



The Mystery Revealed

Kicking It Off

What is one thing someone did or said that made you feel genuinely welcomed somewhere you expected to feel like an outsider?

Read

Ephesians 3:1-13

Summary

God's plan has never been complicated. Love Him. Love people. The tricky part is that we constantly try to add fine print.

Paul is writing from prison in Ephesians 3, and the reason he's there is worth sitting with. He kept telling Jewish audiences that Gentiles were just as welcome in God's family as they were. Full heirs. No asterisk. People did not like hearing that, so they threw him in jail. Paul's response? He starts writing letters. "I'm blessed," he says. That tells you everything about where he's coming from.

What Paul calls "the mystery of Christ" isn't a mystery like a secret code. It's more like something that was always true but that most people had missed. Here's the short version: God told Abraham way back in Genesis that He would bless him so that through him, all the families of the earth would be blessed. All of them. The plan was always bigger than anyone was reading it to be.

But people, being people, kept shrinking it. The Israelites loved God and loved each other, but they drew a circle around their community and mostly stayed inside it. The story of Jonah is a perfect example. Jonah didn't run from Nineveh because he was scared. He ran because he knew if he preached there, God would forgive those people and he didn't want that. He loved God's grace for himself and his people. He just didn't want it extended to the ones he didn't like.

That instinct is human. We all have it. We gravitate toward people who look like us, think like us, share our background. But the church is supposed to be the place where that instinct gets dismantled because the mystery has been revealed. God welcomes everyone. The church is the vessel that carries that grace into the world. You can't fix

anyone's problems. That's actually good news, because that's not the job. The job is to get close enough to love people and trust that what fills you can do the rest.

Discussion Questions

1. Was there anything from the sermon or the passage that stuck out to you?
2. God's plan was always to bless all nations through Abraham, but the Israelites kept narrowing that promise to themselves. In your own life, where do you notice yourself drawing a smaller circle than God draws?
3. Jonah knew God would forgive Nineveh and that was exactly why he refused to go. When have you found yourself hoping God's grace wouldn't reach someone, and what did that reveal about your own heart?
4. The idea that we are stewards, not sources, of grace means the pressure to fix people is not actually ours to carry. How does that change the way you think about engaging with someone who is struggling?
5. Paul found a way to experience blessing in prison because his joy was not tied to his circumstances. What circumstances in your own life are you waiting to change before you feel free to live out your calling?

Significant Quotes from Sermon

"I know exactly what the plan of God is for your life. It's that you would love Him and you would love others."

"God blessed Abraham so that Abraham would bless others. We are the ones who start changing all of the fine print, and then we stray further and further away from the will of God."

"The church is the vessel that holds God's grace. It doesn't matter how special the cup is. What's valuable is what is inside the cup."

"When you begin to love those who aren't deserving of your love, it will shift your theology. It will shift the way you view God, and you will experience His love in an even deeper way."

Sermon Notes

Ephesians 3:1-13

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[a] 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[b] 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.

Outline

1. The Mystery Was Always in the Plan (Gen. 12:1-3; Isa. 56:6-8)
 - a. God chose Israel to bless all nations, not to hoard blessing (Gen. 12:3, "all the families of the earth shall be blessed")
 - b. Isaiah foretold foreigners being welcomed into God's house of prayer for all peoples (Isa. 56:7)
 - c. Israel narrowed the promise to themselves; their love of "others" stopped at the edges of their community
 - d. The Israelites' tribalism was understandable but wrong, a misreading of God's nature and intent
 - e. God is not changing His mind between Old and New Testaments; the mystery was always there, hidden in plain sight
2. The Mystery Revealed: Gentiles Are Co-Heirs (Eph. 3:1-7)
 - a. Paul, a prisoner for the sake of the Gentiles, received the stewardship of this mystery by revelation (vv. 2-3)
 - b. The mystery: Gentiles are fellow members, same body, same promise in Christ through the gospel (v. 6)
 - c. This was scandalous to Jewish ears — not second-class citizens but full heirs
 - d. Jonah illustrates the human resistance: not afraid of Nineveh, unwilling, because he knew God would forgive them
 - e. The wall of hostility has been broken; the church does not rebuild it through tribalism or exclusion
3. The Church as Vessel and Display (Eph. 3:8-13)
 - a. Paul is the "least of all saints" yet entrusted to preach the unsearchable riches of Christ to the Gentiles (v. 8)
 - b. The church is a vessel — its value is not in itself but in what fills it, the grace of Christ
 - c. The church together, as a tapestry of diverse stories and backgrounds, displays the manifold wisdom of God (v. 10)
 - d. This display is cosmic in scope: it declares God's eternal purpose to rulers and authorities (vv. 10-11)
 - e. Stewardship of grace is daily, not just Sunday; it is listening, loving, and praying for people wherever you are

Notes

The plan of God is simple. It has always been simple. Love God and love others. These two commands are not recent additions to the theological conversation. They are not corrections to an earlier, narrower vision. They are the spine of everything, the organizing principle running through all of Scripture from Genesis forward. The problem is not that the plan is obscure. The problem is that human beings, at every turn, have managed to shrink it.

Paul writes from prison. He is in chains not because he committed a crime but because he preached something that offended people deeply. The offense was not complex: he told Jewish audiences that Gentiles were co-heirs of the same promise, members of the same body, partakers of the same gospel. To many Jewish listeners, this was unacceptable. It did not fit the story they had told themselves about who God loved and who He chose. And so they put Paul in prison. He writes anyway. That is the context for Ephesians 3.

What Paul describes as a mystery is not a secret in the modern sense of the word. It is not something whispered in back rooms or reserved for an elite. It is something that had been hidden from view for generations and is now, through Jesus, brought fully into the open. The mystery is this: that the Gentiles, the outsiders, the uncircumcised and the unclean, are welcomed into the household of God on equal footing with the Jews. Not as second-class citizens. Not as honorary members tolerated on the margins. As full heirs of the promise made to Abraham.

This matters because of what that promise actually said. In Genesis 12, God tells Abram something that should have reoriented every generation that followed. "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." God was explicit. The blessing flowing to Abraham was never meant to stop at the borders of Israel. It was always meant to overflow into every nation, every people, every family on earth. God blessed Abraham so that Abraham would bless others. The covenant was not a ceiling. It was a launching pad.

The Israelites, however, consistently read the promise as belonging only to them. This was understandable in a certain sense. They were a people under constant threat, surrounded by nations that were often hostile. The Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Philistines, the Canaanites — these were not abstract enemies. They had caused real suffering, real loss, real destruction. When God spoke through Isaiah and declared that foreigners who joined themselves to the Lord would be welcomed into His house, that their offerings would be accepted on His altar, that His house would be called a house of prayer for all peoples, many Israelites did not want to hear it. The people who had hurt them the most were supposed to be welcomed in? That felt wrong.

This same resistance shows up in the story of Jonah with striking honesty. Jonah was not afraid to go to Nineveh. He was unwilling. The text is clear about this. Near the end of the book, Jonah admits to God that he knew what would happen if he preached repentance in Nineveh. He knew that God, being merciful and gracious, would forgive them. That was exactly what he did not want. Jonah did not hate God's mercy in the abstract. He hated it when it extended to people he believed did not deserve it. He was perfectly content for God to be gracious toward Israel. He was not content for God to be gracious toward Nineveh.

That same instinct lives in every human heart. It is the instinct toward tribalism. People gravitate toward others who are like them, who share their culture, their language, their preferences, their background. This is not malicious in its origins. It is natural. But when it goes unchecked, it quietly reshapes the way a person understands who belongs and who does not. It shapes what a church looks like, who feels welcome and who feels like a stranger, who gets drawn in and who gets held at a comfortable distance.

Paul's assignment, the one that landed him in prison, was to dismantle that instinct. Not just as a social nicety but as a theological necessity. Because if God is what the Scriptures say He is, then the impulse to restrict His grace to people who look and act like us is not just culturally limited. It is a misreading of God Himself.

The church, as Paul understands it, is the vessel through which this grace moves. He uses language of stewardship. He is a minister of the gospel not because of his own merit but by the gift of God's grace. The vessel is not the point. What fills the vessel is the point. A clay jar has no intrinsic importance. A cracked cup that someone picked up off the floor has no status worth advertising. But fill it with the grace of Christ and it becomes something altogether different. Its value is entirely a function of what it carries.

This is why Paul can be in prison and describe himself as blessing the Gentiles through that imprisonment. His circumstances are not the measure of God's favor toward him. The blessing is not the location. It is the presence of God and the purpose of God, which hold regardless of whether Paul is in a mansion or a cell. He writes letters from chains because the mystery he is carrying is too important to be silenced by suffering.

The church, then, is a collective vessel. A tapestry. Each person who has surrendered to Christ is one square in something being woven together over centuries. No single square is the point. No single story, no matter how dramatic or spiritually mature, fully captures the wisdom of God. But together, the diverse, unlikely, improbable gathering of people from every background who have been filled with the same Spirit of

the same Christ, together they display something that no individual square could. They display the manifold wisdom of God.

This has a cosmic dimension that is easy to miss. Paul says the church's visible unity across all its differences is meant to declare something to "rulers and authorities in the heavenly places." The church on display is not merely an evangelistic strategy or a community enrichment project. It is a declaration to powers and principalities that the mystery has been revealed, that God's plan to reconcile all things to Himself through Christ is underway and cannot be stopped.

The practical implication is not complicated, even if it is costly. Be a vessel. Go where people are. Listen to them. Pray for them. Do not wait for people who look like you to walk through a door. Take what fills you into every Tuesday and Thursday and Friday, into every workplace and coffee shop and neighborhood. The art form of being a steward of grace is simply this: get close enough to people to love them, and trust that the One who fills you can do what you cannot.

The mystery that was hidden for ages is now revealed. God has always wanted to bless everybody. Every family. Every nation. Every outsider, every enemy, every person who walks in carrying cracks they have tried to cover. They are not second-class citizens of the kingdom. They are the point. They are the reason the wall came down.

Blog

Paul interrupts himself in Ephesians 3:1 and doesn't finish his sentence until verse 14. He begins, "For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles," and then breaks off into a long aside about the mystery of the gospel, his calling, and the church's role in the wisdom of God. Paul cannot get past verse 1 without explaining why he's in chains. His imprisonment is bound up with the Gentile inclusion, and he wants the Ephesians to understand that the cost he is paying and the gospel they have received are the same story.

The word that organizes the whole passage is mystery (mysterion in Greek). It does not mean what we usually mean. In Paul's vocabulary, a mystery is something previously concealed in God and now openly revealed, not a puzzle to solve or a dark corner of doctrine. The Old Testament had hinted at Gentile blessing in places like Genesis 12 and Isaiah 49. The Lord told Abraham that all nations would be blessed through him, and Isaiah said the Servant would be a light to the nations. What was kept hidden was the manner of inclusion. The nations would not merely receive benefits from a distance. They would be brought all the way in.

That distinction matters more than it first seems. The mystery isn't the plan of God. The mystery is the timing and the scope. God's plans are hard to live with because He often shows us what He intends to do, but He keeps the timing to Himself. And His timing is never incidental. By the time He finishes what He started, the picture is always bigger than what we first imagined. The Israelites had the promise. They knew the nations would be blessed. What they couldn't see, even inside the promise, was that the nations they had fought, the nations they had been warned against, the nations they had defined themselves over and against, would be brought into the household of God as members of the same family. Not the existence of the plan, but the shape of it.

Paul says it in verse 6 with three Greek words that all begin with the prefix syn-, meaning "together with." Fellow heirs (sygkleronoma). Fellow members of the body (syssoma). Fellow partakers of the promise (symmetocha). The Gentiles aren't tucked alongside Israel as a junior partner. They share the same inheritance, the same body, the same promise. Not annexed, not adjacent, not auxiliary. This is what got Paul thrown in prison. Religious systems in the first century could tolerate Gentile sympathizers at the edges. What they could not tolerate was a gospel that put Jew and Gentile in the same family with the same standing. Paul preached that gospel, and he wore chains for it.

Paul calls himself "the very least of all the saints" and says he was given grace to preach the unsearchable riches of Christ to the Gentiles and to bring to light the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God (v. 8-9). The grace that saved him on the road to Damascus also commissioned him in the same moment. Salvation and assignment

arrived together. This is how grace tends to work. It does not just rescue us, it puts us to work. And the picture Paul gives of preaching is humbler than we usually carry. He does not produce the plan. He holds up the lamp so others can see what God has already done.

Then comes the verse that should reorient how we think about church. "So that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places" (v. 10). The audience for the church's existence is not only the people in the room. It includes the unseen powers. Every gathering is a demonstration of the kingdom of God. Manifold (*polypoikilos*) means many-colored or variegated, the word ancient writers used for embroidered cloth or a tapestry woven from every shade. The reconciled diversity of the body of Christ is the visible proof of God's many-colored wisdom. A church that is monochromatic in any way, ethnically, economically, culturally, generationally, cannot display polychromatic wisdom. The unity of difference is the point.

I've had to learn this from a particular angle. I never expected to be a pastor in the Pacific Northwest. I certainly didn't expect to be a pastor at a non-Korean church. Most of my faith was formed inside a community that not only looked like me, but saw the world the way I did. We were immigrants. We were minorities. We were Christians who read Scripture through a shared lens shaped by all of that. From the food we ate, to the songs we sang, to the sermons we listened to together, our community ran on a kind of conformity that felt like belonging because it was belonging. There's real grace in that, and I'm grateful for the people who shaped me. But the kingdom of God isn't the size of the Korean-American church, and I praise the Lord for that. Sitting in a room with brothers and sisters whose stories, accents, and assumptions ran differently from mine forced me to ask which parts of my faith were the gospel and which parts were the inheritance of my upbringing. Both are real. Both matter. But they aren't the same thing, and you don't always know the difference until you're standing next to someone who shares the gospel with you but not the rest.

What I didn't anticipate was how much that kind of belonging would cost. Knowing in your head that the church is bigger than your culture is one thing. Living it is another. There's a discomfort that comes with being a Christian in a room of people whose instincts aren't yours, whose default postures toward conflict, hospitality, and decision-making aren't yours. Even when everyone is genuinely seeking the Lord, the differences press in. They expose where I had confused my preferences with my convictions. And that is exactly where suffering does its work. Suffering, in this kind of context, is the proof that the gospel is doing what it claims to do. If it were easy, it would mean we hadn't crossed any real distance. The kind of endurance Paul talks about, the

kind that produces character and hope, isn't available in any other classroom. It has to be earned by staying consistent in the middle of what's hard.

This was not a backup plan. Paul calls it the "eternal purpose that He has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord" (v. 11). The inclusion of the nations was not improvised when Israel stumbled at the Messiah. It was the goal from the beginning. Verse 12 gives us the posture this should produce. "In Him we have boldness and access with confidence through faith in Him." Boldness, access, confidence. Heads up, eyes forward, no shame at the threshold. We come to God like people who belong there, because we do.

Paul wants us to read his suffering the same way. "So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory" (v. 13). His chains are not random. He suffers because the gospel reached the nations, and that suffering produced the very inclusion the Ephesians now enjoy. His weakness is their honor. The costs we pay for keeping the gospel open and the table set are not interruptions of the mission. They are how the mystery becomes visible.

Two callings come out of this passage. Bold access at the throne. Costly love at the table. We come to God without flinching because the way is open. We come to one another without sorting because the wall is down. A bold prayer life that ignores the brother across the room is not the boldness Paul is talking about. A diverse community that approaches God timidly has not yet received what Christ purchased. When we gather this Sunday, it is more than a religious meeting. It is a demonstration. So take your seat with confidence, and take your place in the tapestry. The plan that was hidden for ages is now on display, and we are how it is being seen.