

FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH, 6-15-14 PM
 “THE GREATEST MYSTERY IN THE BIBLE”
 EPHESIANS 3:1-13
 #10 in Series, “The Christian’s Wealth Walk and Warfare”

Dr. W. A. Criswell said, “Without the truth of this passage, the Bible is a locked, unknown, unsearchable, fragmented book, but in the explanation of this text every part of the Bible becomes a significant, beautifully integrated part.” [Dr. W. A. Criswell, *Ephesians*, page 100]. Is that an overstatement? I don’t think so. This passage lays out the greatest mystery in the Bible. When we use the word mystery in everyday conversation, we don’t normally mean what the Bible (the New Testament) means. The dictionary defines mystery as, “Any thing or event that remains so secret or obscure as to incite curiosity; the quality of being unexplainable.” In other words, the traditional meaning of the word “mystery” is something that is an enigma to us; it is something that we can’t sort out or figure out. Is that what “mystery” means in verses 3, 4, and 9 of our text? No, we can see immediately that the traditional meaning of the word “mystery” doesn’t fit the word used in this passage. The Greek word is similar to the English word – *musterion*. In the first century, this Greek word referred to secrets that were known only to those to whom they were revealed. In the Roman Empire in the first century there were many “mystery religions”. They were pagan religions where only those who were initiated into the religion were told the secrets and understood the tenants of the religion. The closest thing that we have to the mystery religions today is the Masonic Lodge. Only those initiated into the lodge have revealed to them the meaning of the secret symbols and rituals. In this passage, Paul speaks of a mystery, a secret that God kept in His heart that even the angels did not know it and the Old Testament prophets didn’t see it. It was unknown until God chose to reveal it. In this passage, the great mystery is revealed.

Verses 2-13 are a parenthesis. Actually verse 1 starts a prayer for believers to understand the love of God and the resources that are ours in Christ. Paul then stops and reveals this great mystery, how the mystery is to be responded to, and then tells us the results of the mystery. Next week we will pick up where verse 1 leaves off and look at this wonderful encouraging prayer in verses 14-21.

Before we reveal the mystery, I want to examine the phrase in **Ephesians 3:1b (NKJV)** “... I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus...” There is a sermon in that phrase! Paul was literally in prison when he wrote the letter to the Ephesians. In fact, when he wrote this letter, he had been a prisoner for about 5 years – two years in Caesarea and 3 years in Rome. He had been arrested on false charges made by some of the Jews toward him. Paul was accused of taking a Gentile colleague, Trophimus, past the wall of separation that formed a barrier in the temple courts for the Gentiles and said that only Jews could proceed beyond the wall. Paul was innocent of the charges. He faced the Jewish high court, the Sanhedrin, the Roman governor Felix, King Agrippa, and the governor that succeeded Felix, whose name was Festus. Because of a plot by the Jews to take his life, Paul appealed to stand before Caesar which was the right of every Roman citizen. From Caesarea Paul was taken to Rome where he remained under arrest with a soldier guarding him. There is something unusual about a phrase in **Ephesians 3:1b (NKJV)** “..I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus...” Shouldn’t that be “for Christ Jesus”? No, the Greek grammar of the verse (a genitive of originating clause) indicates that Paul was a prisoner of Christ; Christ was the cause of His imprisonment. This is really important because it shows how Paul viewed his trials and his arrests. Because Paul believed in the sovereignty of the Lord, he saw the Lord in everything that happened to him. Although it was the Jews who had Paul arrested, he did not consider himself a prisoner of the Jews. Although he was being held by the Romans, he did not consider himself a prisoner of the Romans. The Jews or the Romans could not have touched Paul unless it was allowed by the sovereign Lord. Paul saw himself as the prisoner **OF** Christ Jesus! Without the Lord’s allowing, no one could touch Paul, and if the Lord allowed it, this was all going to bring glory to God and conform Paul to the image of Christ. After all, it was Paul that God inspired to write **Romans 8:28-29 (NKJV)** “²⁸ And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to *His* purpose. ²⁹ For whom He foreknew, He also predestined *to be* conformed to the image of His Son...” The perspective

from which we view our circumstances makes all the difference in how we deal with the trials and disappointments of life. When our perspective is always from seeing every circumstance in light of the sovereignty of God, we can obey passages like **James 1:2-4 (NKJV)** “² My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, ³ knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. ⁴ But let patience have *its* perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.” When you believe that God is in total control (the basic meaning of “sovereign”) you can trust Him to only do or allow that which is going to bring Him glory – which is what we desire because that is the purpose for which we exist. That doesn’t mean that we don’t suffer pain and struggle with disappointment, but it means that we can rise beyond those natural reactions and with a supernatural joy continue praising and serving our sovereign Lord. From **Philippians 1:12-14 (NKJV)** we see that Paul saw his imprisonment in light of God’s purposes. “¹² But I want you to know, brethren, that the things *which happened* to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel, ¹³ so that it has become evident to the whole palace guard, and to all the rest, that my chains are in Christ; ¹⁴ and most of the brethren in the Lord, having become confident by my chains, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.” Paul saw all that had happened to him to be “for you Gentiles”.

I. The Mystery Is Revealed (V1-6)

Before we look more at this mystery, let’s see what the mystery is not. The mystery is not that Gentiles would be saved. The salvation of many Gentiles was clearly revealed in the Old Testament. The Abrahamic covenant included the promise of **Genesis 12:3b (NKJV)** “...in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” We read in **Isaiah 19:23-25 (NKJV)** “²³ In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrian will come into Egypt and the Egyptian into Assyria, and the Egyptians will serve with the Assyrians. ²⁴ In that day Israel will be one of three with Egypt and Assyria--a blessing in the midst of the land, ²⁵ whom the Lord of hosts shall bless, saying, ‘Blessed *is* Egypt My people, and Assyria the work of My hands, and Israel My inheritance.’” Could the mystery be that the promised descendent of Abraham, the Messiah would suffer and die? No, that was not a mystery; it was very clearly prophesied in the Old Testament. Isaiah 53:5-10 clearly tells us that the Messiah would die for us. Psalms 22 clearly describes the Messiah’s death by crucifixion even before crucifixion was a means of capital punishment. The mystery is not that Christ would die and be raised from the dead (Psalm 16:8-11). What is the mystery – that truth which was unknown until God revealed it? [Read verse 2-6]

The mystery is that Jew and Gentile would be one in Christ in **the church**, the body of Christ. The church is the mystery that is revealed in the New Testament. One of my favorite Bible expositors, Dr. W. A. Criswell put it this way: “What is the mystery that was kept in the secret heart of God until the day He revealed it to His Apostles? The secret was this: that between the suffering of our Lord and the Kingdom appearance of our Lord there was to be a long period of time, an age of grace, a dispensation of mercy, and that in that period of time God was going to form another entity. It would be made up of Jews and Gentiles alike and they would be of the same body belonging to the same household of faith. That was the mystery. Even the angels did not know it... The prophets also did not know it. It was a *mysterion* that was revealed to the later apostles like a hidden valley between two great mountain peaks... They saw the coming of Christ in suffering. They saw the coming of Christ in His glory. But they never saw the wide valley between, and in that valley God says He is going to create something new: the Jew and the Gentile alike should belong to the household of faith. Is not that a remarkable thing!” [Dr. W. A. Criswell, Page 102-193]. Let’s look at how he sets this up. In verse 2 Paul talks about the dispensation of the grace of God that was given to him for the sake of the Gentiles. That word translated “dispensation” is translated “stewardship” in the ESV and the NASB. Stewardship is the best translation. God had entrusted to Paul some great truths. He did not get them from man, but from God who took him into the desert shortly after he was saved and gave him the Gospel. He describes what happened in **Galatians 1:11-12 (NKJV)** “¹¹ But I make known to you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. ¹² For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught *it*, but *it came* through the revelation of Jesus Christ.” Paul is saying in verse two of our text that as God’s servant entrusted with the Gospel he was going to be

a faithful steward, a faithful administrator of the gospel that God had given him to take to Jews and Gentiles, but Paul's emphasis was to get it to the Gentiles. A steward is one who is faithful in the management of that which belongs to another. It is God's Gospel and Paul is committed to get it to those who so desperately need it.

Are you a good steward of the Gospel? If you have been changed by the Gospel of Christ, you are to take it to others. **Romans 1:14-16 (NKJV)** “¹⁴ I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to wise and to unwise. ¹⁵ So, as much as is in me, *I am* ready to preach the gospel to you who are in Rome also. ¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek.” Paul was a pioneer in taking the Gospel to the Gentiles, but we have the same stewardship. Who are you sharing the Gospel with? [Promote the new approach to TELL in the fall].

Verses 3-4 reiterate the fact that the mystery was not something that Paul came up with, thought up, or heard from another person. The mystery of the church and the Gospel through which Jew and Gentile would be a part of this one body was revealed by God to Paul. As he shared the Gospel and planted churches, he was being a faithful steward of the mystery.

The clearest statement concerning the mystery is in verses 5-6. The Old Testament saints had no vision of a called out body of Jews and Gentiles. There were hints such as **Genesis 12:3b (NKJV)** “And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” But the truth remained a mystery until it was clearly revealed in the New Testament.

The fact that the Gentiles would be fellow heirs with the Jews without becoming a Jew was a bitter pill to swallow for so many Jewish believers. That is why there was so much controversy over it that we have been examining more in depth in our study of Galatians. The church, contrary to what some good Bible scholars teach is not simply a continuation and replacement of the Jews. The church is something new. The Greek word for church literally means “the called out ones”. These called out ones are Jews, Gentiles, European, African, Asian – people from every tongue, tribe, people and nation. The church is not a building; the church is people, people called by the Lord unto Himself, a transformed, re-born people who have the Spirit of Christ living in them, people who long to please Him and have a heart affection for Him. There are no distinctions. The Jews are not higher than the Gentiles or vice-versa. We are all fellow heirs.

II. The Mystery Is Responded to (V7-9)

The mystery is responded to by proclaiming it, preaching it, “to make all see what is the fellowship of the mystery” (verse 9). Paul was especially empowered by God to proclaim this live giving message. The word “minister” in verse 7 is *diakonos* that we get the word deacon from. It refers to one who serves. A servant, by definition is one who does what he is told. He was told and we are told to go with this glorious Gospel that is for Jew and Gentile. **Romans 10:14 (NKJV)** “How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?” For the Apostle Paul, this was not some unpleasant duty he had to perform when all the while he would rather be doing something else. He was astounded that God would use him! He says in verse 7 that God had given him the enabling grace to proclaim this Gospel. In verse 8 he shares how utterly shocking that was that God's power could equip him – “less than the least of all the saints” to proclaim the unsearchable riches of Christ. It was as though saying “the least of all the saints” was too high a description of him. He was a step below the least of the saints – he was less than the least! Paul never got over the fact that God saved him and also that God would use him. I hope you never get over those same things. Paul calls himself in 1 Timothy 1:15, “the chief of sinners”. In **1 Corinthians 15:9a (NKJV)** “For I am the least of the apostles...” What an honor to be a steward of this glorious truth of the Gospel! As a New Testament believer, we are all stewards of the Gospel. What are you doing with it? Are you ignoring the “unsearchable riches of Christ” (V8)? That word “unsearchable” is translated “incalculable” in the HCSB and “unfathomable” in the NASB. These unsearchable riches are the riches of

His person, His work for us on the cross, and His work in us. **Colossians 2:3 (NKJV)** says of Jesus, “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” Why are we not constantly sharing that?

Verse 9 literally says “And to make all men see what is the stewardship of the mystery...” Now all believers are to be faithful stewards of this great truth. We often talk about our stewardship of money and time and talents, but what about your stewardship of the now revealed mystery that all people – Jews and Gentiles, your neighbor, co-worker, fellow student, the unreached people groups around the globe – all are in need of the Gospel and in Christ become a part of His body, the church.

III. The Mystery’s Results (V10-13)

A. Our Triumph (V10-12)

The purpose of God’s revealing of the mystery of the church is that the manifold wisdom of God could be put on display. All that God does is for His glory. Usually He uses the angels to show us His glory, but when it comes to the glorious church, we get to show the angels His glory! Angels are created beings and are not all-knowing. Peter speaks of some things that they don’t know in **1 Peter 1:12b (NKJV)** “...the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven--things which angels desire to look into.” In a sense, God is educating the angels by means of His church! What are some things that the angels learn from the church? First, they learn about the “manifold wisdom of God”. That word “manifold” means “multi-colored” complex, diverse, or multifaceted. It is speaking about the beauty of the wisdom of God. “Principalities and powers” can also refer to fallen angels. God’s wisdom is glorified even before the demons through the church!

Verse 11 speaks of His eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus. The church was not an afterthought with God. It wasn’t that the Jews failed so He came up with a plan B. The calling out of a people – Jew and Gentile – was in the plan of God from before He created the world. It was always going to be accomplished through Christ. **Revelation 13:8b (NKJV)** describes Jesus as “...the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.” In the fullness of time He became flesh and walked among us. Verse 12 tells us that when we are in Christ, the One who accomplished the eternal purpose of God the Father, we have boldness and access to the presence of God. **Hebrews 10:19 (NASB)** “Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus”.

B. Our Tribulation (V13)

Paul had been glorying in the unfathomable, marvelous riches in Christ and now he comes back down to earth. He was a prisoner in chains! His concern was that the Ephesians would lose heart. We can rejoice in the unsearchable riches in Christ even in the midst of trials and tribulations here. The fact is that the majority of those unsearchable riches are experienced here when we are in times of tribulation. They will only be fully experienced when we go to be with the Lord. That explains why Paul said in **Philippians 1:21 (NKJV)** “For to me, to live *is* Christ, and to die *is* gain.” **Philippians 1:23 (NKJV)** “For I am hard pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, *which is* far better.” That is why we do not lose heart in tribulation!

CONCLUSION

Oh the glorious mystery that has now been revealed to us who are in Christ – the glorious church, the body of Christ where Jews and Gentiles are one body in Christ. We are called out to fulfill **Ephesians 3:21 (NKJV)** “to Him *be* glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.” (3250)