

# The Mystery Revealed

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 25 March 2025

Preacher: The Rt. Rev. Mike Hill

[ 0 : 00 ] Thirty years ago, I was on a plane in O'Hare Airport in Chicago, when this very cool guy, beautiful suit, expensive hand luggage, came into the cabin.

! I was feeling amazingly blessed as I managed to get my ticket bumped up into business class. After paying a pittance to travel. So I was sitting there, I got up because he had the window seat. And like Americans do, he thrust out his hand and told me his name. So I responded by telling him my name. And he said to me, it's the kind of question that clergy don't really like to be asked when they're in Mufti.

He said, what do you do for a living? And I was tempted to say, I'm in middle management in some national organisation. But I sort of thought if I said that, I'd hear a cock crow in my head or something and it might break down.

So he's kind of stiffened. He said to me, you need to know I have nothing to do with religion.

[ 1 : 28 ] He said, I've never had a religious thought in my life. But you have one minute to tell me why it's important to you. What would you say?

What would you say? I mean, I can't remember what I said. It's 30 years ago now. And I can just about remember why I'm standing here at the moment. And he proceeded to drain the liquid contents of the business class cabin and fell into a coma.

And we said goodbye to each other. We didn't exchange telephone numbers or anything like that. And I did think about him once or twice.

And I mean, I can't say that faithfully I prayed for him, that whatever I said would influence him. But I did think of him occasionally. And when I thought of him, I thought to myself, I wonder what kind of persons Paul had in mind when he said, you know, God can do infinitely more than we ever dare to ask or imagine.

And it would be maybe 10, 12, possibly 15 years later. In the days of faxes.

[ 2 : 54 ] Remember them? And suddenly my machine started to whirl about 5.30 in the evening. And he was from this guy.

He said, you might remember me. We sat next to each other. He said, I appreciate I was a little antisocial. But I thought you might like to know. And you might even like to pray for me. Because tonight I'm being baptised. And it was in a church actually in Brussels that I knew quite well. And I knew the minister there.

And the minister there relayed to me what an amazing turnaround there had been in the mind of this man. And the reason he was so kind of embittered and so unwilling to listen to the gospel was that his 21-year-old beautiful daughter had died of leukemia some two or three years before I bumped into him.

And tonight one of the things we'll hear about from verse 1 in this passage in a few moments.

[ 4 : 13 ] is what do we do? Where do we turn when bad things in life happen to us?

Before that, I just want to do a quick recap on the things we were talking about last week. And I said there were three things that I thought, you know, it's up to you, but three things I thought that you might like to talk about at this Lent.

One was, do I really believe? Have I really processed the truth that if I am in Christ, as Paul would put it, I am forgiven?

Or do I still live under a cloud of guilt? Two, can I truly accept God's grace, this idea that God loves me even though I may have lived a life which would not normally deserve his love?

And thirdly, this is a question for believers only, am I working hard on those good works that God has prepared in advance for me?

[ 5 : 30 ] And I said, you know, there's three good questions for Lent that you could think about, and I don't know if you have, but I would suggest you might.

I came across this week in my preparations another way to look at the Ephesian literature. And this pattern basically divides the whole epistle into three sections.

The first section is chapters 1 to 3. Where Paul is talking about the wealth of the believer. You remember in chapter 1 we're told that in Christ God has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual gift.

Then the person who wrote this framework up said, we move from the wealth of the believer to the walk of the believer. That is, given that this is what you believe, this is the way that you should behave.

And our speaker in church on Sunday made the very good point that a lot of churches seem to get the idea that if you want to come amongst us, you better behave.

[ 6 : 42 ] In the hope that if you come amongst us, some of it may rub and you come to believe. And he was questioning whether or not we should be like that.

And you know that phrase that's used in churches frequently, all are welcome. And I attended this Methodist church in Cornwall, which some friends of ours went to.

It was this rather dear Methodist lay preacher with a very fine Cornish brogue. And he would say, after the service today, there'll be a sausage sizzle.

And my daughter, Mahalia, will be singing at it. All are welcome. I mean, I have no idea how many people went.

I didn't go myself. But we say all are welcome. But I think, you know, there may be occasions when we really need to face the truth. That actually, in a lot of churches, a lot of people who show up in goodwill don't feel welcome.

[ 7 : 53 ] And we need to think about that. I heard a speaker today. No, I heard it was at the prayer meeting this morning that I attended. And somebody was saying, it's Mothering Sunday this Sunday.

And, you know, that's a really sad day for a lot of people. And that's true. And, you know, I often wonder whether we should call it Motherhood Sunday.

So it's not quite as, you know, stigmatizing for people who are not mothers. But I don't know. So from the wealth of the believer to the walk of the believer.

And then the very last shortish section, which I suspect in our churches, and I shall say this again to you in a couple of weeks, the warfare of the believer.

That is, we're involved with the principalities and powers. Paul says that's where our real battle lies. And then he tells us to put on the full armor of God.

[ 8 : 55 ] And to pray at all times in the Spirit. So I have this kind of anxiety about the warfare bit. And that is, in most churches, they don't even take it seriously at all.

And in some churches, they're totally obsessed by it and find the work of the devil under every stone they can overturn. And I want to say to you, I think we do need to take it seriously.

But we don't need to be obsessed because Jesus Christ has already won the victory over the evil one on the cross of Calvary. So that's another way to look at it.

And what's great about this text, I'm not going to read this to you tonight. But you might like, if you like homework, you might like to do this. But you might like to look at the story of Paul's arrest.

Remember I told you that this letter was written very likely from Rome where Paul was in prison. He was later transferred to Jerusalem and held in house arrest in Jerusalem.

[ 9 : 59 ] But at this point, he was chained to a Roman army prison officer. And you can read about that in Acts chapter 21, verses 17 to the end.

And the interesting thing about Paul's imprisonment was that, first off, he should never have been in prison. He was a Roman citizen.

And Roman citizens had a lot of rights. I mean, basically the way it worked out if you were a Roman citizen, was that if somebody did something to you, and the person was caught, the full might of the Roman Empire would be brought to bear on them.

And, you know, as we know, you might well end up being crucified upside down on the Appian Way or some such place. So he was in prison wrongly because he was a Roman citizen.

But even worse, he was falsely accused. What he was accused of was saying, because, we'll talk about this a bit more in a moment, but because Paul saw his primary ministry to preach the gospel

to the Gentiles, he was accused of being dismissive by the scribes and the Pharisees, of being dismissive about the law in the Old Testament.

[ 11 : 29 ] Paul wasn't dismissive of it at all. Incidentally, nor was Jesus. You know, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, I didn't come to change a jot or tittle of the law.

I came to fulfill it. Two different things. I was telling somebody I had to go to Long Ashton on Sunday and give a talk on...

There's some people, and I mean, there are quite a lot of people like this, surprisingly, in many ways, who think that we should never read the Old Testament in public worship, you know, all that butchery.

Actually, less than 0.01% of the Old Testament is to do with butchery. In fact, there's a lot more stuff in the Old Testament calling sinful Israelites to repentance than there is about violence and death and all that kind of thing.

So, Paul describes himself in verse 1 as a prisoner of Christ. Interestingly, there is a new version of the New Testament.

[ 12 : 35 ] Of course, there is. Called the English Standard Version. You may have seen a copy of it. As far as I know, it is the only modern translation of the New Testament where instead of saying that Paul...

When Paul describes himself as the prisoner of Christ Jesus, the ESV says the prisoner for Christ Jesus, which I think carries a sense that the actual Greek word won't carry.

I think he was a prisoner of. Christ Jesus. But that in itself is a very interesting statement. Because technically, Paul was a prisoner of the Roman Empire.

To be accurate, he was a prisoner of Caesar Nero, who was not a nice man. And he was in a Roman prison and was something that would be held by the Romans in Jerusalem.

And I think they asked the very interesting question of, really, whose prisoner was Paul? I think if you'd asked the man in the street whose prisoner Paul was, they would have said, well, Nero's, the Romans.

[ 13 : 48 ] But actually, Paul described himself differently. He says, I'm a prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles.

I think that raises a very interesting question. And I think it's raised the same question for Christians throughout the ages.

And that is, in the end, who is in charge of your life? In the world today, there are two dominant philosophies.

One is fatalism. You know, you know, Garrison Keeler, in one of his stories about Lake Wobegon, says that the town motto was, we are what we are.

And actually, just so you know this, do you know, I mean, if you're part of Prayer for Clevedon, keep your mouths delicately closed at this point. But do you know what the motto of Clevedon Council is?

[ 15 : 05 ] Shout it out. Watch and pray. Isn't that amazing? So as a group, which I get to as often as I can, that meets to pray for Clevedon, I'm sure they'd love to see some of you at that.

It's a good time together to pray for our town and those setting authority over us. But making the decision as to who is really in charge of your life is a very critical issue.

And it's been a critical issue for Christians throughout the ages and for people in this church this evening. And one of the times that we discover who is really in charge of our lives is when something goes wrong.

As I said, there are two things there, philosophies that underlie the way a lot of people think today and indeed the way quite a lot of Christians think. One is what's called fatalism, that is stuff happens, get over it kind of thing.

And the other is determinism, which is a far more subtle thing and in my view has found its way into churches in a way that's not been that helpful.

[ 16 : 22 ] Determinism is this idea that all human actions take place because of circumstances beyond ourselves.

So you will have heard it often said, you know, when a prisoner is in court that some barrister stands up and says, well, my Lord, you know, poor old Harry here, you know, he came from a broken home.

He flunked it in school and it's not his fault that he bashed this person over the head. And the trouble with the kind of determinist thing is, I mean, people blame biology, they blame their parents,

they blame all kinds of things for their circumstances today.

That would be determinist thinking. There's a man called Professor Robert Sapolsky who's written a scary book called Determined. And what that book argues is that anything we do is the result of our internal programming and external circumstances.

So it's either your genes or it's your background. And of course, up to a point, we can't say that our backgrounds don't affect us. But on the other hand, we can't keep excusing our bad behavior on the basis of it's not really my fault, you know.

[ 17 : 55 ] My mother didn't make a great job of, you know, nappy training me, so, you know, that's the reason I'm a serial killer. I'm exaggerating to make a point.

But look, here's the thing. The trouble with determinism, and I think this has found its way into our churches, is it is a machine to create perpetual victimhood.

It's never my fault. If I can always throw the ball out to the wing, then I'm never responsible for my behavior. And in my view, it's one of the most childish facets of adulthood is not to understand that behavior has consequences.

consequences. My view is, it's rule one of being a parent that you need to teach your children that behavior has consequences.

I don't think that's saying anything particularly controversial, although if you were a couple of generations younger, you'd probably, you know, I'd be outed on mum's net or something.

[ 19 : 04 ] So Paul saw his, that Jesus was in charge of his life. He's in prison. He's not getting great food. He's chained to a bloke 24 hours a day.

And he still recognizes that who's in charge of his life is Christ Jesus. And I think the problem for us is that especially when times are difficult, when things are not going, how we would like them to go. The big problem is this. We start to forget that Jesus is in charge of our lives. If you have an addictive illness, you know, you need to be very honest with yourself about who's in charge of your life.

Is it your addiction or is it Christ Jesus? If you're going through a hard time, where will you turn? You know, I love Psalm 121.

It's going to be read tomorrow at my friend of mine's funeral service, which I have to speak at, where the psalmist says, it's what they call a psalm of, it's a psalm that was said as the Israelites traveled to the big feasts in Jerusalem.

[ 20 : 28 ] And Psalm 121 is a well-known psalm. And the first line of it, I think, asks a very deep existential question.

And it's this. Sorry, I'm in 121, don't I? I lift up my eyes to you, to you whose throne is in heaven. Sorry, Psalm 121. I lift up my eyes to the hills, whence does my help come from? That is a very profound existential question. Where do you turn when your life is under pressure?

And if Jesus is in charge of your life, you will do well to turn to him, will you not? But it's amazing, isn't it, how many of us in times have, it's the kind of last thing, I must say, I chastise myself sometimes.

You know, I'm in a situation, somebody comes in and says something, and sometimes I think, why is the last thing I think about praying? You know, I generally want to think of myself as somebody who's prayerful and I like to come to prayer meetings here and I like to think of those that I know and lots of people I don't know.

[ 21 : 57 ] So Paul is telling us by telling us that he's a prisoner of Christ Jesus, though he's in prison, who is in charge of his life.

I mean, are you aware of this, that Paul's ministry in prison was unbelievably productive he wrote the epistle to the Ephesians, he wrote the epistle to the Philippians, he wrote the epistle to the Colossians, and he wrote the letter to Philemon all at times when he was in prison.

And, you know, I'm glad we've got those epistles to look at and to study together, all written from prison. Paul was very clear under whose authority he served.

He was a prisoner of Christ. Let me just ask you, are we as clear as that? Not that we're in prison, but that we are servants of Christ.

And that should be the determining factor in all that we do and all that we say. when I was a brand new Christian, I went to this very strict church, and there were all kinds of rules, and one of them was that if you were single and you were near a single woman, there's no way you should get more than nine inches closer to her.

[ 23 : 27 ] Right? I mean, I never, you know, I never argued with our cure and said, well, you know, it just gives you a little bit of, you know, leeway.

But nine inches was the rule, but the better rule that he gave us was, he said, I hope you will never do anything when you're with your girlfriend that Jesus, if you imagine Jesus looking at you, would you be ashamed?

Wow. So Paul was very clear under whose authority he served, and this Lent, you might like to just mull over in your mind, how clear are you about the authority of Christ Jesus in your life?

And then we come in verse two to the big deal, the very big deal in this whole epistle as a matter of fact. And when Paul's talking about the dispensation of grace, he's not talking about saving faith. He's talking about the way that God revealed a mystery to him. And the mystery related to an issue that could have torn the early church apart.

[ 24 : 41 ] And that was, is the gospel only for Jews? Or is it for Jews and Gentiles? that was the issue why Paul was in prison?

And, you know, Paul had a very challenging message in a divided world, and in Galatians chapter three and verses 26 to the end, he talks about, he says this, there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Two really significant points here to bring out. One is that Paul knew that real change comes from the preaching of the gospel. Paul had different ways of doing it.

if you read Acts, you will read there that Paul's plan if he went into the synagogue, when he arrived in a new town, he went straight to the synagogue, and he tried to prove from the Old Testament that Jesus was the promised Messiah.

And a few Jews believed, lots of them didn't, but a few did. When he, and we only have one example of this in the New Testament, and that's in Acts chapter 17 when Paul is in Athens and he stands on this hill which is outside the Areopagus called the, what's it called?

[ 26 : 17 ] The Areopagus. Areopagus. And if you go there, by the way, it's been climbed on by so many preachers, it's really shiny and dangerous. It's really easy to get up there, but it's quite difficult to get down.

And I think when we were there, somebody broke their wrist trying to get down off it. But the big deal in this gospel addresses that thing that could have caused a major dispute in the life of the early church.

Is this deal, the gospel, only for Jewish people or is it for Gentiles as well? Paul's conviction from the earliest days of his conversion were, this is for Gentiles as well.

That was dynamite in terms of the expectation of the Jews. And Paul, Peter, you remember in Acts chapter 10, has this kind of weird dream where he sees all these animals and gets to the end of it and God says to him, look, none of these animals are going to make you unclean.

And his understanding of his dream is that the gospel is for all creatures. I mean, that's true, I don't know if you think about this, but I mean, you know, the prophecies of Isaiah, you get this idea that the whole of creation will be redeemed.

[ 27 : 48 ] And do you remember he talks about the lion lying down with the lamb? And I mean, it's quite, you know, challenging to think of lions becoming vegetarians. Maybe vegans, I don't know.

So this dispensation of grace, Paul, when he talks about a mystery, I told you this last week, a mystery here is not like we've got to get together the clues and find out who done it.

But the mystery is an ancient fact that suddenly God reveals. And of course, in the Old Testament, you can find evidence.

that God's concern was for all people, not just for his chosen people. And certainly in the New Testament, Paul led the charge on preaching the gospel to the Gentiles.

And here's the thing, and sadly, I think we are losing this in the 21st century church. That Paul wrote in Romans chapter 1, you remember this verse, verse 16.

[ 29 : 01 ] Paul says, I'm not ashamed of the gospel. Well, I have the horrible feeling that there are a lot of churches up and down this country which are very unsure as to whether the gospel is the right thing to preach.

Romans chapter 1 in verse 16, I'm not ashamed of the gospel. Why? Because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. I mean, when you read that, you kind of ask yourself, well, why wouldn't we preach that?

If it's the power, if it's the power of God for the salvation of everyone, it needs to be released into this world.

Paul gives us a little framework as to his understanding of the gospel in chapter 15 of 1 Corinthians, in the first few verses there, I won't bother reading that to you tonight.

The issue of Jews and Gentiles and who's the gospel for was the very reason that Paul was in prison. And his amazing conclusion was it's for all people.

[ 30 : 26 ] I want to go back to what I was saying at the beginning. If I said to you, you know, do you think the gospel is for all people? And then I said to you, and do you think your churches should be inclusive?

I don't think there's anybody in the house who would say, certainly not. I think you'd all think that the churches should give a welcome to anybody and everybody.

And I think you would say that the gospel is for all people, for all classes, races, et cetera, et cetera. And look, I think we got to really think 60 years ago, a movement started called the Gospel and Culture Movement.

And what that movement was about in its early days was working out how do we preach the gospel in different cultures. It's a good question. tradition. I think anybody who's been a youth pastor would say that the way they preach the gospel to youngsters isn't quite the same as you would preach to older people.

[ 31 : 48 ] I mean, basically, the tenets are the same, but they might use different illustrations, different parables to kind of get their message across.

But it's the Gospel and Culture Movement migrated somewhat and started to ask questions.

Well, hang on. If all organizations have a culture, maybe our churches have a culture, and maybe we need to think some more about that culture, because we blithely stand at the front and say, all are welcome, but do they feel welcome?

I remember in my church, which was in the so-called yacht and yogurt belt of South Buckingham, and I remember the first time a chap came to church in the summer with his short-sleeved shirt, and he had tattoos, sleeves as they call it, on both arms.

I mean, I'm going back a long time now. And people were horrified that he would come forward for communion and put his tattooed arms out to receive it.

[ 33 : 08 ] And, you know, we're all relatively intuitive. We can kind of get, you know, am I welcome here or am I not? I thought to myself, and, you know, I'm somebody who is conservative on issues of human sexuality, but I think, you know, all people are welcome in our churches, and I thought, you know, what must it be like to be a gay person and come to church, particularly 30 years ago.

I mean, you know, public attitudes have changed a lot. I thought to myself, what must it be like if you've been imprisoned? And people know it.

Are you, can we really make people like that feel welcome? Well, the answer is yes, but it's got to be thought about. And the kind of pat phrase, all are welcome, I think sometimes can be very unselfaware when we say it.

And Paul goes on, says this amazing thing, that in chapter 6 he talks about the rulers and authorities and he also mentions them in chapter 3.

And he thinks it's a very good thing that in preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, he's preaching it to the rulers and authorities of this present age.

[ 34 : 38 ] That is, those forces that you cannot see but are at work in the world which are malign. Forces that can oppress your life, forces that can create war and rumours of war and all that kind of thing.

And Paul thinks, one of the great things about the gospel is that it turns back, it limits their malign power in this world.

love. And here's my final point for tonight. So in towards the end of this chapter, I love this.

Paul says, I pray that out of his, that is God's glorious riches, he may strengthen you with power through his spirit in your inner being so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.

I'm always telling Christians because there is this kind of slightly superficial idea around that if I become a Christian my problems are over.

[ 35 : 54 ] Nothing bad will ever happen to me because I've got the Lord on my side. And actually Jesus said, didn't he, the rain will fall on the good and bad alike.

And I think this verse gives you a clue to God's divine strategy to do with hardship and that is, God won't protect you from everything that goes wrong in your life.

But he will give you inner strength. He'll give you the inner strength to hang together. I've never forgotten this, but I remember when we had a terrible car accident and poor auntie was very badly injured and my family, apart from my son, gathered in the John Ratcliffe Hospital in Oxford.

I've never forgotten this. So this guy comes out in scrubs. They've had emptier in there for three or four hours and this guy comes out in scrubs and he said, I think we need to have a word.

So have a word. And he took us to the side room. And fortunately, I think I was the only one of the five of us who saw this, but on the door there was a sign that said bereavement room.

[ 37 : 17 ] I'm thinking, oh my goodness. So he went in there and anyway, it turned out auntie hadn't died and he explained to her that her injuries were pretty extensive and she was under a, they'd induced a coma and his line was the next 24 hours will be critical.

Well, if you know auntie, she's here tonight. I mean, she survived that amazingly. But my four daughters and I, we went to what they call the visitors' room in the intensive care unit and we prayed to quite late into the night, or should I say into the early morning.

And at the end of it, I think we did have this conviction. I certainly did have it very strongly and as we got no idea, I mean, we prayed that God would heal healthier, but our deeper awareness was that whatever happened, we would be given the strength to carry on.

I pray that out of his glorious riches, he may strengthen you with power through his spirit in your inner being. I thank God for that promise that Paul writes there.

His inner strength helps us because it reveals the truth about God to us and it strengthens us from the inside out.

[ 38 : 49 ] Going back to what I was saying is in times of trouble, it's often we grasp at things which are external to us to help us. No, God's plan is that he wants to strengthen us from the inside out, that we might face the terrible things that can happen to us in our lives by this strength.

And Paul says, verse 20, it's a power that's already working within us. He also says, the power in terms of its ability to do more than we can ever ask or imagine, is unimaginable.

people. And in verse 21, Paul tells us, it reveals the glory of God in the church. I think that when it comes to your role as witnesses in the church, if I might say this politely to you, I think people are much more interested to know in how you have coped with hardship in your life than whether or not God found a parking space for you in the supermarket car park.

I'm not saying he isn't interested in your parking. He'd be very interested in mine. I can never park straight. But see what I mean?

I mean, I think there is power in testimony where God has really, really helped us through a difficult time in our lives.

[ 40 : 26 ] testimony. I've found testimonies to be of varying value that I've heard in church.

I've never got this confirmation I was taking and a minister came to me and said, we've got three of the young people who want to give a testimony.

And two of them were, you know, pretty good, I thought. And the last one was this boy got up and comes ambling up to the front and says to him, so, Jeremy, why are you getting confirmed tonight? He said, well, my grandson said she'd buy me a bike. I didn't talk to him afterwards, but I kind of thought, it's not what we want, is it, that kind of thing.

So, here you go. three questions for you to think about this Lent. Where do I find strength in time of need?

[ 41 : 36 ] Second, what does it mean to make Jesus the authority over my life? And three, do we take the rulers and authorities, these hidden forces at work in the heavenly realms, whose influence is malign?

do we take them seriously enough? Thank you.