

EPHESIANS

Part 5: “The Mystery”

Ephesians 3:1-13

Sunday, September 16, 2018

By David A. Ritchie

3 For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles— **2** assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God’s grace that was given to me for you, **3** how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. **4** When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, **5** 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. **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.

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. **8** 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, **9** and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, **10** so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. **11** This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, **12** in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him. **13** So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory.¹

Introduction

- Seven years ago about this time, I was convinced I was about to plant a new church.
- I thought I knew exactly what that church would look like.
- I thought we’d all be young, artsy, probably downtown in a rented space.
- I was twenty-seven and had just finished doing campus ministry, so I was expected to have a Lord of the Flies church for a season.

- But God surprised me.
- Instead of a plant, we became a replant. A church named West Amarillo Christian Church heard I was planting a church and asked if I would be willing to work with them.
- Instead of having no building, we had a great building.

¹ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Eph 3:1–13.

- The people I thought would be here left the city, and we became a multigenerational family seeking to show our city that God was capable of redeeming a broken church.
- On day we weren't necessarily the coolest church in Amarillo.
- In the early days, at least once per service, every light in the sanctuary would just randomly turn off.
- One the day of one of our first baptisms, the metronome was playing in the house mix. It was described by one of our visitors as Chinese torture. That guy never came back.
- Another day we showed up, and the sound system just wouldn't work.
- But we worshipped all the same.
- We weren't the coolest church, but we were a church where God was doing something undeniably special.
- The values that motivated the vision I had for a church did not change: a church that was centered on the gospel of Jesus Christ, as the transforming truth of God; a church that was committed to each other in community as the people of God; and a church that was committed to impacting culture as we engage in the mission of God.
- But the concrete picture of what I thought that church would look like had changed
- It was a different church than what I was expecting.
- And it was a *better* church than what I was expecting.
- Redeemer has been one of the greatest surprises of my life.
- This passage shows us how the church is one of the greatest surprises in history;
- that the Jewish messiah would turn out to be the savior of the nations;
- and that the church would be destined to become a woven fabric of all colors and tribes of people, displaying the glorious power of God's redemption.
- It is often said that God works in mysterious ways, and today we will see just that. This passage teaches us this: *God calls the unworthy into an unlikely community to accomplish an unbelievable task*. We'll spend the rest of our time today unpacking that statement.

Exposition

1.) God Calls the Unworthy.

- *"For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles—assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly." (Ephesians 3:1–3, ESV)*
- Paul draws the attention of his readers to his own story and his own call.

- He refers to his “stewardship” (οἰκονομίων),² which literally means that he is an “estate manager.” Paul is showing us this that he is not the owner of this ministry. He is a steward.
- Eugene Peterson renders this as meaning, “the part I was given in God’s plan.”
- And what is that part? Paul is the apostle to the Gentiles.
- This is historically true. Many of the earliest churches in Asia Minor and Europe were planted by Paul and his team, including the church of Ephesus.
- But if you know Paul’s past, he is about the most unexpected candidate for the Apostle to the Gentiles one could imagine.
- The book of Acts tells us about an earlier version of Paul that looks less like a missionary and more like a radical ISIS terrorist.
- **“And Saul approved of his [Stephen’s] execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.” (Acts 8:1–3, ESV)**
- **“But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.” (Acts 9:1–2, ESV)**
- But this Saul, as he is traveling to persecute Christian, encounters Christ. He is saved and called to be used by God (Acts 9).
- A religious zealot and a cultural chauvinist becomes the greatest cross-cultural missionary in history.
-
- As Paul writes this letter, he is in prison; Ephesians is a “prison letter.”
- He is sacrificing and suffering for those he once hated.
- O’Brien: “the particular point he makes here is that it is *for the sake of you Gentiles* since it was directly in consequence of his Gentile mission that he was now in prison.”³
- Even radical ideology can change.
- **“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. To me, though I am the very**

² “responsibility of management, *management* of a household, *direction, office.*” William Arndt et al., [A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature](#) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 697.

³ Peter Thomas O’Brien, [The Letter to the Ephesians](#), The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 226.

least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ,” (Ephesians 3:7–8, ESV)

- Examples:
- I was once an agnostic. I thought the Bible had no more credibility than fairytales with unicorns. But God saved me. The gospel I once mocked, I now proclaim.
- Bryant Lee, a pastor that I served with earlier this week, was former Muslim who came to church one day to murder the pastor but instead became a Christian.
- This is the power of the gospel word.
- No matter where you are, God can change you and use you for his kingdom.
- God likes to show off the power of his grace.

- Paul is saying, if God can change him, he can change anybody.
- Gospel change is evidence by radical humility.
- The gospel message or the call to ministry must never lead us to place of pride.

- Barclay: “If ever we are privileged to preach or to teach the message of the love of God or to do anything for Jesus Christ, we must always remember that our greatness lies not in ourselves but in our task and in our message. Toscanini was one of the greatest *orchestral conductors* in the world. Once, when he was talking to an orchestra as he was preparing to play one of Beethoven’s symphonies with them, he said: ‘**Gentlemen, I am nothing; you are nothing; Beethoven is everything.**’ He knew that his duty was not to draw attention to himself or to his orchestra but to let Beethoven flow through their playing.”⁴

- We are Toscanini and the orchestra. The gospel is Beethoven.

2.) God Calls the Unworthy into an Unlikely Community.

- The theme of “mystery” is repeated over and over in this passage, and appears over and over in the writings of Paul.

- What does mystery mean? A criminal has committed any crime and wants it to be covered up. Then a detective steps in and solves the case.
- When she was a little girl, my wife Kate and her little sister loved Nancy Drew books. She loved them so much she wanted to become Nancy Drew. She put a sign outside of her home that said “Kate and Emmie’s Detective Agency: We Will Solve Your Mystery for Free.”
- This was not the most cost-effective business strategy, but it didn’t matter because no one took them up on their offer.
- But the New Testament uses the word mystery in a different way.
- The mystery of the New Testament is not designed to be kept secret forever.

⁴ William Barclay, *The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians*, The New Daily Study Bible (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 144–145.

- This mystery is one that was designed to be revealed, at just the right moment.
- **Mystery (μυστήριον)** “is the unmanifested or private counsel of God, (*God’s secret*, the secret thoughts, plans, and dispensations of God...which are hidden [from] human reason, as well as [from] all other comprehension below the divine level, and await either fulfillment or revelation to those for whom they are intended.”⁵
- God has an open secret that he wants to show the world.
- God has concealed something that now he wants to reveal.
- *“When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, 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. 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”* (Ephesians 3:4–6, ESV).
- The mystery is that Gentiles who put their trust in Jesus are equal members of the family of God.⁶
- No one was expecting this to happen.
- Are Israel and the Church two completely different things?
- Does the church replace Israel so that Israel is irrelevant?
- No, but Church is part of, the continuation of, and the full manifestation of Israel.
- The Gentiles are, like a branch of an olive tree, grafted into the ancient root system of the body of Israel (Rom. 11).
- The practice of plant grafting allows a farmer or a garden grower to attach a branch or twig of one plant to the root system of another plant.
- The practice of grafting allows you to grow fruit in a zone that would otherwise be impossible.
- It also accelerates the fruitfulness and the potential for different and unexpected varieties.
- This is an unexpected turn, but not a deviation from God’s plan. The gospel Paul is preaching is not an innovation.⁷
- This was the plan all along.
- Long before the nation of Israel existed, we can glimpse God’s plan to redeem the nations in the promise he made to Abraham, the ancient ancestor of the Jewish people.

⁵ Arndt et al., 661–662.

⁶ “The secret plan is that God always intended to bring Gentiles, the non-Jewish peoples of the world, into fellowship with himself, on equal terms with his ancient people the Jews. And the good news—the ‘gospel’—is that God has now accomplished this through Jesus the Jewish Messiah, Jesus who is also the world’s true Lord.” Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 33.

⁷ O’Brien, 231.

- *“Now the LORD said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed”* (Genesis 12:1–3, ESV).
- The Prophets too spoke of a day when God would work salvation for even the enemies of Israel.
- *“In that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the LORD of hosts has blessed, saying, ‘Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my inheritance”* (Isaiah 19:24–25, ESV).
- This truth was prophesied by the prophets and implemented by the apostles.
- If you are in Christ, you are in the true “Israel of God” (Gal. 6:16).
- We are the inheritors of the promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob! The heir of David is our true king!
- Father Abraham had many sons; many sons had Father Abraham. I am one of them, and so are you.
- This multi-national people of God is one of the greatest surprises in history!
- On a practical level, this means unlikely spiritual community is evidence of the gospel.
- It is really easy to get along with people who are just like you and agree with you about everything. But gospel community is more than just making friends with people it is easy for you to get along with. Gospel community is something that displays the reconciling power of Jesus in unlikely and unexpected ways.
- Example: the Connors and the Gravleys

3.) God Calls the Unworthy into an Unlikely Community to Accomplish an Unbelievable Task.

- Community happens when Christians are:
 - Learning together
 - Sharing together
 - Caring together
 - Praying together
 - Growing together
 - Serving one another
- This all seems rather unimpressive when you are in the middle of it.
- The kingdom of God advances through this unlikely means of grace.
- Through the ordinary, the extraordinary happens.

- Christianity is the only major religions that is not culturally and geographically bound. Christianity by its very DNA is cross-cultural.
- Spiritual Community is also an act of spiritual war.
- *“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, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. 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. So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory.”* (Ephesians 3:8–13, ESV)
- The manifold wisdom of God displayed to the ruler and authorities; demonic forces, ideologies, and structure that systemically, reject God, distort truth and seek to stir hatred among humanity.
- But against this Church is designed to display to the watching world what it could never be outside of Christ.
- N.T. Wright: *“The heart of the present passage is verse 10, which is one of the New Testament’s most powerful statements of the reason for the church’s existence: the rulers and authorities must be confronted with God’s wisdom, in all its rich variety, and this is to happen through the church! Not, we should quickly add, through what the church says, though that is vital as well. Rather, through what the church is, namely, the community in which men, women, and children of every race, colour, social and cultural background come together in glad worship of the one true God.”*⁸
- Example:
- The Church in Hard Places conference ([Show picture](#)).
- This room would never come together under political ideology, musical preferences, or common interest. The only reason this people comes together is Jesus of Nazareth.
- Multiple people who don’t go to this church and people who are not even believers have emailed me asking me if they can know more about what we are doing.
- May we be a church for older and younger; for single and married; for black, white, and brown.
- May we be a church that seeks not to be served with our preferences, but serve our city and one another for the sake of the cross.
- May our city see in us the glory of the kingdom of God.

⁸ Wright, 36.

- This is not an easy calling. When you push against the darkness, the darkness pushes back.
- *“So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory.”* (Ephesians 3:13, ESV)
- Community is messy and costly and sacrificial and inconvenient.
- So was the cross.
- Jesus was broken, so we could become whole.
- He suffered alimentionation so that we could belong.
- He gave his body so that we could become part of his body the church.

- This is the mystery; God’s open secret to the world.
- *God calls the unworthy into an unlikely community to accomplish an unbelievable task.*
- May we display this mystery with our lives, our love for one another, and the way we come together as Christ’s body the church. AMEN.

Community Group Discussion Starters

1. *Summarize the passage in your own words.*
2. *Paul refers to himself and the ministry he was given by God: to be the apostle to the gentiles. In light of Paul’s past (See Acts 8 and 9), why is Paul such an unexpected candidate for this task?*
3. *How might God’s willingness to use Paul be an encouragement to us?*
4. *The mystery referred to in this passage is that the Gentiles (i.e., non-Jewish people) can become part of God’s people through faith in Jesus. In other words, the gospel has the power to create community among very different types of people. How should this truth determine the way we practice Christian community today?*
5. *In Eph. 3:10, Paul says, “through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.” In what ways do you think the church might be able to display the wisdom of God to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places in today’s world?*

Bibliography

- A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the New Testament: The Gospel Realized*. Ed. Michael J. Kruger. Wheaton: Crossway, 2016.
- Barclay, William. *The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians*. The New Daily Study Bible. Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002.
- Calvin, John, and William Pringle. *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*. Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010.
- Hughes, R. Kent. *Ephesians: The Mystery of the Body of Christ*. Preaching the Word. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990.
- O'Brien, Peter Thomas. [*The Letter to the Ephesians*](#), The Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
- Stott, John R. W. [*God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians*](#), The Bible Speaks Today. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979.
- Wright, Tom. *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon*. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004.