

God's Mystery Revealed

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Preacher: Mark Chew

[0 : 00] It is in the original Old English. Hands is not sort of gender, whatever, politically correct.

! And there are some words in there that you might not understand,! but I've got that little cheat sheet at the bottom there! that will hopefully help you understand.

But, you know, if you've got nothing to talk about over dinner tonight, why not talk about this? It's a wonderful mystery that we don't fully comprehend, but this is the God that we worship, and this is the Lord Jesus that we worship as well.

Okay, let's turn our Bibles back to Ephesians 3, page 1174. And you should have an outline there as well. Well, talking about mysteries, I know that some of you like mysteries.

And for a very long time, there was a mystery that lay unresolved at the very heart of the Jewish faith. A puzzle which many in Israel sought to find the answer to.

[1 : 12] And the Apostle Paul, who wrote to the Ephesians, was a man well qualified to know this. After all, he was a Pharisee among Pharisees, well trained in the law, devout in keeping it, and he took great pride in his Jewish heritage.

And so when Paul says three times in our first six verses today in the passage, that this mystery has now been revealed to him, he of all people should know what he's talking about.

And of course, if you've been following along in Ephesians so far, Paul actually has already shown us or revealed to us the answer to this mystery. It's in the Gospel, which Paul has spent time in chapter 2, explaining how God saves all humanity.

And in particular, verses 1 to 10, he explains how God saves everyone, by faith or through grace. But in verses 11 to 22, he also shows how this is done as between Jews and Gentiles, bringing peace.

And so we actually looked at this passage in part in our Hope 25 series, when we considered how Jesus gives hope to the divided. But hidden away in the Old Testament, Paul explains that there has been a long-standing mystery which the Gospel now resolves.

[2 : 35] And we can see this as we begin chapter 3, because he begins with the words, for this reason. In other words, he's saying, what I'm about to say relates back to the chapter that has just passed.

So we'll dive back into verses 11 to 22 in a short while. But before that, we need to ask, what is this mystery? Well, it's this. That from the moment God called Israel out of Egypt, and even before, he wanted them to set themselves apart from the rest of the world.

And so, we saw last year, when we looked at Leviticus, the laws that were given, were given so that they could be kept holy. And the word holy has the idea of being set apart for God, separated from the rest of humanity.

Hence, the laws on clean and unclean food, for example, meant that Israel couldn't eat at the same table as Gentiles. So, if they had Chinese restaurants in those days, I could invite them to have sweet and sour pork with me.

You know, much to, I guess, their disappointment maybe. And so, as they entered the Promised Land, God told them, and we read that now in Deuteronomy 7 in our Old Testament reading, that they were to destroy the adults in the land.

[3 : 54] He told them not to intermarry with the people, but to drive them out. And then he says in verse 6, which is the last verse that was read, For you are a people holy that were there set apart to the Lord your God.

The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be His people, His treasured possession. So, Israel was to set themselves apart from the nations.

And yet, sitting alongside this message to be holy was yet another message in the very same scriptures where God says that He's the God of the nations. And He expects that one day all people, all nations on earth, will come to Him in worship, and specifically at God's dwelling in Jerusalem.

So, I'll give you two examples in the Psalms. The first one, Psalm 22, it says, All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations will bow down before me.

For dominion belongs to the Lord, and He rules over the nations. All the rich of the earth will feast, eat, and worship.

[5 : 04] All who go down to the dust will kneel before Him. Another one in Psalm 67 says this, May God be gracious to us, that is Israel, and bless us, and make His face shine on us, so that your ways, that is God's ways, may be known on earth, your salvation, God's salvation, among all the nations.

And there are a few more other Psalms just like this. And likewise, if you go into Isaiah, there are prophecies of nations coming to Zion, to Jerusalem, to worship God together with Israel.

How then were the Jews to reconcile both these things? How is God able to fulfill them both? Well, as chapter 2 said, With the coming of Jesus, and His death on the cross, all is now revealed in the Gospel, and resolved, solved in Christ Jesus.

And so if you go back to Ephesians 2, verse 13, Paul says that it's by the blood of Christ that the Gentiles who were once far off are brought near. That they are no longer excluded from the promises made by God in His covenant with Israel.

Now God's standard of holiness has not changed, nor His view on sin, but by His blood shed on the cross. Jesus fulfills the law, that standard that the Jews could not, and then sets it aside, sets the law aside, so that the Gentiles can approach God without them, us, needing to obey the law to be saved.

[6 : 37] So no longer is the temple required in Jerusalem, because Jesus has replaced all that the temple embodies. He's the high priest, He's the sacrificial lamb, He's the temple all rolled into one.

And so in Christ, God is now able to unite Jew and Gentile, and create a new humanity, living in peace, not just with each other, but with God.

And so, if you look back again at verses 15 to 18, that summarizes as Christ, that is His purpose, Christ's purpose, was to create in Himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body reconcile both of them to God through the cross.

By which He put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you, that is the Gentiles who are far away, and peace to those who are near the Jews. For through Him, we both, Jew and Gentile, have access to the Father by one Spirit.

And so now, it's not just Israel, but all who are in Christ, whether you Jew or Gentile, that are set apart for God. Together, as one new humanity, we have access to the Father, worshipping Him together, not at a temple in Jerusalem, which the Gentiles were barred from, but through Christ, by the Holy Spirit.

[7 : 58] And this is the picture that Paul paints at the end of chapter 2, verses 21 and 22. It says, In Him, the whole building is joined together, and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.

And in Him, you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by the Spirit. And that is amazing, isn't it? If you just pause to consider it.

Because there is not only no need to go to a temple anymore, Paul says that we are the temple, Jews and Gentiles together.

That God dwells with us, among us, by His Spirit. All because, all made possible by the blood of Jesus shed for us on the cross.

And so for a Jew like Paul, who all his life has been trained in the law, this was a real eye-opener. Which, therefore, fuels his passion to want to bring the gospel, the good news of Jesus, to the Gentiles.

[9 : 01] Because as someone who loves the law, this part of the scriptures was also being fulfilled. That of the Gentiles coming to Christ.

And so, not only does he have this passion, God then appoints him and sets him apart for this task.

And that is the bit that we are now going to move into in chapter 3, verse 1-13, because this is the thing that Paul now wants to impress on the Ephesians, as to why he's being called to the task that he is.

So in verse 1 he begins, For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus, for the sake of you Gentiles. And you know, when Paul says that he's a prisoner of Christ, he's not exaggerating.

He's literally a prisoner of Christ. And he's literally a prisoner because of his preaching to the Gentiles. Now most people think that Paul wrote to the Ephesians while he was in prison in Rome.

[10 : 04] And he got to Rome as a prisoner because the Jews in Jerusalem had accused him of spouting heresies. That's from their point of view, of course.

For he was saying things like, the Jews no longer need to obey the law. He was saying now that the Gentiles can be saved by this man, Jesus. That's what got the Jews upset.

And now if we read his letter, these are the very things he's writing about, isn't it? Chapters 1 and 2. These are the very things that got him into trouble. Because he was trying to convert, to preach salvation to the Gentiles.

Now it's at this point that Paul breaks his sentence off here. You can see the dash means he's actually going on a tangent. And he does that because he's wanting to show why he is going to such lengths for them.

And so he explains it in verse 2.

[11 : 30] So Paul is talking about his responsibility for the gospel. And he uses the word God's grace instead of gospel.

Because it's a proxy for what the gospel demonstrates. That salvation is due solely to God's grace for both Jew and Gentile. And Paul himself has experienced this grace firsthand, which he'll talk about a bit later.

But so impacted is he by the gospel, that now he says he's compelled, given this revelation of the mystery, he wants to share it with the Gentiles, because it's for them.

This mystery is being revealed for them. Its impact is on them. You see, Paul, all his life, has been a fastidious keeper of the law as a Jew, right?

But until now, or until he became a Christian, he had concentrated on that part which said, set yourselves apart, be holy. The Deuteronomy 7 bit. But now that the mystery is revealed and resolved, that God's purpose was to bring salvation to the Gentiles, then he too wants to fulfill that bit, or do his part to see that fulfillment come to pass.

- [12:42] And so his passion now transfers over to wanting to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. You know, it's a bit like when I was planning our family trip to Japan last year. I thought it would be a good idea to, you know, just maybe join a few Facebook groups where they're sharing travel tips.

So here's a couple I joined. One was called Singaporeans Travelling to Japan, planning and discussion. By the way, they spelled traveling wrong. Two L's.

That's okay, Singaporeans. And then the second one, a bit more professional, Japan travel tips. There was one which I joined for Korea as well, but I don't know, the chat there was not very active, so I don't know.

But I think what it showed was that the Japan group was really active because the people in the group actually had a great passion for Japan. They loved this country. And you can tell the posts were long, right?

The photos were many, you know, autumn leaves, Mount Fuji, many, many pictures of Mount Fuji. And, you know, as they were sharing it, they were just waxing lyrical about this country of Japan.

- [13:54] You know, we're done with great pride and satisfaction. You know, when they managed to save a bit of time here or a bit of money there, they would say, oh, you know, do this, do that. You can't miss going to it.

And I found this little gem of a sushi restaurant that nobody else knows, and I'm now telling you so that everyone else will now know. Oh, this ramen bar, how you can get a table, even though, you know, it's booked out for months, but if you do this, you'll get the table.

And I'm just reading it, you go, these people love Japan, right? I'm sure the other group loves Korea too, but I don't know. And so it's the same sense that you get with Ho, you know, this mystery, you know, that he was hidden from him for so long that once he finally understood, once God reveals it to him and the other apostles, it's sort of, wow, I love this.

I love this answer. I love this gospel, and I need to tell the Gentiles because they are integral to the fulfillment of God's will. For him, it all makes sense now, isn't it?

God's purpose was never just to save the Jews, but all humanity, because why God is not just the God of Israel, but the God of all creation. And so besides his passion, Paul also knows that God has set him apart for it.

- [15:15] That's why the word, I think, holy is there, holy apostles. He's set apart for this job, as with the others. But for him, his specific task was to be set apart to preach this gospel to the Gentiles, where the particular emphasis is not just that the Gentiles are saved by grace, but they now share with Israel all the promises that God had originally given to them in the Old Testament.

And friends, that is the reason why, even though we're Christians, we don't just read the New Testament. We read the Old Testament too, even though it was originally written for the Jews. Why? Because in Christ, those promises that God gave to Israel, everything that's written for Israel, is now ours as well, because of Jesus.

And so Paul summarizes this in verse 6 for them. He says, But as I said earlier, Paul himself experienced God's grace personally, not just in his conversion, but also in his commission.

And so he goes on in verse 7 to say, I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace, given me through the working of his power. Although I am less than the least of all the Lord's people, this grace was given me to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things.

And so Paul here is not just talking about the grace of salvation, but the fact that by God's grace, even though he's the less, he's less than the least of all people, of all the Lord's people, that's a few superlatives there, God chose him to bring the message of the gospel to the Gentiles.

- [17 : 22] Yes, he wanted to do it, but he also knew he was undeserving because he was a one-time persecutor of the Lord's people. And so what right did he have to be an apostle on their behalf?

But choose him God did. And so Paul is duty-bound as well as inspired by God's grace to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. Or as he says in verse 8, to make known the boundless riches of Christ, the administration of this mystery, which is just another way of saying the responsibility for the gospel.

And as we've read the first two chapters of Ephesians, we've seen just that, isn't it? Chapter 1 was all about every spiritual blessing in Christ, that is, boundless riches in Christ.

Chosen by God, forgiven, redeemed, make known the mystery of God's will, sealed with the Holy Spirit, guaranteed eternal glory, boundless riches in Christ, right?

And then in chapter 2, we saw God's amazing grace, saved while we did in our transgressions, saved by grace, through the gift of faith, given new birth, so that we can do good works that God has prepared for us, all by God's grace.

- [18 : 39] And then of course, 11 to 22, the mystery is resolved so that the Gentiles can be heirs, members, and sharers together with Israel in the promises of God.

One united humanity, God's dwelling place, by which God's eternal purpose is accomplished in Christ. And so it's here, in verse 10 to 13, that Paul finishes off his digression, and he finishes it off by saying that the beauty of the gospel, the outcome of the gospel, the fulfillment of God's purpose for creation, is now seen and displayed in the church.

And so we read, his intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In him and through him, or through faith in him, we may approach God with freedom and confidence. I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.

This mystery that was hidden for so long that even angels and demons in the heavenly realms were wondering how it would be accomplished, well, Paul now says that we can see it in the church, which he calls the manifold wisdom of God.

- [20 : 04] I wonder what makes you most proud of to belong to in life. If you're still at school, maybe it's the school that you come from when you're representing them in some sport or as part of their orchestra.

If you're working, maybe it's your company because you believe in their vision statement or their products. Or maybe it's a proud supporter of a footy club.

You know, Collingwood, maybe. Maybe not. Or perhaps you're proud that you're a dinky-dye Aussie. You know, that we've now, yet again, made the World Cup.

Got to the first round, at least. Or, is it the church of God? Maybe proud is not the right word, but blessed.

You see, Paul calls the church the manifold wisdom of God. It's his glorious unveiling to the rulers of the heavenly realms his greatest accomplishment in Christ.

[21:10] Christ. We are that accomplishment. You know how wise God is? Very wise, isn't it? To think that we, us, we are the manifold wisdom of God.

Now, it says there that he reveals it to the rulers in the heavenly realms. And you might wonder, why not rulers on earth? Well, because I think the church that he's referring to here is actually the universal church, the church of God's elect across all ages and in every place.

The invisible church, which is largely unseen to the human eye. So, he's not talking about the institutional church, like the Roman Catholic church or the Anglican church with all the impressive cathedrals and abbeys.

No, he's talking about the Lord's people, those in whom God's grace is at work. And you know, as you walk about in your daily life, going about in your shopping centre or whatever, you don't look very different from any other person, do you?

It's not like you've got God's grace sort of like shining out of you, right? Because God's grace is mostly at work, away from the public eye, isn't it?

[22:30] But when we put our faith in Jesus, we belong to this church. We are part of the manifold wisdom of God joined together with all the Christians, all the Jews and Gentiles across time.

And this is the church that is visible in the heavenly realms, that angels and demons alike are able to look on and see what God has achieved in calling each and every one of us to Him through Jesus.

And when the angels and the demons, even the demons, look on this, they cannot help but marvel. And I think the word here, manifold, is very apt.

Because it's a bit like a beautiful but intricate sculpture. Some of you, I think, go to museums and all that kind of stuff. You know, when you look at a sculpture, a beautiful one, it reveals its manifold beauty, isn't it, from different angles.

So you might look from one side and see the sunlight shine on it and go, wow, that's beautiful. Wow, I didn't see that casting light on that little shadow there. And then you walk around a bit and go, oh, that's another view and that's beautiful too.

[23:41] I didn't know that the sculpture has this other. And then you keep walking. That's why they always have the sculpture in the middle and you can walk around it, isn't it? Because there are manifold aspects to the sculpture.

And then you go upstairs and have a bird's eye view of that sculpture and it's different again and you go, wow, that's beautiful. And that's the thing about the church. The more you consider how God has brought all of us together, the more aspects that you will marvel at.

From one angle, we marvel at the people God has chosen. Some of us are the most unlikely people that God would choose, if you think about it. I'm probably one of them.

But every testimony, every time we have a baptism up here and we hear a story about how God brought them to faith, it's a wonderful story, isn't it? Beautiful in its own way. Everyone unique.

Some of us, like Paul, were former haters of Christ. Others, God may have lifted out of poverty and despair at our moment in time in history. Yet others, you know, rich and sort of proud that God had to humble before we would believe.

[24:51] but each one of us, God marvelously and wonderfully calls us into His church. And then together, we see the diversity of the people that God chooses, people from every tongue and tribe.

And some, you know, Christians would otherwise be at war with each other were they not for Christians. Right? There are actually Christians in Israel and Christians in Palestine.

And they actually love each other. They pray for each other. Even though their governments might be at war. The same between Israel and Iran. The number of, I've been told by our Persian brothers, the number of people in Iran that are Christians who love the Jews.

It's amazing. But all brought together because of Jesus. Now even locally here, we look at our churches. Some of you may be a bit too young.

But you know, amongst us, we have Labour voters and Liberal voters. Right? Some of you might even vote Green and Teals. That's all alright.

[25 : 58] But what are we doing each Sunday? We're singing praises together. We don't care how people vote. We're not fighting with each other about that. Because we're united in Christ.

And then as you look at the church across the world, some people would say, look, if God is so powerful, why is this church so weak in so many places? Why is He all powerful?

Why does He come and just stop all that suffering for them? Stop the persecution? Good question. But you know, as we look at the lives of our brothers and sisters in these places, it inspires us, doesn't it?

It causes us to praise God because through their perseverance and suffering, we see the wonderful display of God's grace and power in their lives. And it encourages us to keep going and not complain about our silly problems in our lives, isn't it?

Friends, we are blessed to belong to this church as disciples of Jesus. But more than that, as Paul says, we are blessed to also be able to approach God freely and boldly with confidence, whether we're Jew or Gentile, because of Jesus.

[27 : 15] You know, when you first start working as a junior in a large company, don't expect that you'll just be able to walk into the CEO's office anytime, right? I mean, unless you're a manager or hire even, you can't even make an appointment to see him or her, right?

But as someone who is in Christ, you don't need an appointment to speak to God. You can go right into his throne room. Just pray and you're there.

Every time we pray, we're right there in God's very presence. What a blessing. What a privilege. And that's why I encourage you, keep praying.

It's hard, but sometimes, you know, we've got to keep persevering because when we pray, we are approaching God with confidence freely and boldly. Now you see why then Paul was so passionate about the gospel, isn't it?

And in particular for the Gentiles as this mystery is revealed that this gospel is not just for the Jews, but Jesus is the Messiah for the Gentiles as well. And you know, we're not commissioned like him to be an apostle to the Gentiles, but hopefully, I pray that we ourselves would want to be like him, a servant of the gospel.

[28 : 39] Why? Because we ourselves have experienced this amazing grace of God. And when we're caught up by this grace, it will fire us, isn't it, to want to tell others so that they too can become a servant of the same gospel.

Well, let's pray and ask God to help us do that. Father, we thank you that we are able to approach you freely and boldly through Jesus. Thank you that even right now you hear us.

Thank you that Jesus has broken down the wall of hostility and that we have peace with you in him. And for us who are Gentiles, sharers with Israel in your promised inheritance, give us such a sense of your amazing grace and the boundless riches we have in Christ that we too will share the gospel with others for their sake and for Christ's glory.

In his name we pray. Amen.