Ephesians series to preach on the Prodigal Son parable because we had Jason Hildenbrandt with us who dramatized the story. If you’ve been here with us for a really long time you know that I preached on that parable two years ago as part of our series on Luke. I know that but I didn’t think too many other people would remember that but earlier this week at soccer practice John Atkinson blew my mind, he said: “I noticed that your message this Sunday was slightly different from the last time you preached on the parable two years ago. I spotted a few refinements by comparing my notes against the notes from last time.” Who keeps notes in their Bible on two year’s worth of sermons? Apparently John does which actually seems to indicate that this whole plan of God to use ordinary means and the foolishness of preaching is actually working! The way its supposed to work is that I preach to you so that you understand the Gospel so that you can remember that and preach it to your friends. Each Sunday as we shine the light on Jesus from different vantage points in the Bible you are supposed to be growing in your ability to open the Bible with your

neighbours at any point in it and to make a bee line to Jesus Christ upon the cross. That's how this is supposed to work and by God's grace it seems to be happening. Preaching the Gospel in the church happens first to the people and then by God's grace and with God's help THROUGH the people unto all the nations of the earth.

2. The Gospel is preached through the church by means of the ordinances

I've decided to use the word "ordinance" here instead of "sacrament" because it sounds a little bit like "ordinary" and because it reminds us that the sacraments are not optional, they were ORDERED by Christ. I've been in churches where baptism and the Lord's Table were treated as optional. I was a pastor in a church that styled itself as a seeker church and that rarely celebrated communion because it might weird out the new comers. I worked there for three years and don't recall ever attending a communion service, we would very occasionally do one on a Sunday evening but as the youth pastor I was not required to attend. Communion was treated as optional, and even worse as an embarrassing impediment to outreach. The Bible says the exact opposite.

In teaching one of his churches to celebrate communion Paul said:

²³For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, ²⁴and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." ²⁵In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." ²⁶For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, **you proclaim the Lord's death** until he comes. (1 Corinthians 11:23-26. ESV)

Do you understand that the act of communion, as indeed the act of baptism, is intended to PROCLAIM the Gospel? Communion is supposed to be mysterious and a little bit confusing to newcomers because explaining it to them is one of the very best ways EVER of preaching the Gospel. Listen, if you need some help sharing the Gospel to your unsaved friend, here is what you do; invite them to a communion service. After the service ask them if they understood what was happening. Of course, they will not have understood and they will ask questions and as you answer those questions you will be giving the Gospel. They might ask: "Why do you use bread instead of slices of cheese?" Good question. We use bread because bread represents the basics of life. God feeds us with life through the life and death of Jesus Christ. The bread also reminds us of our bond with one another. If you look closely at a piece of bread you can see tiny grains of wheat in there but it is still one loaf. So it is with us. We are all unique individuals but we are one church, one body of Christ. They might ask: "Why the cup of grape juice?" We use grape

juice because it looks like blood. Some churches use wine because the word for wine in the Bible is the same as the word for blood. That reminds us that our union with God and with one another is only because of the shed blood of Jesus Christ upon the cross. By his blood we are healed. When the wine or juice goes into our stomach it passes into our blood and becomes part of us and that represents how the Spirit of Christ enters our hearts and becomes part of us and makes us a new people before God. They might ask: “Why do the elders serve and not the priest only like in the Catholic church?” Because the elders represent the people and our pastor is not a priest he is a teaching elder and the elders serving us reminds us that the grace of God is shared by all Christians equally and that there is only one mediator between God and man the God-man Christ Jesus. You tell them that and you’ve told them the Gospel. The ordinances of the church are part and parcel of our proclamation of the Gospel to the nations, they are here for God’s glory and for your help.

Thirdly:

3. The Gospel is preached through the church by means of its fellowship and fruit

We could handle these separately but because the latter so naturally flows out of the former it is probably best to treat them together. Most of us don’t connect fellowship with witness but in the Bible the two go hand in hand. The church in its constitution and in the manner of its internal fellowship is treated in the Bible as a miracle in and of itself! I mean, look around! In our fellowship today, former prostitutes will worship beside wealthy businessmen and doctors will worship beside people who didn’t graduate from high school and rich people will worship beside poor people and white people will worship beside Pilipinos and Blacks and Hispanics and Asians and old people will worship alongside young people and single people will worship beside breeders and where else in the world would you find a place like this? The diversity and unity of the church is a miracle that cannot be explained apart from the cross of Jesus Christ. Church, let me flip that upside down for you. This is why targeted church is an absolute abomination. It is so common now for churches to target a demographic; to say, we’re the church for baby boomers or builders or young people or young families or we’re the church for disaffected gen xers or whatever. The marketing experts tell us this is the way to go but I say to hell with targeted church – it is an abomination and it obscures the miracle of the Gospel. The miracle of the Gospel, said Paul in chapter 2 is that all these crazy people who have every right to be hostile to

each other have come together in loving fellowship through the cross. The fellowship of this church should be impossible to explain to our city apart from the wonder of the cross.

And secondly the love and fellowship of this place should overflow the banks of our church and roll down and bring life to all people in this city. Fellowship should overflow in good works that adorn the Gospel. Paul said that to Titus, a young pastor he was mentoring. He told Titus to make sure that his church was full of people showing the fruit of faith, leading the way in good works to all:

so that in everything they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior. (Titus 2:10. ESV)

Our good works in the community are like ear rings or necklaces around the face of God's beautiful bride. They draw attention to her beauty and grace. Our good works draw attention to our good message: the Good News of what God has done in Christ to secure our salvation.

Thirdly – we've looked at the mystery, we've discussed the means and now we should be impressed by the marvel of it all.

The Marvel

Look at verse 12; the marvel of God's grace is that:

we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him. (Ephesians 3:12. ESV)

Bold, confident access. This is what we've been looking for since way back in Genesis 3! Before Adam's sin we walked with God in the cool of the day, since Adam's sin we have been living in exile and in darkness and under the sentence of death. But in Christ, through our faith in him, we have boldness and access with confidence to God our Father and Creator; to walk with him as before in the cool of the garden breezes. Does the enormity of that blessing penetrate your minds? In the Old Testament only the High Priest could enter the presence of God and that only once a year and that only with a rope tied around his waist lest the holiness of God flash forth against him and consume him where he stood. But now we walk right in – no rope required – we walk right in without fear. We have no reason to fear because the cross of Jesus Christ has

SATISFIED the wrath of God and now we know only his favour, his mercy and Fatherly grace. That is the marvel of the Gospel and against that marvel, what is suffering? What is tribulation and what is cost?

The Challenge

Paul ends with that challenge. He says in verse 13:

¹³So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory. (Ephesians 3:13. ESV)

Paul says: “Given the mystery – that God has made a way home for the nations through the cross- and given the means – that God is preaching this Gospel through the church, through ordinary means and ordinary people – and given the marvel that our Gospel service will actually result in exiled sinners being adopted into the loving fellowship of Father God – given all of that – the mystery, the means and the marvel – what is tribulation and what is cost? Paul was led to this sidebar we recall by his saying:

¹**For this reason** I, Paul, **a prisoner for Christ Jesus** on behalf of you Gentiles— (ESV)

For this mystery, because of this means and compelled by this marvel I am a prisoner for Christ Jesus. I am suffering, I am paying a heavy price but it is as nothing to me! What is my suffering compared to your salvation? What is my loss compared to your gain? It is nothing! Less than nothing it is actually GLORY and HONOUR and PRIVILEGE to suffer on behalf of the Name. When you understand what’s at stake church, when you understand the mystery, the means and the marvel, suffering is gain. Suffering is glory. Suffering is often agency. It is so often through our suffering that we give our best witness to the victory of the cross. How will people know if we truly believe what we are telling them? If we bear our suffering with grace and if in our suffering we give God glory. If we can look beyond death and see life they will know that Christ is risen and has triumphed over the grave; so embrace the cost. Don’t live your whole life trying to avoid pain, don’t live your whole life trying to avoid getting noticed or giving offence. Embrace the cost as the context of your witness. Do not mourn as the pagans who have no hope and do not lose heart over what we may suffer – it is our glory and this is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

