



Sunday Morning Worship Service

April 24, 2016

The Greatest Mystery—Revealed & Appreciated

Ephesians 3:1-21

Introduction: Paul begins this portion of his epistle giving the reason (*For this reason*) why he is praying for the Ephesians—that God included Gentiles in the church, His dwelling place (2:22); but before praying, he chooses to reinforce what he had taught them concerning the mystery of the church, picking up his prayer in v. 14 (*cf.*—3:1 with 3:14ff).

I. Paul, a Prisoner of the Mystery (1-4)

A. *Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus (1a)*

1. Ephesians is a prison epistle (along with Philippians & Colossians) and at the time of this writing, Paul had been in prison for about 5 years—2 in Caesarea, the rest in Rome (Acts 21:27-28:16).
2. Paul considered himself a prisoner of *Christ*, not of the Jews or of Rome.
3. Paul lived with a divine perspective, totally trusting God’s purposes, not allowing circumstances to control him.
4. As he wrote to the Philippians (1:12-14), Paul knew that his circumstances had been used by God to promote the gospel:

¹² Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel, ¹³ so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else, ¹⁴ and that most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear.

B. *For the sake of the Gentiles (1b)*

Paul was not in the ministry for his own sake or purposes and he did not try to serve in his own power. Note Colossians 1:24-26:

²⁴ Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church, in filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions. ²⁵ Of this church I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, so that I might fully carry out the preaching of the word of God, ²⁶ that is, the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints,

- C. God's steward of the mystery through divine revelation (2, 3a)
 - 1. Paul knew the Ephesians had heard that God had chosen Paul to be the manager of His grace for them
 - 2. Special divine revelation given directly to Paul concerning the mystery.
- D. Referred to by Paul earlier in the epistle (3b, 4)

"As I wrote before in brief" refers to 2:11-22 in which Paul had briefly and generally described the relationship of Gentile believers to Jewish believers.

II. The General Definition of a Mystery (5)

- A. Three components of a biblical mystery:
 - 1. Not revealed in the Old Testament period—*in other generations*
 - 2. Can only be known by revelation—*it has now been revealed*
 - 3. Revealed in the New Testament—to *His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit*
- B. In this case, Paul is going to move from the general to the specific; namely, that in Christ Jew & Gentile are brought together in one body, the church.
- C. Paul is now going to explain and clarify the mystery for the purpose of believers understanding its significance; what is not properly understood cannot be properly applied.
- D. Paul's zeal and passion was not driven by emotion or experience, but from his spiritual *insight*.

III. The Specific Content of this Mystery (6)

That Gentiles are fellow heirs, members, partakers . . . this was a bombshell to Jews, in spite of the Old Testament teaching that Gentiles would be blessed by God (Gen 12:3), that Gentiles will bless God (Ps 72), that Messiah will come to Gentiles (Is 60:1-3), that Gentiles will be saved by the Messiah (Hos 1:10), and that Gentiles will receive the Holy Spirit (Joel 2:28-29).

This was the spiritual equivalent of saying that lepers could intermingle as normal members of society. The thought of Gentiles having total equality with Jews before God was inconceivable and tantamount to blasphemy.

- A. *Fellow heirs*—Jews and Gentiles share all the privileges of those who are members of Christ's body, the church.
- B. *Fellow members*—equal members of the Body of Christ. Church leadership did not have to be Jewish and all believers are full members of the Body, none are second-class. Note 1 Corinthians 12:12-13:

¹² For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. ¹³ For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.
- C. *Fellow partakers of the promise*—not the promises to Israel, but the spiritual blessings of the church through the Holy Spirit. Jewish believers could not claim any special enabling that wasn't also available to the Gentile believers.

The fact that saved Gentiles and saved Jews share spiritual equality in Christ should lead us to value one another as brothers and sisters in Christ.

IV. The Minister of the Mystery (7-9)

- A. His attitude (7, 8)
 - 1. Paul realized that he was privileged to be called to be God's servant.
 - 2. Paul's unusually clear comprehension of God's righteousness allowed him an unusually clear understanding of his "leastness"—overwhelmed by his sense of unworthiness.
- B. His task (8, 9)
 - 1. *To preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ*—all His truth & blessings. 2 Peter 1:3 describes it as *everything pertaining to life & godliness*.
 - 2. *To bring to light the administration of the mystery*—
 - a. *Administration* in v. 9 is the same word as *stewardship* in v.2
 - b. The *mystery*, again, is that Gentiles and Jews alike have the same spiritual standing in Christ.
 - c. Paul was to reveal the full expression of the operation of this great truth, hidden for so long in the mind of God the creator.

V. The Purpose of the Mystery (10-13)

- A. The supreme purpose of the church is to glorify God by manifesting His *manifold* (multi-colored, multi-faceted) *wisdom* before the angels (*rulers and authorities in heavenly places*), who can then offer greater praise to God. (10)
 - As one commentator put it: *In the classroom of God's universe, God is the Teacher, the angels are the students, the church is the illustration, and the subject is the manifold wisdom of God.*
- B. This mystery was not an afterthought; it was the eternal plan God conceived and fulfilled in Christ. (11)
- C. This truth strengthened Paul's resolve to proclaim the gospel (12)
- D. In spite of the hardships he faced, because he endured them for the Ephesians' benefit and glory, their honor rather than their disgrace. (13)

VI. Appreciating the Mystery (14-21)

- A. Paul continues with his prayer (14-15)
- B. Reasons to appreciate the mystery of the church (16-21)
 - 1. The church is *strengthened with power through His Spirit* (16)
 - 2. *So that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith* (17)
 - 3. *Able to comprehend* the full expanse of Christ's love (18-19a)
 - 4. *Be filled up to all the fullness of God* (19b)
- God's supreme goal for the church is to make us like Himself by filling us with Himself, with all that He is and has. Do you understand what that means? No? Neither do I! I can't, you can't! Not fully in this life, at least.

APPLICATION:

You've heard it said many times, by many preachers, that there is no such thing as a perfect church, because every church is made up of imperfect people, believers though they are.

Should this concept motivate us to be disillusioned with the church? That was not Paul's conclusion! Rather, he was so thrilled and captivated by the truth about the church because he was thoroughly convinced that the church was God's means to bring Himself glory by being the organism whereby His grace would be disseminated to believers so that they would be conformed to the image of Christ—that God's marred image bearers could be restored to His likeness!

No, we should be motivated to give thanks to God for the church—for this church—and for the gracious opportunity He gives us to be part of His purpose through it. As our current cultural circumstances should warn us, we need each other as much as ever to stand firm against the anti-religion, anti-God sentiment that pervades the highest authorities in our land.