

THE MYSTERY OF CHRIST

Ephesians 3:1–13

Key Verse: 3:6

“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.”

Do you ever think you've got things all figured out? Some people think they don't need to learn anything more. They think they know the world and people well enough. They may even think they've got God all figured out. But who has God all figured out? Actually, nobody. God is God. He's way above us, way greater than our finite minds. God is in sovereign control. And in his own eternal plan and purpose he's chosen to make certain things known to us. God has given us the gospel of Jesus, to help us experience his grace and be saved. God also has made known something very important through his church. In today's passage Paul calls it “the mystery of Christ.” Paul repeats the word “mystery” four times (3,4,6,9), and twice he says it needs to be “revealed” by the Spirit (3,5). What *is* this mystery in the church? *Why* is it called a mystery? And why do we all need insight into it? May God open our hearts and speak to us through his word today.

First, Paul's ministry (1–4, 7–9, 13). In this letter Paul begins by praising God for every spiritual blessing we have in Christ and by praying for the Ephesians. He shares how God's grace makes us alive in Christ and brings us close to God and close to each other as members of God's household. But this was a radical idea. Historically, God's holy people were to separate themselves from the corrupt world. How can people who were living far off from God now be so close to him and equal brothers and sisters with all his saints? Paul knew this was hard to understand. It still is. So he says in chapter 3 that this reality in the church is God's “mystery.” Before explaining it, Paul shares how he came to know it.

Read verses 1–4. Paul begins by saying he's a prisoner of Christ on behalf of the Gentiles. While writing this letter he was under house arrest in Rome for preaching about Christ. His ministry to the Gentiles was especially controversial. The Jewish religious leaders had persuaded the Romans to arrest Paul. They hated Paul's teaching about Jesus, and they hated his ministry to Gentiles? Why? Not because it was bad, but because they didn't want to repent. So they twisted the facts to say that Paul had been stirring up rebellion. After all his labor, these false accusations and imprisonment must have been hard to go through. But Paul saw it all from God's point of view. Though it looked like people had imprisoned him, Paul saw that he was really a prisoner of Christ. He was happy even to die for Jesus. And he saw God's purpose in his imprisonment. He says God was using it “on behalf of” the Gentiles. In verse 13 he tells them not to lose heart and says “I am suffering for you” and that this is their “glory.” Through Paul's suffering, they are coming to taste God's grace. Spreading the message of God's grace may sound easy. But to really spread it involves suffering and self-sacrifice.

How did Paul get into this situation? Read verses 7–9. Paul insists that his ministry is God's grace to him. He mentions this "grace" earlier in verse 2. Now in verse 7 he says God gave him this grace "by the working of his power." Paul had been a self-righteous Pharisee. In his blind zeal he had been persecuting the early church and sending people to their death. Nobody could change him. But the Risen Christ met him and blinded him physically for a while so that he could finally see spiritually. God opened Paul's eyes to see his amazing grace to call him, God's worst enemy, to be his servant. That's why he says in verse 8 that he's "the very least of all the saints." This is no false humility; he really means it. Though he's the very least, God's work in his life reveals the gift of God's grace all the more vividly. And it's this grace that Paul's been preaching. It's God's grace in Christ to open the door widely to the worst of sinners to come back to God and enjoy close fellowship with him. So many people responded gladly and joined the Christian fellowship. They tasted the unsearchable riches of Christ in his amazing grace. In verse 2 Paul says he had been given "stewardship" of this grace. It literally means God made him a grace dispenser. Some people give off bad vibes. Some are like wounding machines. But contrary to what anybody at first would have imagined, God was using Paul to serve all kinds of sinners with the amazing grace of Jesus. It was indeed an essential part of "the mystery."

Second, the mystery of Christ (3–6, 8–12). Paul had mentioned the word "mystery" at the beginning of the letter. In 1:9 he wrote, "...making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ..." Now in chapter 3 Paul comes back to this idea of God's "mystery." Why is he describing God's will as a "mystery"? To understand, we first need to know the context. At that time, the city of Ephesus was the capital of the mystery religions of Asia Minor. It was a center of magic arts as well. People were really into going to Ephesus to find some mysterious knowledge or get some mysterious mystical experience. To Paul, it was all a bunch of nonsense. God's real mystery is in Christ. Paul wants the Ephesian believers to be sure they have the real mystery. He also wants to make it very clear that he himself didn't invent it.

Read verses 3–5. The point here is that Paul came to know this mystery by "revelation." He didn't figure it out with his own clever brain power. God revealed it to him through his Spirit. In fact, God had been revealing this same mystery to all of Christ's apostles and prophets. In earlier generations people couldn't see it, but now in Christ and through his Spirit, it's becoming known more and more. Why is it important to know that this mystery has its origin in God himself? It's so that people can fully trust it and embrace it.

And what exactly *is* this mystery? Read verse 6. This is a powerful gospel truth. In chapter 2 Paul described these Gentiles as formerly "dead in trespasses and sins," under the influence of the devil, "children of wrath," "alienated," "strangers," "having no hope," "without God," and "far off" from him. But now they are "brought near." How did it happen? It was "not a result of works," or the most intense human effort, or observing lots of rules. Paul says it was "by the blood of Christ" and "through the cross." That's the power of grace. By God's grace in Christ Paul called them "members of the household of God." Now he calls them "fellow heirs," "members of the same body," and "partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus." In Greek, the words in verse 6 are literally "fellow heirs, fellow members, fellow sharers." In other words, these new Gentile

Christians are full equals with Jewish Christians. Humanly it's impossible, but in the grace of Jesus, it's not only possible, but very real. These people are not inferior in any way, or second-class citizens. Paul wants these new believers to see themselves this way. He wants the older believers to see them like this, too. Paul says it's "the mystery of Christ" that makes this happen. When Christians who are very different from each other get together as fellow heirs, fellow members, fellow sharers, this glorious mystery of Christ is fully revealed. Such a church really is mysterious.

In verse 8 Paul calls this mystery "the unsearchable riches of Christ." Why? It's because his grace is so rich, so strong, it can completely redeem the worst of sinners. It can heal and restore the most damaged, the most lost people. His grace can also reconcile the worst enemies. The unsearchable riches of Christ can help people forgive each other of the most hurtful behavior. The unsearchable riches of his grace can give us deep peace with God and deep peace with each other. The unsearchable riches of his grace can heal all our insecurities and human striving. The unsearchable riches of his grace can bind us all together so closely.

Third, the manifold wisdom of God (10). What's the purpose of the mystery of Christ? Look at verses 9–11. It's all part of God's eternal purpose and plan. This mystery is not just about our own individual salvation. Paul says the focus of this mystery is "the church." It's the second time in this letter he uses the word "church." Later in chapter 5 he describes the church as "the bride of Christ," radiant and holy. It means the mystery of Christ is so beautiful. How do you view church? Some see it as a relic from the past, out of touch, totally irrelevant. Some see it as a judgmental place or a total hassle or really annoying or pointless. But Ephesians proclaims that the church is the culmination of God's eternal purpose and plan. At the end of chapter 3 Paul prays, "...to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus." Paul puts the church on a par with Christ himself.

Why is church so important? Read verse 10. The Church reveals "the manifold wisdom of God." In Greek, these words are actually at the end of the sentence, for emphasis. But what does this phrase mean? The word "manifold" means diverse, multifaceted, or multi-colored. So Paul is saying that church is like a gorgeous piece of art. Not the building, but the Christians in it. Paul called individual Christians "God's workmanship." Now he calls all these individual Christians unified together in church as "the manifold wisdom of God." It's fascinating. We each have our own story of God's personal grace. But together, this grace in our lives is magnified into something so spectacular, it's breathtaking. It's like a mural of photographs. Scattered, they don't make sense. [PHOTO] But brought all together, they give off a stunning image of Jesus our Lord. How cool is that?

Who gets to see the beauty of his church? Paul says here that it's "the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places." Who's that? Basically, it's angelic beings, both good and bad. This seems really obscure. What's Paul talking about? Later in chapter 6 he writes, "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." These evil forces are trying to divide God's people, even now. They're trying to stir up conflict, hatred, bitterness, hostility and revenge among us. How? By getting us to focus on things

other than our Lord Jesus Christ. They want us to get into how different we are. They appeal to our sinful nature. They look at us like we're sitting ducks, easy prey. But in the mystery of Christ and the unsearchable riches of his grace, they can't find any chink in our armor. They can't divide us. All their tactics fail. What's the source of our victory over all this spiritual evil? Look at verse 12. Through our faith in Jesus we have boldness and access with confidence. Christ is the Victor over even our most powerful spiritual enemies. By faith we can come to him and claim his victory in our own lives and in our church.

Read verse 6 again. May God give us insight into the mystery of Christ in our church. May he unite us all into one, by the unsearchable riches of his grace, and help us live as fellow heirs, fellow members and fellow sharers. In this way, may God use us to display the beauty and glory of our Lord Jesus Christ to people living in this dark and discouraging world.