

The Mystery of Christ

Ephesians 3:1-13

29 September 2019, Covenant Waterfall

Pray

Introduction

Do you know about some of the world's greatest unsolved mysteries? What happened to the lost city of Atlantis? Why was Stonehenge built? How were the pyramids built? Who was Jack the Ripper? We will probably never find the answers to these mysteries in our life time – remain mysteries to us.

What if a mystery that is far greater, far more significant than all those mysteries put together, was revealed to us? Wouldn't we be devoted to understanding it and then telling other people about it?

Well this is exactly what happened with the Apostle Paul. God revealed a mystery to him, that had been kept under wraps since before the foundation of the world. God entrusted this mystery to Paul in order that he would devote his whole life to understanding it more and then telling others about it.

What was this mystery? It is what this passage in Ephesians 3 calls the "Mystery of Christ" (v.4). It's because of this mystery that any of us sitting here tonight know Jesus Christ and are counted among God's chosen people. The nature of this mystery is that believing Gentiles are now included among God's people, which is no longer exclusively Jewish. May seem obvious to us now, but as we saw last week, it was a revolutionary change in the early church.

We're going to dive a bit deeper into the nature of this mystery:

- The revealing of the mystery
- The nature of the mystery
- The purpose of the mystery

Overall – see that **because the mystery of Christ has been revealed, we know that Christ is indeed Lord of all.**

A. The revealing of the mystery, vv.1-5

Last week when we looked at the passage just before this one, we saw the big shift that had taken place in God's dealings with man with the coming of Jesus. Prior to Christ coming to earth, God had almost exclusively dealt with the nation of Israel as his chosen, covenant people. Now after Christ's ascension to heaven, the focus of God has spread not just to the Jews, but to all the peoples and tribes of this world. In short, the Gentiles are now included in God's plan of salvation.

Paul, the author of Ephesians, has been given a special calling by God – to take the gospel to the Gentiles. That's why he is called in Romans 11:13, "the apostle to the gentiles". This was his life's mission. We see this mission worked out, especially in the book of Acts. Paul pioneers the gospel throughout Gentile territory in the Mediterranean. Series of three missionary journeys where he is instrumental in establishing churches all over the Gentile world.

This is why he opens up this chapter by writing, vv.1-2, **"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"** – Paul has been tasked with stewarding God's grace to the Gentiles. Grace that he himself received (dramatic conversion – persecutor of the church to chosen apostle), now proclaiming it to the Gentiles.

Continues, vv.3-4 – **"how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. ⁴When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ..."** Paul calls this new shift in God's dealings with man, a "mystery". Nature of a mystery is that it is something that has been hidden. In this case, hidden by God. There are many things that God has intentionally hidden from us and kept a mystery.

Deuteronomy 29:29 says, **"The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law."** It's not up to us to try to seek out things that God has deliberately kept a secret

from us. There will always be mystery in our faith, and we've got to be okay with that. What we are to seek to understand are those things which God has revealed to us. All those things are contained in his Word.

This mystery of Christ is one of those things which was a secret, but now God has revealed to us through Paul. How come? Paul was called by God as one of the apostles of the early church. Who was qualified to be an apostle? Those men who had met the risen Christ – able to testify to the resurrection of Christ, and those who were commissioned by the Lord directly. Footnote here – state the obvious – means that no apostles today. Unique office of the early church. Paul even calls himself the “last apostle” in 1 Cor 15.

Paul met both these criteria, and because of this was uniquely qualified to receive apostolic revelation – new information concerning the gospel that God chose to deliver to the church specifically through his apostles. Whole NT, the gospel itself – revelation received by the apostles.

That's why in our passage from last week, in 2:20, it says that the church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. In verse 5 it repeats this, saying – **“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.”**

New revelation is only received by God's chosen apostles and prophets – that's part of their unique role. Because they are foundation of the church = temporary office. Use foundation once, build structure upon it. Once foundation is built, it's built – don't continue building more foundations, you build the structure itself.

God gave all the revelation he wanted to give to the church to the apostles and prophets – all contained in the Bible. It's completely sufficient for us. No new revelation. Holy Spirit guides us today in helping us understand what has already been revealed by God to us. That's why Paul says in verse 4, **“you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ...”** In other words – you must grasp the mystery which has already been revealed to me. Not for us to search after new mysteries!

Verse 5 makes clear to us that the mystery of Christ – Gentile inclusion into the people of God – was not known in the OT. But what then about the many prophecies of the Gentile

nations coming to worship the God of Israel that we find in the OT? E.g. Isa 19:21, **“And the Lord will make himself known to the Egyptians, and the Egyptians will know the Lord in that day and worship with sacrifice and offering, and they will make vows to the Lord and perform them.”** Many other OT prophecies like this.

True – we see glimpses in the OT of God’s focus one day extending beyond Israel and Gentiles worshipping the God of Israel. But nothing explicit in the OT that the Gentiles will one day be included among the people of God and counted as equals with Israel. No one saw that coming. That revelation, the mystery of Christ came only through the NT apostles and prophets by the Holy Spirit.

B. The nature of the mystery, vv.6-9

Verse 6 continues - **“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.”** Paul spells out the nature of the mystery for us here very clearly. Gentiles are now included among the people of God. People of God no longer exclusively Jewish. New Israel, the church is made up of believing Jews and Gentiles.

He fleshes this out – force of what he says is communicated better in the Greek, direct translation = “Gentiles are **co-heirs, co-body members, co-partakers** of the promise of Christ.” Point Paul is making = Gentiles are not just coming along to worship with the Jews but remain separate, doing their own Gentile thing. No, they are instead equals in every way.

They (we) – share in the inheritance that God promised to Israel – that he would be our God and we his people. Be a part of the same body, the same chosen people, now grafted into Israel, as Romans 11:24 says. And share in the covenant promises all over the OT that point to Christ.

All of this is only possible because of the gospel. This is what we saw last week (have a listen!) – Christ has restored us in relationship – first and foremost with God – lived the perfect life we were unable to live and died the death that we deserved because of our sins

– taking upon himself God’s wrath that was meant for us – if we believe, in return we receive grace – forgiveness of our sins, life everlasting with God.

Also restored to the people of God – Jew and Gentile are now one – as Christ has broken down the dividing wall between them by fulfilling the law.

Verse 7-9 continues – **“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. ⁸To 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, ⁹and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things..”**

Paul gets personal here and reflects on the fact that God chose him of all people to preach the mystery of Christ, the gospel, to the Gentiles. He calls himself the “least of all the saints”. In 1 Timothy 1:15, he calls himself, “the chief of sinners”. Remember – before Jesus appeared to him on the Damascus Road, his mission in life was to kill Christians. He was persecuting God’s own people with zeal. He realises now how undeserving he is of receiving the gift of God’s grace. Worst of all sinners, tasked with taking the gospel to the Gentiles! Even as he is doing it, he is enduring suffering (v.13) and is in prison (v.1) for the sake of the gospel.

This is an incredible picture of how God works. He tends to take those of us who are least deserving, who’ve messed up so much, who are weak vessels, who are suffering, who are considered foolish by the world, as use us for his glory, to proclaim what in itself the world considers a foolish message – the gospel.

Yet this is grace – we who were undeserving of God (actually only thing we deserved was his wrath), instead received his favour and blessing. This is exactly what happened to Paul. And it’s exactly what happened to the Gentiles too – that’s us – we were a people undeserving of God’s favour because of our sin, yet through Christ, we’ve received this incredible gift of grace!

C. The purpose of the mystery, vv.10-13

We've seen how the mystery was revealed to Paul, the nature of the mystery. Now Paul tells us what the purpose of this mystery is. Verses 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. ¹¹ This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord,” Purpose of the mystery of Christ? That through the church, the manifold wisdom of God may be made known to the rulers and authorities in heavenly places. In other words – purpose of the mystery is to display God's glory to the whole world – earthly rulers and even the heavenly beings – to show that God is not just the God of Israel, but that he is indeed the God of the entire universe – the God of all peoples, nations, tribes and tongues. He is indeed the one true sovereign King, the only great God of all the world!

Important to see here that this mystery of the Gentile inclusion to God's people was not a plan B. It was not as if God suddenly changed his mind during the course of history because he saw that Israel kept messing up and so he decided to give up on the Jews and come instead to us pagans. No! Verse 11 is clear about this. It was always God's plan, his “eternal purpose” as the Scripture here says, to include people from every nation in his chosen people.

The Greek word here for “eternal purpose” is exactly the same one used in ch. 1:11 when Paul tells us of God's eternal purpose of salvation. Remember how we saw that God the Father chose, predestined, a people for himself before the foundation of the world. (Us Gentiles were chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world – not an afterthought!) God the Son redeemed us, his people by dying for our sins on the cross, and God the Holy Spirit sealed us forever in Christ till the day he returns.

This eternal plan for the salvation of God's people has been brought to fulfilment in Christ who destroyed the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile and raised us who were dead to life as a new man, new creations in him.

And we see the ultimate goal of all this in the last two verses, 12-13:

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.”

Once we were far off from God, dead in our sins and trespasses, ashamed before God, condemned, living our lives independent from God, doing our own thing, on the way to eternity in hell.

Yet because God reached down to us in Jesus, found us in the muck and mire, breathed his Spirit into us, caused us to have faith in him – *because of him, because he shed his blood on the cross in our place* – we can enter his presence, come into God's throne room with boldness and confidence. We can call out to our Father and worship him who loves us as his own beloved sons, who sees us not wretched in our sins, but instead clothed in the righteousness of Christ himself.

Because we have this incredible hope, we do not lose heart, even in the midst of suffering and hardships that we will endure here on earth. Our hope is not in the things of this life, but is rooted in the unshakable covenant promise of an eternal future with Jesus Christ himself.

Conclusion

Friends here who know you are not right with God, separated from him because of your sins, think you've messed up and you're a hopeless case for God – know this – there are no sins that are too big for God to forgive. Trust in Jesus, trust in his life and his death on the cross in your place to forgive your sins and raise you up from the dead into new life that is truly life.

If we're in Christ we can only draw near to God and worship him, know his love for us and be assured that we will always be his, our salvation guaranteed in him – because of this mystery. This mystery, as we have seen, is that us Gentiles have been included among God's people. This means that we too share in the blessings of the gospel and therefore have a hope that no one can take away from us. Nothing in heaven and on earth, neither height or depth, nor anything else in all of creation can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord!

Amen