

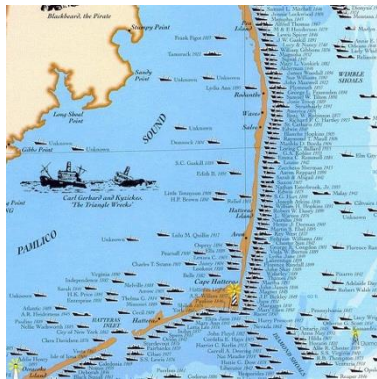
X Marks the Spot
Ephesians 3:1-13

First Presbyterian Church
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Synopsis: God’s mysterious treasure revealed in the gospel provide riches for life, worship and in suffering far beyond all others.

Getting the mail in my house growing up was much more interesting than it is today. My childhood was the golden age of magazines. *Look, Life, and National Geographic* regularly showed up at our door, and since I was the first one home from school I would typically get first crack at them. One afternoon I flipped the pages of the *Geographic*, and the map centerfold untucked. There, just off the coast of North Carolina, were at least a couple of dozen bright red ‘x’ marks – showing where various Spanish Galleons, Pirate schooners, or Confederate blockade runners were thought to be sunk. Each wreck, in my 10 year old mind, were filled to the brim with gold doubloons and priceless jewels, which was what this article very much encouraged. When Dad came home, I was more than ready. “Have I got a place for summer vacation! Look at this! All we have to do is pick



one wreck and we’re rich forever!” As a new coin collector and growing up in the age when ads for metal detectors promised wealth untold, I couldn’t believe it when Dad once again pointed the station wagon toward boring old Canada where the most exciting treasure discovery for me would be a bag of marshmallows and maybe a matchbox car.

Striking buried treasure contains romance and intrigue that have filled probably thousands of stories, from *The Count of Monte Cristo* to the latest Indiana Jones or National Treasure flick. Yet Paul uncovers for us in this ‘sidenote’ passage the unsearchable riches of Christ (v. 8) made available to us if we but take the time to receive them. Out of the many that are here, we’ll bring three jewels to light. First, the TREASURE OF GOSPEL STEWARDSHIP. Second, the TREASURE OF GOSPEL SIGHT. Finally, the TREASURE TRANSFORMING SUFFERING. The key to unlocking these mysterious treasures is the same: God’s grace given in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. Let’s take a look.

TREASURE OF GOSPEL STEWARDSHIP (Eph. 3:1-8)

In our opening verses, Paul repeatedly uses the word “mystery” to help describe what we have received in Christ’s riches. These are riches that weren’t made clear to previous generations, but are revealed now – that Jews and Gentiles are not just junior and senior partners to each other, they are ‘fellow heirs’, completely equal and organically united in the Body of Christ. Paul actually invents several compound words in verse 6 to get this idea across. “You are fellow members, sharers together of the promise in Jesus through the gospel.” Gerrit described how Jesus tore down the dividing wall of hostility between different groups very powerfully last week, and if you haven’t read or listened to his sermon, I strongly encourage you to do so. Our names, and the names of people from many tribes and nations are engraved into the crucified and risen hands of Christ, nations and groups that have historically been at odds with one another may be reconciled and forgiven at the cross. X – the cross - marks the spot of this treasure.

Yet the implications of this mysterious treasure begin to be experienced on Pentecost Sunday. The Holy Spirit comes like a mighty wind and tongues of flame on Jewish believers in Acts chapter 2, but then the same Holy Spirit comes and fills Gentile believers in Acts chapter 10. This is the promise that Paul is referring to here in verse 6. The presence of God Himself, which came as a pillar of fire leading the Israelites through the wilderness, the glory cloud that filled the temple, the holiness that filled the ark of the covenant and would strike dead anyone who disregarded the proper approach to Him in worship, the presence that brooded behind the curtain in the holy of holies, who could only be approached by a high priest once a year, and even then a priest who had a cord tied to his ankle in case he would be struck dead out of unworthiness – THAT Presence – the presence of the Holy Spirit – now lives and is at work *inside* the hearts of Jews and Gentiles, due to Jesus’ death and resurrection. “Christ in you, the hope of glory” is how Paul puts in Colossians.



Let me bring us back to verse 2. Paul says he is a steward of God’s grace for the Gentiles. That’s why he’s in prison- powerful people are upset that he’s extending this invitation to the wrong sort of people. A steward is someone entrusted with a company, or a place, or a treasure that they don’t OWN, but they MANAGE. Adam and Eve were called to be stewards of God’s creation. Paul has been entrusted the gift of God’s grace in the gospel message, but as a steward, he is to take this gift and share it with others. Praise God that he did, because everyone in

this room and on this planet without a Jewish last name are the beneficiaries of the gospel news he began to share.

Paul delivered the gospel treasure to the Ephesians, and to Jews and Gentiles across the Roman empire. They passed this news onto others, and so on, until we get to Baton Rouge, 2023 A.D. Now it's our turn! The focus of our stewardship campaign is that we are all stewards not just of financial resources, but resources of the Holy Spirit, called spiritual gifts. Are you familiar with Spiderman? When Peter Parker (Spiderman's) uncle tells him, "with great power comes great responsibility," he was basically paraphrasing the Apostle Paul. When the Holy Spirit comes into your heart through faith in Christ, every believer is given the treasure of at least one spiritual gift (1 Cor. 12:7). "To each is given the manifestation of the Holy Spirit for the common good." In other words, Chuck may be given the gift of hospitality, but it only operates as he uses that gift toward others. Jaimie may have the gift of teaching, but it only 'works' as she provides that for others in the body. Everyone else's gift is actually a gift to you, but only if it is put into action. These gifts are different pieces of the ministry of Jesus Christ while he was on earth, and this ministry continues today through his Body, the church.

We have booklet describing the multiple ways these spiritual gifts can be put into practice here at First Presbyterian, and in ministries we're involved in across Baton Rouge and the world. God reveals our value and our purpose through the gift of the gospel. We could never earn reconciliation with God and eternal life. "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." We could never earn a significance that allows us to be ambassadors of heaven to a hurting and fearful world. Paul knew this – he was killing people who turned out to be his brothers and sisters in the faith, and he calls himself "the least of all the saints" (3:8), yet he is engaged in passing on the gift of the gospel, even to people very different from himself. It doesn't matter what you've done or where you've come from. Through God's grace and the treasure of the Holy Spirit inside of you, you have a role to play, and a gift to give. I believe if you have a conversation with your hurting friends, co-workers, and family members who are not yet believers in Jesus Christ, and ask them, "what do you need in your life?" you will hear versions of three answers:

"I need help." I am struggling with a relationship or a compulsion or a question I can't solve.

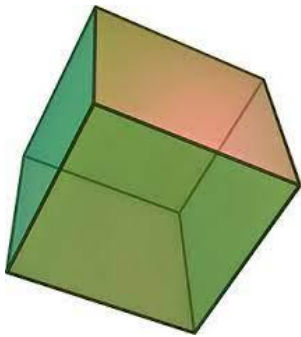
"I need hope." Is there a reason for any of this? Can I see a possibility for purpose for my life?

“I need a home.” I need a place to belong and a family to belong to. I’m constantly told to live my best life and invent myself, but a social media tribe doesn’t really do any of that. Is it possible that a community of healing actually exists? Paul and the gospel say, “yes” to all three! It’s the gospel proclaiming church where this is found. Discover your spiritual gift, and get into the game! Be a steward of the gospel treasure message.

TREASURE OF GOSPEL SIGHT (Eph. 3:9-10)

But Paul goes on to state that the mystery in this treasure has another aspect. Some mysteries are like Agatha Christie novels or a good Cajun cookbook. Through your own powers of observation over time and experimentation you find the perfect roux or who-done-it. That’s not the kind of mystery Paul is describing with the gospel. The gospel is also a “dimensional mystery.”¹ What?

Suppose you came to this building each week and your pastors expounded diligently each week on “the square.” We gave you precise and exhaustive teachings on the angles and the area of its circumference and so on. But what if it was suddenly discovered that there were actually more than two dimensions in the world? What if what we thought was a square was actually far more developed – a cube? There are more dimensions to reality than we had supposed! This is a mystery that has to be revealed to be known, one that shows a deeper or denser reality than we suspected. It’s a mystery that has riches so infinite, that “revealing it creates even more wonder, awe, and respect.”



Paul in verses 9 and 10: “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 realms.*” To borrow Hamlet, “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.” When we gather for worship, Jay High, our media and tech leader, is able to tell us how many people are in the pews. He’s also able to tell us how many people are watching through the streaming service as we beam this worship online. Ok, we can grasp that. But Paul is telling us here that untold numbers of angelic and demonic beings are also watching, and are learning the ways of God through the gospel through the worship and existence of the church.

¹ For this idea, see Steven Boyer and Christopher Hall, *The Mystery of God*, pgs. 4-14.

Why is this important? Two points here. First, we heard last week that there is a great deal of hostility and warfare on earth. The same is actually true in heaven. Spiritual beings, also created by God, have various names. We typically call them angels, which are obedient to God, and demons, who are in rebellion against God, led by Lucifer, a rebellious archangel. As far as scripture tells us, angelic beings, who are completely aware of God in all his unmediated glory, are either faithful or rebellious for eternity. That human beings can move from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light through Christ's death and resurrection is a revelation in heaven (See also 1 Pet. 1:12)! The 'manifold wisdom' of God here in verse 10 is a poetic word referring to an intricately embroidered pattern of 'many-colored cloaks' or a garland of flowers. It reminded me of that old Dolly Parton song about her childhood, "The coat of many colors" that is a good description of the church appearing before an incredulous world and universe:

*I recall a box of rags that someone gave us/and how momma
put the rags to use
There were rags of many colors/but every piece was small. . .
with patches on my britches
And holes in both my shoes/in my coat of many colors/I hurried
off to school/ just to find the others laughing/ and making fun
of me/ in my coat of many colors/ my momma made for me
I couldn't understand it/for I felt I was rich/and I told them of
the love/ momma sewed in every stitch/ and I told them all the
story/ momma told me while she sewed/ and how my coat of many colors/ was
worth more than all their clothes.*



The many facets of the different tribes and nations of man overcoming hostility through Christ – there is nothing else like the ethnic diversity and peace crossing old barriers of hatred through grace and love anywhere – on earth or even in heaven. Commentator F.F. Bruce declares that “the church appears as God’s pilot scheme for the reconciled universe of the future.”

Now, let me go from a border-line sentimental country tune to the realm of horror films. October is the month of course, where all kinds of scary flicks are rolled out, typically showing that evil demonic spirits can and will do unspeakable things to men, women, children, pets, you name it. The Ephesus in Paul’s day, and indeed all of Asia minor, trafficked in trying to manipulate spiritual forces through magic, incantations, and temples to various gods and goddesses. Read Acts 19 about Paul’s first visit there for an eye-opening tutorial on the spiritual realm that is

opposed to the Holy Spirit. Not unlike a visit to the French Quarter. Let me say two things here. First, I'm in agreement with the Bible that the angelic and the demonic realm exist. Spiritual beings didn't disappear when the Enlightenment came along, and they don't just hang out in the places of the world that "still believe that stuff." Demons don't need passports. They can and do exert real damage when left unattended, or worse, when they're encouraged by our unforgiveness, bitterness, or words we use to curse others. We cannot fight successfully against them under our own authority – see the sad 'sons of Sceva' in Acts 19. But Hollywood lies when they show those in Christ's service unable to do anything to fight against or defeat the demonic. The triune God coming against the forces of darkness is like the 2019 Tigers going up against the 4th grade third string termite league football squad. Jesus' authority shown through the cross and resurrection is unquestionable. Verse 10 shows that in every place a gospel proclaiming church body worships, it is an 'X' where the demonic powers are shown a tangible reminder that their authority has been decisively broken and that all things will be subject to Jesus Christ.

TREASURE TRANSFORMING SUFFERING

I need to briefly close with one more point, since Paul's incredible sidebar begins and ends with the issue of his imprisonment and suffering. Paul is isolated, and unable to see his beloved Ephesian church face to face, but he is not discouraged. Indeed, he says his efforts are for the Gentiles glory. By raising the importance of the truth that Jews and Gentiles are organically united in the Body of Christ as equal heirs, Paul is willing to lay down his wealth, his reputation, and even his life, and do so willingly. The value we place on something determines the hardship we are willing to endure for it. Do you recognize the inexhaustible treasure that is yours in the gospel? Do you have something beyond your own comfort that is worth laying your life down for to promote? To defend? Samuel Rutherford, the great Scottish pastor frequently jailed for his faith tells us, "when I am in the cellar of affliction, I look for the Lord's choicest wines."

But I will add that it's not just suffering for the gospel that gets transformed. Suffering *in the light* of the gospel also can get transformed. And for those of you watching online, perhaps because you are not well enough or strong enough to be with us in person, I hope you prick your ears up with my final story.

In college I spent a summer in a Christian song and dance group called "The Missioners." The Missioners would go anywhere in the greater Dayton, Ohio area that would have us, and we'd do it for free. Nursing homes, assisted living

facilities, prisons, JV holding houses. You haven't earned your stripes on the stage until you've tried to sell the Oak Ridge Boys "Elvira" to 400 juvenile delinquents in a gym, using an upright piano with half the keys broken or completely out of tune.

Near the end of the summer, we came to a very humble nursing home. There was no air conditioning, and it was brutally hot. Many patients were extremely drugged; some were belted into their chairs or beds. The smell wasn't very pleasant either. But at the end of each performance, as at every location, we were to go out into crowd and talk with the audience. At this stop I was actually a bit intimidated, but I noticed one man trying his best to motion me over, so I approached. He was extremely difficult to understand, so I needed to kneel and bend close to make out his words. He was clearly in the last stages of a degenerative disease, perhaps ALS. It took about four attempts, but I made out his first sentence. "I want you thank God for me." "Ok, sir, what do want me to thank God for you for?" Another several efforts, with several deep breaths. "I want to thank God that he will be giving me a new body."

I met this man for a few minutes 40 years ago, but I will never forget it. It may have been the event that cemented my desire to go into ministry, because in this man I witnessed the gospel treasure grasped in a way that nothing, not even this suffering could possibly take away. X marked the spot in a crowded, hot, stinking hall that was also the gateway to heaven.

Do you know what is available to you this morning? Are you willing to receive and pass on a treasure that doesn't require you to descend to the deepest depths or climb a mountain of pain? That work has already been done for you, and the treasure that was recovered is available for you now. Receive it. Value it appropriately. Enjoy its help, its hope, and the home it gives. And share this glorious treasure with someone else today.