

“The Mystery of Christ”

The Sixth in a Series of Sermons on Ephesians

Texts: Ephesians 3:1-13; Isaiah 57:12-20

In many ways, Christianity is like a good novel—redemptive history is an unfolding and compelling drama played out on the stage of human history. Throughout the first half of the redemptive story (the Old Testament), the central character (Jesus) remains hidden deep in the shadows. Early on in the story, God called a people unto himself (the nation of Israel), but as the story continues to unfold, God sends a series of prophets who declare that the good things God has promised to Israel, will one day extend far beyond the narrow confines of Israel’s borders. The great turning point in the redemptive story comes about when Jesus leaves the shadows and takes his place on center-stage, fulfilling all of the promises made about him centuries in advance. In his letter to the Galatians (chapter 4:4-5) the Apostle Paul speaks of this coming of Jesus as follows: “*But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.*” But in the third chapter of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle tells us that the mystery of Christ has been revealed to him, enabling Paul to fulfill his calling as Apostle to the Gentiles. The mystery of Jesus Christ is tied directly to God’s saving purposes, which do indeed extend well beyond the borders of Israel, just as Israel’s own prophets had promised. In fact, the gospel which Paul preaches will go to the very ends of the earth, and God will save each and every one of his elect (Jew and Gentile) and unite them together into one body, the church of Jesus Christ. What had been hidden is now revealed. What had been a mystery is brought out into the open.

We have been working our way through Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians, and we now come to the third chapter of this profound and remarkable letter. Before we turn to our passage (vv. 1-13 of Ephesians 3), we need to develop the context for the key points Paul will make in this chapter, because his points flow directly out of those important themes Paul has already developed in the first two chapters.

Recall that Paul opens the epistle by setting out the big picture of God’s redemptive purpose. As we have seen, the Apostle takes us from eternity past unto the resurrection of our bodies at the end of the age. The Father has chosen us “in Christ.” The Father sends Jesus Christ to save all those whom the Father has chosen. The Spirit then applies the work of Christ to God’s elect, ensuring that we came to faith when the gospel was first preached to us. In the final verses of the first chapter, Paul prays that struggling Christians would be able to live confidently in the knowledge that God has chosen them “in Christ.” He also prays that in the midst of our struggles, we might see God’s love for sinners when we look to the cross, where our Savior suffered for us, in our place.

Paul also reminds us of the fact that in Jesus’ resurrection from the dead it is clear that God intends to accomplish his purposes for his people. And because Jesus subsequently ascended into heaven, Jesus now rules over all things in this age (things temporal) and in the age to come (things eternal). Because of this, Christians can have hope in the midst of any difficult circumstances, because in Jesus’ death for us we see God’s love, and in Jesus’ resurrection we see that God’s power extends over our greatest foes, death and the grave. It is in this light that Paul prays in verses 18-19 of Ephesians 1, may “*you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might.*” Our hope is grounded in God’s gracious and sovereign control over all things.

In Ephesians 2, we see Paul the realist when it comes to fallen human nature. The Apostle reminds us that we were “dead in sin,” and that we are by nature “children of wrath.” This simply means that we are guilty before God, that we deserve his wrath, and that we can do nothing whatsoever to save ourselves from our predicament. But even though our circumstances are grave, because God is love, he chose us “in Christ,” and he sent Jesus to redeem us from our sins. Our sinful condition is in Paul’s mind when he writes that we are saved by grace through faith, not by works. But having saved us by grace through faith, we become God’s workmanship in Jesus Christ, men and women who now do good works.

In the second half of Ephesians 2, Paul lays out God’s redemptive historical purposes for Jew and Gentile. The Jews did indeed have a number of very important redemptive-historical advantages over the Gentiles. Those outside the nation of Israel were separated from Christ, aliens from God’s holy nation, strangers to the covenants of promise. The Gentiles were without hope and without God in the world. But God sent Jesus into the world to shed his blood to make peace with all those sinful rebels (Jew and Gentile) who fell in Adam. And because Jesus removed the ground of God’s anger toward us (the guilt of our sin), we are now able to approach the Holy God as our Savior and friend. And because of this two-fold reconciliation (God to humanity, humanity to God), Jew and Gentile are to be reconciled to each other, and together are made members of Christ’s church.

This was Christ’s purpose from the very beginning, Paul says, to make the two divided peoples into one. In verses 18-22 of chapter two, Paul writes “*we both [Jew and Gentile] have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.*” In Christ’s cross God’s people find their peace with God, and with each other.

So, it is in the light of Paul’s discussion in Ephesians 2:11-22 regarding God’s purpose in uniting Jew and Gentile in Christ, that the Apostle can go on to speak of the mystery of Christ as revealed to Paul himself in chapter 3:1-13. This mystery, now revealed, is the basis for Paul’s mission to the Gentiles, of which this letter is an important part.

In verse 1 of chapter 3, we learn of Paul’s difficult circumstances at the time he composed this letter: “*For this reason I, Paul, [am] a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles.*” This statement actually resumes the prayer which Paul began back in Ephesians 1:15-19, but from which he had broken off so as to explain his point about the human predicament, salvation by grace through faith, and the purpose of Christ Jesus in reconciling Jew and Gentile (chapter two). In fact, Paul will resume his prayer in verse 14, when he tells us “*I bow my knees before the Father.*” Whenever we hear someone like Paul use the “I, Paul” formula, we need to sit up and take note of the fact that what follows is very significant. Paul uses this formula to solemnly remind us that he is the Apostle to the Gentiles, and that now he has something of great significance to say to us.¹ This is Paul’s way of saying “listen up.”

Paul also identifies himself in this verse as a “prisoner” for Jesus Christ. He does the same thing in Philemon 1:9, which clearly indicates that this epistle (which Paul probably intended to be circulated in a number of churches) was written while Paul was imprisoned in Rome, awaiting his appeal before Caesar. According to Acts 21, Paul had been initially arrested in Jerusalem. But as a Roman citizen, Paul had the

¹ Bruce, Ephesians, 309.

right of appeal, and so he went from Jerusalem to the Roman capital of Palestine (Caesarea) for a hearing (Acts 23), before going on to Rome, where he composes this epistle while under house arrest.

According to Luke's account in Acts, as well as Paul's own testimony, Paul was arrested in Jerusalem because of his mission to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. In the first chapter of Philippians, written during this same imprisonment, Paul writes these words: *"I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear. Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former proclaim Christ out of rivalry, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice."* There can be no doubt this is what Paul is referring to when he calls himself, *"a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles."* Even in the midst of such hardship, Paul still rejoices when the gospel is preached.

But Paul (like so many of us), gets so excited about his message, he repeatedly digresses, as he does yet again in verse 2—*"assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you."* Paul is not only an apostle, he is an apostle with a very specific mission. He is the Apostle to the Gentiles. He has been given the assignment of taking the gospel to the Gentile world by none other than the risen Christ himself. Although a Rabbi by training, a tent-maker by vocation, and a Jew by culture and heritage, Paul fulfills his task joyfully (as we see in Philippians) even if this means sitting under arrest in Rome, waiting for an audience with Caesar (Nero) or one of his representatives. Paul knows full-well that the success of this mission (the stewardship of which has been given him) fully depends upon the grace of God for its ultimate success.

Paul states in no uncertain terms that his mission to the Gentiles flows directly from the nature of the gospel which was revealed to Paul by none other than Jesus Christ himself. In verse 3, Paul speaks of *"how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly."* No doubt, whenever he speaks of a mystery made known by revelation, Paul is referring to the events recounted in Acts 9, which occurred when Paul was on his way from Jerusalem to Damascus to hunt down and arrest Christians, when suddenly Jesus appeared to him, blinded him, and called him to be the Apostle to the Gentiles. Paul went on to Damascus, where he was converted, baptized, filled with the Holy Spirit, and then commissioned for his work. As Calvin so aptly put it, God took Saul (a wolf, in the sense of being a persecutor of Christ's church) and then turned him into Paul, not merely a sheep in God's flock, but into a shepherd of the sheep—something only God could do.

In verse 4, Paul informs his readers of this epistle, in part, about his purpose in writing. *"When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ."* The "mystery of Christ" is the content of what Christ has revealed to him. In Colossians 2:2, Paul speaks of Christ as God's mystery. Since God is unseen and transcendent he reveals himself primarily through the person of his son, Jesus. This is why in 1 Corinthians Paul can call the gospel (the declaration of those things Jesus has done on behalf of sinners) the revelation of the "mystery of God" (1 Corinthians 1:21). While the person and work of Christ was at one time hidden in the types and shadows of the Old Testament, now that Jesus has come in the flesh, what had been hidden has been brought out into the open and made public.

In the verse next verse, Paul makes this point regarding the mystery of Christ quite explicitly: *"which 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.” These things had been hidden to those men who lived in prior generations until the coming of Jesus Christ. But through the preaching of those men whom Jesus had chosen and filled with his Spirit—the apostles and prophets—this mystery surrounding God’s purpose was revealed, and through the work of Christ, the barrier wall (the ceremonial and cultural aspects of Judaism) would no longer divide God’s household.² In the new covenant, the new temple and dwelling of God’s Spirit is the church of Jesus Christ. This church is built upon the foundation of the apostle’s teaching of which Jesus himself was the chief cornerstone which upheld the rest of God’s spiritual house, and of which we all (whether we be Jew or Gentile) are said to be living stones, filled with the Spirit.

Based on Paul’s connection between the mystery and the prior generations (what had been previously hidden in the Old Testament) and that now being revealed in the gospel, we can see the deadly doctrinal error on the part of those (especially in the proto-gnosticism of the apostolic period) who argue that Paul and the Apostles taught them a number of esoteric, secret, religious mysteries, when, in fact, Paul’s point is exactly the opposite. That which had been hidden (in terms of being promised, but not yet fulfilled) has been brought out into the open, in what Jesus accomplished for us in ordinary human history.

In other words, Christianity is not a religion of religious techniques which allows the truly “enlightened ones” to gain insight into the secrets of spirituality. Christianity is a religion grounded in what Jesus did in public before hundreds of witnesses. The blood he shed to save us was RH typeable. The cross upon which he died, would give us splinters if we rubbed our hand roughly across it. The tomb in which he was buried was sealed and placed under guard, was empty because Jesus was raised from the dead and walked out of it, to be seen by witnesses who saw him eat fish, and who touched the wounds in his hands and feet. Christianity is not about secrets. Christianity is about what Jesus did for us in history, and the gospel is the public proclamation of what Jesus did for sinners. Good news is something proclaimed! Paul’s point here is that what Israel’s prophets had predicted (the mystery) has been revealed in Jesus Christ. Paul’s own calling, as apostle to the Gentiles, is to proclaim the gospel (what was predicted in the Old Testament has been fulfilled by Jesus Christ) to those nations and peoples who previously had no contact with YHWH or the covenants of grace and the covenant at Mount Sinai.

Therefore, anyone who sees the essence of Christianity as tied to something subjective in the sinner’s experience (often tied to the language of “spirituality”) or ethics (our conduct) does not understand Christianity. For both our experience and practice as Christians flow out of our trust that what Jesus did for us on a cross, on a particular Friday afternoon, outside the city of Jerusalem, turned aside God’s anger from us. Had you been there on that Friday you would have seen it, heard it, and smelled it. What happened that Friday afternoon is the only thing that turns aside God’s wrath and anger toward my sin, and brings me back to God who is not longer my angry judge, but my Savior and my friend.

In terms of Paul’s main point expressed previously in chapter two, God’s purpose was to unite Jew and Gentile into one new people. This was the mystery of which he has been speaking, a point he makes explicitly in verse 6. *“This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.”* Once Jesus steps out of the shadows of the Old Testament, what God had promised (although kept hidden in the background) is that now all elect Gentiles are fellow heirs with Israel and together as one people who will receive everything God has promised to his own. This is directly tied to the original promise made to Abraham under the terms of the covenant of grace way back in Genesis 12, when God promised Abraham that *“in you all the families*

² Bruce, Ephesians, 314.

of the earth shall be blessed.” Since Jesus Christ is that seed (redeemer) promised to Abraham, it is in Christ that God will now fulfill all of his covenant promises, which, as Paul now tells us, include both Jew and Gentile. In fact, not only was this foretold in Genesis 12, Isaiah 49 (as we saw last time), but also in Isaiah 59:19 (part of our Old Testament lesson), where we read these words. *“So they shall fear the name of the Lord from the west, and his glory from the rising of the sun; for he will come like a rushing stream, which the wind of the Lord drives.”* The gospel has gone to the ends of the earth.

What all of this means is that together with believing Jews, all those Gentiles who trust in Christ are fellow heirs, members of Christ’s body, and partakers of the same promise that God had promised to Israel. Now we see that it was God’s purpose all along to fulfill his covenant promises through the life and death of Jesus Christ. As Paul put it back in verses 13-16 of chapter 2, *“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.”* All of this is found in the gospel which God called Paul to preach to the Gentiles.

As Paul says in verse 7, *“Of 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.”* This gospel is the reason why Jesus Christ appeared to Paul on the Damascus Road. This gospel is the reason why Paul is imprisoned in Rome. This gospel is the reason why Paul cannot wait to gain an audience with the Roman emperor, and be released so that he can undertake another gospel mission to the Gentile nations. And this is why Paul can solemnly remind his readers that this is why we need to listen carefully to what he says in this section of his epistle. For Paul, it is all about the gospel. For in the gospel we see God’s free grace and the working of God’s great power. Paul knows that it is this message (and this message alone) which gives life to sinners.

When speaking about this, Paul cannot help but be amazed at all that God has accomplished through his own humble efforts. *“To 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.”* Paul is not feigning humility here—anyone who has ever once seriously considered the guilt of their sins feels like the least of the saints. When Paul says in 1 Timothy 1:15 that *“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost,”* he means it. But, no doubt, Paul also knows that every Christian feels the same way. If God can save Paul, a persecutor of his church, and then change him into the apostle to the Gentiles, well then, there is hope for everyone. Paul also knows that his own sinful state was no obstacle to God, who called Paul (because God was gracious) to preach the gospel to Gentiles. Paul is a prime example of what God’s grace can do.

Paul calls the gospel “the unsearchable riches of Christ.” This gospel is absolutely the best news people have ever heard. God saves the worst of sinners. God saved me. God saved you. No amount of money, no amount of success, wealth, fame, or celebrity is worth the knowledge that the holy God (who has every right to send you to Hell) has sent his son to die for you sins, and now draws near to you in Christ, desiring that you draw near to him, and that you live in the light of the knowledge that your sins are forgiven. These are the unsearchable riches of Christ of which Paul has been speaking.

With this gospel now proclaimed, nothing we need to know remains hidden. As Paul makes clear in verse 9, that in proclaiming the riches of Christ, God will *“bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things.”* No longer will there be anything left hidden in the shadows of the earlier chapters of redemptive history (the Old Testament). To his reader (mostly

likely a Greek-speaking Gentile in western Asia Minor trying to make sense of how Jesus relates to Judaism) Paul explains that God's purpose which is to save all of his elect in Christ, had previously been hidden. God created Adam, and promised him a redeemer. God called Abraham from Ur of the Chaldees to the land of promise, and then called Israel out of Egypt under the leadership of Moses, where they wandered in the wilderness for forty years before entering Canaan. God raised up a king for his people (David) and had them build a magnificent temple under Solomon. Then when Israel fell into unbelief God sent a series of prophets who called the people to repentance while promising a redeemer yet to come when the messianic age finally dawned. With the birth of Jesus we see how God's eternal purpose was behind all of this. The mystery has been revealed. What had been hidden is now out in the open. Everything has been made plain to all those who will see this through the eyes of faith.

As Paul sees it, the gospel creates the church and the church preaches the gospel "*so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.*" With the coming of Christ and the establishment of God's household (the church), no one can plead ignorance about the purposes of God. All those who are hostile to God's purposes, whether through heresy (i.e, the Judaizers), or through their rejection of Christ (unbelieving Jews), to those who see themselves not as sinners and therefore in no need of a Savior (self-righteous pagan Gentiles), collectively, are without excuse. So too are those Jewish and Roman political authorities who see the gospel as a threat to their self-preservation and who therefore refuse to submit to God's authority.

This brings Paul full-circle, back to the point he made in opening section of this epistle. "*This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him.*" What God had decreed to do in eternity past, he has done "in Christ." He then announces that to us in the gospel. And because of Christ's work on our behalf, we Gentiles who were dead in sin, and without God, strangers to the covenants of promise, now have full access to God. We have great confidence in God's purposes. All of this comes through faith. Paul is simply saying that the gospel is the realization of God's eternal plan. None of this came about by chance or accident. Everything God has done "in Christ" is now ours.

And so Paul can conclude this section by reminding all those, who having heard this, might be worried about him, "*So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory.*" No doubt, Paul is in difficult and trying circumstances. He knows those hearing these words will be concerned. But Paul reminds us that this is what God has ordained, and his circumstances advance God's purposes in some mysterious yet powerful way. By bringing Christ glory, Christ's glory is realized in us.

III. What, then, do we say as we wrap up?

Quite often we hear Christians (almost tritely) speak about God having a plan for everything. But when it is pointed out to them (biblically speaking) that this divine plan entails the doctrines of both predestination (God determines whom he will save and on what grounds) and providence (God foreordains all things) they immediately back-peddle, retreating into a false notion of fairness. "It wouldn't be fair if God . . ." But in the first three chapters of Ephesians, Paul, who is undergoing an unfair and horrific trial under Roman arrest, spells out how God has chosen his elect (Jew and Gentile) in Christ, sent Christ to die for them, and then called these elect to faith through the preaching of the gospel. Paul even states that his own imprisonment, unfair as that is, is God's plan.

As this gospel is proclaimed, what had been hidden (God's purpose to save all of his elect—Jew and Gentile in Christ) has now been revealed. This gospel was revealed to Paul by Jesus himself, and then

proclaimed to all through Paul and those prophets and apostles who God has raised up for this very purpose. Preaching this gospel may have landed Paul in jail, yet he rejoices because God's plan (to save his elect and bring them together in a new household—the church) is being fulfilled. Despite his own troubles, Paul realizes that this is God's purpose and everything that was hidden is now out in the open.

For Paul, this is the mystery of Christ—because of Christ's death for our sins, Jews and Gentiles are partakers of the same gospel and now beneficiaries of the same Savior. As Paul states in verse 6-7, *“this mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. Of 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.”*

If preaching this message lands him in jail, well so be it. God's plan cannot be turned aside or defeated by human sin. Through the ministry of Paul, the mystery of Christ is no longer a secret—we see the hidden unveiled in the gospel and its promises signed and sealed at this table. No longer are God's people divided by diet and culture. We are now one because of Jesus Christ's perfect righteous and shed blood, which save us from our sins and grants us entrance into the household of God.