

Ephesians 3:1-21
This Great Mystery Revealed

Eph 3:2-13 (ESV) —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.

Paul is talking about revealing a hidden mystery; a secret “hidden for ages.” He says mystery four times in these verses, and he used the word before to introduce God’s ultimate purpose for the world. He said was God giving us a great gift, a Gift of Grace that “*He lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in Him (Christ), things in heaven and things on earth.*”(1:8-10) What Paul introduced as “*The Grand Theme*” of his letter, he explains more fully here. And it seems he realizes he forgot to tell us everything, so he interrupts his prayer to make sure we understand what God is really doing. We were dead but now we are alive, and it is a totally new kind of life. We were aliens and enemies but now, in an amazing way, Jews and Gentiles are friends. And even more amazing, we are friends in a family! God can bring peace to nations, yes, but can He really put an end to dysfunctional families? Paul wants to make sure we realize that it is God Himself who is revealing His plan and purpose to us, and Paul and the other Apostles are gifted instruments, under His control. They are serving for *HIS* pleasure—not theirs.

As we read Paul’s letters, we can see when Paul wants to emphasize something, something he wants us to clearly understand, he uses a word over and over. And he *LOVES* the word *mystery*, and he throws in more words to more fully describe a hidden mystery to add to the emphasis. Paul is saying this mystery is deep, really deep, like locked away under ground in a vault, that only God uncovers in His own time. And now is the time. *The Great Mystery Revealed*—it *WAS* revealed by Paul, and it is still *BEING* revealed by the Church, in every generation, through the gifting power of the Holy Spirit. So why do so few people seem to understand? Sadly, sometimes the Church has garbled the message, and often people just do not want to listen. Go back and read the life of Jesus, when His message was crystal clear, but so many failed to hear. We are no different today, in our culture and in our time.

First, let me say my wife loves mysteries—Agatha Christy mysteries, Poirot, Murder She Wrote, Murdoch. She usually knows “whodunnit” long before the ending. Me? I am

clueless. Even after the mystery is revealed I still don't get it and she has to explain it to me. Myself, I like Columbo because we, the audience, know "whodunnit" and Columbo is the one who doesn't know. In either case, all the clues are there, and once you know the answer to the mystery all the clues make sense (at least they are supposed to). The guilty party is revealed. All the players are gathered together and you find out "*The butler did it!*" This is the way Jesus used the word mystery when He said to His disciples in Mat 13 "*the knowledge of the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you...*" and when He met the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, Luke says, "*And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.*" Jesus told them "*all the clues are in the Scriptures,*" but you have to believe they are true and then you can see "*He's the ONE!*" Of course, our very desire to *want* to figure all this out is the Holy Spirit shining a big bright light on the clues and then into our minds!

Now let's get a little more technical. The Greek word for mystery is *mysterion*. Not much different from our English word is it? Which means we really haven't been told what it actually means in Greek. The Greek Lexicon by Louw and Nida¹ defines *mysterion*: "*the content of something not known until it is revealed to an in-group or restricted constituency...*" The heart of this definition; "*something not known until it is revealed*" is the way Paul uses this word. It means there *ARE* no clues. This is not our English meaning, and Louw and Nida add this: "*There is a serious problem in translating μυστήριον into the English expression 'mystery, for this term in English refers to a secret which people have failed to understand.*" All the clues are there, but we don't understand them and we can't figure out who the murderer is. Or, in the case of Jesus when talking to the disciples in Matt 13, all of the people were seeing the same miracles, seeing the same clues, but not everyone could see "*Jesus is THE GUY!*" Jesus said to them "*It has been revealed to you...*" meaning that Jesus has led them to understand the clues.

There are no clues about the Church before the resurrection of Jesus. This mystery is really hidden. It is locked away and covered up and "*cover up*" is another Greek word we see in v.3: "*the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly...*" The word we are looking for is "*revelation,*" which in Greek is "*apokalupto.*" "*Kalupto*" means *to cover up*, and "*apo*" means *remove*, so *remove or take away the cover*, to reveal the secrets that lie within. Let everybody see! Jesus did not use this word in Matt 13. He said, "*it has been given to you to know, to understand what is right in front of you...*" NOT "*revealing that which was hidden from view and covered up...*" But Paul says that the Father has hidden His plan for the Church until the time would come that He would reveal it as a magnificent gift of Grace to the entire world. This is how he says it in v.9: "*to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God...*" See the word hidden? It is the opposite of *apokalupto*, because our mystery has also been "*apokrupto*" which means hidden in a crypt, an underground vault. God covered up His plan in a sealed crypt, where it has stayed for all the past ages. See the difference? *Apokrupto* means *to cover over, to hide something*, that is what God did in the past. He buried the plan. *Apokalupto* means *to dig it up and take the cover off*, and that is what God did through Paul and the other Apostles, and what He is doing through us now. Remember, this revelation of the mystery of Grace is an ongoing project. That is until the final Revelation, the Grand *Apokalupsis*, where Jesus is uncovered as the King coming back to take possession of His world. We read about that in the John's final book called Revelation. But not today.

So Paul has “*brought the mystery to light*”, up out of the ground and into the daylight. Paul is still amazed and deeply grateful that God has called him and sent him out as one of the Apostles to reveal His plan, as he expresses in v.8-9: “*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...*” Because he is faithful to God’s call, Paul is a prisoner, serving at His pleasure.

Ultimately we will see that Paul is not upset about being a prisoner of Rome, because he sees himself as still free in Christ. He sees God’s purpose being moved forward and fulfilled, and not in spite of his circumstances but *because* of them. He tells the Ephesians not to lose heart, not to get discouraged just because he is in prison. He is in prison for revealing the Mystery, and it’s worth it! Don’t be discouraged, don’t get depressed by my circumstances, or yours. God is in control of it all and he loves us. Let’s listen to what he tells the people in Philippi: “*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 (those other people in the Roman government) 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.*” (Phil 1:12-14). Paul is writing Ephesus and Philippi from the same place, under the same Roman guard. All of the soldiers guarding him are hearing the Message—The Grand Mystery Revealed! So think about it, it is no longer a *BIG* secret. Even the people in Caesar’s Palace are finding out! And it has emboldened some of the saints in Philippi. Paul wants the Ephesians to see his imprisonment as actually “*your glory*” and not a mark of shame. They can rejoice with him in prison because Jesus Himself was crucified as a Roman criminal—and that also is to *your* glory, and it is *OUR* glory, too. God’s Kingdom turns shame into honor. It is really an upside-down world!

This brings us to the real heart of this entire chapter, to the question, “*Why is God revealing this Mystery to the world?*” Paul tells us God’s purpose in vv.10-11: “*... 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*” This is one of the most powerful statements of the reason for the existence of the Church. Look at that word *manifold*. It means “*many-sided, many-colored, many-splendored*” wisdom. It is a multifaceted diamond that sparkles with all the colors of a prism.² Paul says in the Church we experience a new life because the New Man has been unveiled through Jesus, and we all share a future hope. Do we always see this? Has the world seen the glory of Christ in the way the Church has done things over the centuries? Never think that God’s wisdom is clearly seen simply because the Church exists. Dan Wallace says about this passage “*The wisdom of God is displayed by what we DO with what we know.*”³ That is the Hebrew, Old Testament meaning of wisdom—the *skillful use of our knowledge*. Wisdom is knowledge applied, the *application*. The rulers and authorities in the heavens, both good and evil, are confronted with God’s wisdom when the Church imitates the character of Jesus and does the things Jesus did. Jesus was willing to give His life for His enemies, and Jesus has left His Body in the world to do the same thing. That is wisdom! The problem is, the evil powers in heaven are behind the governments and the religions, the greed and the idolatry, of this age. Evil powers and authorities create societies in their own image. They marginalize and kill people who

don't fit their narrow point of view.³ God, on the other hand, is creating one unified, multi-racial group consisting of formerly divided groups, and the Church serves a warning to all rulers that their time is at an end. For us, called out to be Christians, *"the Church is a place of untold and inexhaustible riches. Being a Christian is meant to consist of going from room to room in the king's palace, relishing the beauty and splendor of it all."*⁵ The Church is the storehouse of our resources and our strength.

Paul, a prisoner of Rome, reveals all the treasures of God's wisdom by proclaiming a crucified Messiah, now raised from the dead, as God's true and final ruler. The powers in Heaven and on Earth have been put on notice. And Paul knows he is in a battle, and not just with "flesh and blood." Paul also knows one of the greatest treasures is free and confident access to God himself. Jesus' death opened the door to the throne-room of the King. And this is where Paul takes us now: *"in Christ 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. For this reason I bow my knees before the Father..."* (Eph 3:12-14)

As we look back, much of Ephesians 1-3 is Paul praising God and praying for the Church. This doesn't mean these chapters do not contain some very good teaching, some sound doctrinal truth. They do! Could there be a lesson, an application of wisdom in the way Paul prays? Could it be that the best Christian doctrine comes from time in prayer? Paul's prayers teach us about God's love and God's power, and understanding and experiencing His love grows and intensifies as we pray. Through prayer the power of God can flow through us and out to the people around us. This is essentially what Paul is praying for in all three chapters—that Christians discover the heart of what it means to be a Christian—knowing God really is our all-loving, all-powerful Father. This is why Paul does not consider his imprisonment to be shameful, but a sign of the power of the Gospel to challenge the powers of the world. This is the Father's plan, the Father who loves Him. So Paul says to the Ephesians *"...not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you—it is YOUR glory!"*

Paul glories in his imprisonment. He calls himself *"Paul the prisoner"* without any shame. He says, *"I am less than the least of all the saints..."* (v. 8), stressing his own unworthiness. Paul emphasizes his weakness so the rulers of the heavens and earth see the triumph of Jesus the King. If Paul had been given political strength or earthly power, this display to the evil powers might be diminished. Paul, therefore, highlights his humiliation and weakness. Paul in his weakness falls on his knees before the Father, or, as we saw last time *"pros tov patera"*—*face to face* with the Father. Paul has full access. We all do! I think as Paul picks up the prayer he began in v.1, he wants us to get the sense that it is through prayer that God really reveals to us the mysteries of what it means to be the Church, to serve Christ in the world. *The Great Mystery* is revealed to us AS we pray. In v.14 Paul begins his prayer again and he appeals directly to the Father *"to strengthen us in the new inner man with the power of the Holy Spirit so Christ can come and live in our hearts."*(vv.15-16) Paul asks for this strength from the Father through the Spirit so that we can all comprehend together as a Church family the *"breadth and length and height and depth"* of the love of Christ. He prays that we know Christ's love so clearly we recognize and experience it as we see in working in others. Paul said this at the very beginning of the letter: *"Because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you"* (1:15-16) Paul is grateful because the love they show in their

lives is a testimony that they *believe* in Christ. They are *trusting* Him and the power of the Holy Spirit is working in them.

The essence of Paul's closing prayer is in the final request: *"that you may be filled with all the fullness of God."*(v.19) *All the fullness of GOD.* The fulness of God is, of course, the Triune God; the God of Three Persons that we can follow in the train of thought in Paul's prayer. Paul prays *to the Father* in faith, which opens the door *to the Holy Spirit*, who reveals *Christ*, who fills the heart, and when the heart begins to experience the magnitude of this love, *we are filled with God*, *"Who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us..."*(v.20)⁶ Why is this true? It is the fullness of the Triune God working in us, three persons in one body. The Church is one Body made up of many persons, all under One Head—Jesus Christ. And who gets the credit? *"To God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen."*

Let's pray the prayer our Jewish forefathers prayed before *The Great Mystery* was ever *Revealed*, when they prayed to our Great God, yet did not know the full Glory of His Triune nature—

"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. 5 You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. 6 And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. 7 You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. 8 You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. 9 You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates." (Deut 6:4-9 ESV)

Jesus, please fill our lives with your strength by the power of your Spirit so we do not stray from You, OUR GOD! Amen.

¹All the Greek definitions are from Louw&Nida "Greek Lexicon"

²N.T. Wright "Paul's Prison Letter" p.32

³Dan Wallace "Greek Grammar Beyond The Basics" p.434

⁴Timothy Gombis "The Role of Ephesians 3:1-13" p.320

⁵N.T. Wright "Paul's Prison Letter" p.38

⁶I am indebted to F.B. Meyer for this "Train of Thought" idea