

God's Mystery Revealed

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[0 : 00] Our gracious Father, we do thank you again for your word through which you speak to us. And we pray, Father, that you would give us ears to hear and minds to understand. But more than that, that you would give us, by your Spirit, a will to live it out.

We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, they say a magician should never reveal his tricks, his secrets. But I'm going to tonight.

All right, I'm going to show you one of my children's favourite tricks and then reveal its secret. So here is a colouring book of magic, so they say. And as you can see, it has blank pages in it. I'll have to go down here so you can see. You can see the blank pages? Yeah? No, getting nothing out there. That's all right. I'll keep moving on. But if you give it a tap, then it actually draws some pages in for you.

So you ready? There it is. There's the pages. You can see the pages? Oh, I've got a few people. All right. My kids are obviously more easily impressed. If I tap it one more time, then it colours it in even.

[1 : 04] Oh, thank you. Thanks, Gillian. I can feel the love now. But now let me reveal the trick to you.

I'm not trying to promote magicianship here at HED, but let me just reveal the trick to you. It has all the pages in it, blank, drawn and coloured, but they are cut at different angles and with different tabs.

So when you hold the book at a certain level, it picks up just those pages. So if I hold the book down here, it picks up just the blank pages. If I hold the book up here, it picks up just the drawing pages.

And then the middle... Oh! Oh! I'll pay you later, Gillian. And now that the secret is revealed, it's not so mysterious, is it?

Why am I talking about revealing secrets? Well, because tonight I want us to look at God's secret or mystery from the book of Ephesians. And the word mystery just means a secret or something that is hidden from understanding, like magic tricks are.

[2 : 06] There's always an explanation for them. They're just hidden from our understanding. But God's mystery is no trick. It's a plan that is revealed to us through the Apostle Paul, and particularly in Ephesians 3.

And I want to look at it tonight on HTT Sunday because it will remind us of what we as a church ought to be on about this year. And so if you've got your Bibles there, Paul begins in chapter 3, where he's about to pray for the Ephesian church because of what God has done for them in chapter 2.

So he says in verse 1, For this reason, in other words, because of what God has done for you in chapter 2, I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus, for the sake of you Gentiles.

And then he breaks off, doesn't he? Do you see the dash there? He stops to pray, or stops praying, because with the mention of being in prison for the sake of the Gentiles, he thought he better pause to explain why he's okay with that.

Why he's okay being in prison. And so instead of continuing with the prayer, he starts to explain why he's in prison, and in particular, the job that God has given him to do, which has landed him in prison.

[3 : 18] And so he continues now to explain verse 2. Have a look there. He says, Surely you've heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you. That is the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I've already written briefly about.

You see, God gave him the job of administering God's grace by preaching the gospel. That's why he's in prison. And administering God's grace included speaking about a mystery that God has revealed to him.

A mystery that he has already written about, particularly, I think, in chapter 2. And it's a mystery that he hopes they will understand from reading his letter.

So you see verse 4? He says, In reading this, then you'll be able to understand my insight, just as I've understood it, into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to people in other generations, as it is now being revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets.

See, Paul says, I want you readers, these young Christians in Ephesus, to be able to understand this mystery too, from reading my letter. And he hopes they'll understand it just as he has understood it.

[4 : 37] So what, then, is this mystery he's going on about? Well, it's there in verse 6. It says, This mystery is that through the gospel, the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.

The mystery here is that Gentiles are gathered together with Israel in Christ. Now, just in case you don't know, a Gentile is someone who is not a Jew. And so most of us here tonight are Gentiles.

In fact, I think we probably, is there any Jews here? No, we're all Gentiles here tonight. But what is so mysterious about this plan? What was so secretive about it?

I mean, didn't the Israelites know that the Gentiles always had a part in God's plan? We heard a bit about it in our first reading. Remember, God would bless all the nations through Abraham.

Now, what's more, we hear in places like Isaiah 49, where God's servant would be a light to the Gentiles, and various other places in the Old Testament.

[5 : 46] So how was this a mystery? How was this a secret? Well, in two ways. First, in the way the Gentiles would be given equal status together with the Jews as one people of God.

So in verse 6, Paul says three times, notice the word together, three times. The Gentiles are together with Israel, with the Jews. And by together, Paul means on the same level or equal footing as one people.

So we are co-heirs with them, which means we have an equal share in God's inheritance. We are co-members of the same body or family. We are co-sharers of the promise, which I think he particularly means the Holy Spirit.

We are gathered together with equal status before God. Now, never in a million years would the Jews have thought the Gentiles would have that.

After all, the Jews were God's chosen people. They had a long history with God, as we read in the Old Testament. Even the temple in Jerusalem had an outer court for the Gentiles and an inner court for the Jews.

[6 : 55] They had a special place. In fact, in Acts 22, when Paul speaks to a mob of Jews who have already tried to kill him once, he quietens them down and then they try and kill him again.

But it's not because he speaks of Jesus as Lord. It's not even because he speaks of forgiveness of sins through Jesus' name. No, no, the thing that sets them off to the point where they try and kill him again, it's when he says, I've been sent to the Gentiles.

And that's when they try and kill him again. So the Jews would never have guessed that us Gentiles would be together with them as one equal people of God.

It was a secret that had to be revealed to them. Now, I realize that for us now, this doesn't seem like a big deal or a big secret that had to be revealed. But perhaps that's because we've forgotten exactly who we once were.

In your Bible, just have a look at, it's on the same page, so you don't even have to turn. Chapter 2, verse 11. Chapter 2, verse 11, bottom left-hand corner of the page there. Paul says, In other words, we were once spiritual outcasts.

[8 : 40] With no spiritual family to belong to, no God to help us, and no hope of heaven. But then God gave us all the same privileges of being one of his chosen people, even though he had no right and did not deserve it.

I may have mentioned to you before about some friends of ours whose parents adopted two children from India, along with the natural children they had. And what I didn't tell you was that these children from India were in an orphanage that struggled to care for them.

And so these two children had next to no toys to play with, hardly any clothes to wear, and little education to receive. And as orphans, then obviously they had no family to belong to, to be loved by.

No share in an inheritance. And there was certainly no guarantee or promise that they would be adopted. In fact, in a country with so many people and so much poverty, they had next to no hope, too.

And now they didn't deserve to be adopted any more or less than the orphan next to them, but they were. And when they were, our friends' parents treated them the same as their natural children, even though they were not.

[9 : 55] They were given the same love, the same amount of clothes, the same level of education. And as I mentioned to you before, when my friend's father passed away, they were even given the same amount of inheritance that the natural children received.

It was extraordinary generosity. And yet that is what God has done for us Gentiles. Now, of course, the Jews didn't deserve to be part of God's plan either.

But they did have a special place in it, while we Gentiles did not. And yet the secret was that God has given us an equal place together with those Jews who trust in Christ as one people.

And so the first application as we begin this new year is, I guess, to remember how gracious and generous God has been to us. That he would make us who have no claim on him whatsoever part of his chosen and privileged people.

Don't take that for granted. Because when we do, we stop being humble and thankful to God. And we start being arrogant and demanding of God.

[11 : 07] But there is a second part to this mystery or secret that's been revealed. And that is how or the means by which God gathers people together, both Jew and Gentile, as one.

Notice in verse 6 again, it says it is through the gospel, beginning of verse 6. Or at the end of verse 6, it says all this happens in Christ Jesus.

Now, the word Christ is a title which just means anointed one or king. But again, never in a million years would anyone have guessed that God would save and gather people through a gospel message about a crucified king.

In fact, even after it's been revealed, people still can't believe it. It's just utter foolishness to them. I was visiting someone recently, an elderly person from our church, who told me about one of her childhood friends growing up.

They were both Christians for a long time. And then about 20 years ago, her friend walked away from Christ. And they caught up just last week. And her friend had a go at her. And she said, you still don't believe that rubbish, do you?

[12 : 17] People still can't believe that God would gather people through a crucified king, even today. And for the Jews, they thought God would send a king or the Christ. Yes, but that he would unite their nation through military conquest.

But they never would have thought he would die on a cross. And yet, this is how God gathers and unites people together as one. He does it through Jesus, who died on a cross to pay for our sins. And then rose again as Lord of all, so that as people hear the gospel message about Christ and believe in him, God brings them together, unites them together in him as one new family.

I mean, Paul has already explained this back in chapter 2 and was about to pray in light of this. So have a look at chapter 2, pick it up at verse 14. It says, For he that is Christ himself is our peace, who has made the two groups, that's Jew and Gentile, one group, and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose, or Christ's purpose, and notice this, was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, Jew and Gentile, which really means everyone who trusts, to God through the cross, he says.

[13 : 54] Notice verse 16, Christ's purpose was to create in himself one new humanity, and to reconcile both Jew and Gentile, everyone who trusts in Christ, to God.

In other words, it's by Christ's death on the cross that God gathers people together in him, as one new equal people of God. This is the part of the mystery that's been revealed to Paul.

So just to illustrate this visually on the next slide, I think we've got... No, we've got blank. Here we go.

This is Christ, and then on the next slide, where we've got dots that represent different people with different backgrounds, different races, different languages, different likes, different dislikes. But when we trust in Christ, we hit the space bar, we join together, and no, no, it worked before. It was supposed to all come together in this magic animation thing.

[14:54] No, forget it. I was just trying to show you visually. You know how we're visual learners, some people are visual... Anyway. Oh, thank you. All right. Now, remember the shape for later.

That's what happens when people trust in him. And I know you know this, but it has huge implications for us. And so the first implication, I think on the next slide, first implication, is that we need to commit to church.

You see, if we are already gathered together in Christ spiritually, then we ought to keep gathering together physically to express who we are.

It's like being a member of a football or basketball team. If you belong to the team, then you express it by turning up to practice and turning up to the games. But on the other hand, if we don't gather together physically at church, then we are actually denying who we are spiritually as God's gathered people in Christ.

And so do commit to gathering Sunday by Sunday here at Five O'Clock Church this year. And please do encourage others to keep meeting together, to keep coming to church.

[16:08] And if you see people, or if you don't see people for a couple of Sundays, ring them up, ask them how they're going. And encouraging them to come back and gather together in Christ because we are already spiritually gathered in him.

The second implication on the next slide is live a Christ-shaped life. You see, if we are united in Christ, then he is the one who ought to shape our lives.

Just like we saw those colored dots eventually kind of take shape inside the person Christ, well, that's what we're supposed to do in our lives. We don't just keep living out here on our own.

No, no, we are gathered to Christ and he is to shape how we live. Or to put it slightly differently, to help you think about it, where you live shapes how you live, doesn't it?

So when I moved to Melbourne, it means I never put away my warm clothes ever again. In fact, on the 6th of January, it was 41 degrees. And then eight days later, it was 10 degrees.

[17:08] People turned their heaters back on. Where you live shapes how you live. And if we live in Christ, then we are to live like Christ. Or if Paul puts it on the next slide, in chapter 4, verse 15, it says we are to grow up into Christ.

That's the second implication. The third one on the next slide is maintain our unity. If we are spiritually united as one family in Christ, then we are to maintain the unity we have by loving one another.

Or as Paul writes on the next slide, chapter 4, verse 2 and 3, He says, Be completely humble and gentle. Be patient, bearing with one another in love.

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit, who's joined us together as one family in Christ, through the bond of peace. Seek to live peacefully with each other.

Now in a church of this size, there will always be people who rub you the wrong way. Of course, we are never one of those people. It's always other people. But we are to bear with one another and work together.

[18:18] Because this mystery revealed tells us that we are gathered together in Christ. Maintain the unity. But the fourth implication for us, I think, is on the next slide, proclaim the gospel.

If God's secret has now been revealed, that He is gathering all sorts of people whether Jew or Gentile, together in Christ, if this is what He's on about, then this is what we're to be on about at HTD.

But notice in verse 6, it is through the gospel, as I said before, that God does this. And so whatever ministries we're involved in this year, we need to make sure we're either proclaiming or promoting the gospel.

For that is how God gathers people and even grows people in Christ. That's why Paul in verses 7 to 9 has become a servant of the gospel. That's why Paul says, don't be ashamed of me being in prison for the gospel.

It's through the gospel that God gathers and grows His people. And so whatever ministry you're doing this year, we need to make sure we either proclaim the gospel or promote it.

[19 : 28] We had to proclaim it in Sunday school, a Bible study, through evangelistic courses, youth group, J kids, and so on. Or we had to promote the gospel by doing things that will help people hear it.

Whether it's welcoming people so they feel like coming back another time and hearing the gospel again. Whether it's serving supper or dinner or whatever it is, serving at youth group, cooking meals for them so the kids can hear the gospel.

You get the idea. For it is through the gospel that God gathers people together and grows us in Christ. But you see, there's just four implications. Do you see how this mystery of God that's been revealed, Jew and Gentile together in Christ, you see, there's huge implications for how we live as a church here at HCD.

In fact, it has a big implication for God too. Just come with me down to verse 10. We'll have to skip some verses if we're running out of time. So verse 10. It says, God's 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.

You see, the purpose of God gathering us together as one in Christ is to show his wisdom to the heavenly realms. In other words, we are God's advertisement, if you like.

[20 : 48] Through us, he displays his wisdom to the spiritual rulers, both good and bad. The angels did not know what God was doing in sending his son. And nor did Satan understand what God was doing.

Otherwise, he would not have prompted Judas to portray Jesus. But now, all people can look at the church and see what God has done in Christ and think, wow, what an amazing God.

It's as though God takes his spiritual rulers through the gallery of his great works, the mountains, the seas, the skies, and then he stops the tour and says, but this is my masterpiece, my Mona Lisa, my Michelangelo, my church.

Now, I realize that as we look around at ourselves this evening, we don't seem like much. Well, perhaps I should just speak to myself. Some of you are looking sharp tonight.

But when these spiritual beings look at us, this diverse group of people who would never have normally come together to love one another, to serve Christ together, when these spiritual beings look at us and see that, they are amazed at God.

[22 : 06] They see an amazing work of God and a manifold, a great, many-faceted wisdom of God. And so it matters even more that we meet together and love one another because our unity in Christ displays God's wisdom to the heavenly realms and brings him glory.

Of course, it's hard to live out all these implications, isn't it? And so Paul finishes the chapter by praying that God might help the Ephesians live out their one new humanity in Christ that he spoke about in chapter 2.

And so that's what he was doing in verse 1. He picks it up in verse 14. And in particular, he prays that God might give them power or strength. And so let's pick it up at verse 16. He says, I pray that out of the glorious riches, God may strengthen you with power through his spirit in your inner being so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, he says.

That is, Paul prays that God's spirit might strengthen them to live like Christ more thoroughly, to be shaped by him as we saw in implication number 2.

Or as Paul, again, remember, on the next slide, chapter 4, verse 15, he's basically praying that God's spirit will strengthen us to grow up into Christ. Now, to live like Christ means doing implication 3.

[23 : 27] It means loving one another, keeping the unity we have, sacrificially loving one another like Christ. Paul says this on the next slide in chapter 5, verse 2.

You can read it there for yourself. And that includes loving each other even when people do things that are different to the way we would do things. Or when they park in your spot or worse, sit in your pew.

I had a few people this morning kind of go, hmm. And to live like Christ also means doing the fourth implication of doing what we can to either promote or proclaim the gospel that more people might be saved and gathered to him.

After all, that's why Jesus came to seek and save the lost. Now, to help them do this, Paul not only prays for God's spirit to strengthen them, he also prays that they might know Christ's love in order to motivate them.

So have a look at verse 17 and 18. He says, in verse 17, he says, and I pray that you being rooted and established in love may have power together with all the Lord's holy people to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge, he says.

[24 : 48] Paul prays that they might know Christ's love more deeply, that they might know how big it is. And notice in verse 19 that Christ's love is so big that it surpasses knowledge.

And so even with God's power to help them know it and grasp it is so big they will never fully comprehend it. It's like the universe, no matter how much we grow in our knowledge of it, it remains so big we can never fully grasp it.

When Michelle and I were visiting my parents over Christmas, I teased Michelle in front of my parents and they just shook their heads at me and marveled at how great Michelle's love must be for me.

The point is Christ's love is so great that we will continue to marvel at it and never fully grasp it even with God's power to help us know it.

Now that's an extraordinarily big love for us, isn't it? In fact, the Bible reader this morning actually teared up and choked up as she was reading that bit because it hit her just how much Christ loves us.

[26 : 05] And Paul prays that we might have the power to know this love more deeply so that we might be moved, I think, to live like Christ more thoroughly.

And then at the end of verse 19, Paul sums up this prayer and he prays all this so that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. His prayer for power to live more thoroughly like Christ and to know more deeply the love of Christ is so that we might reflect more fully God's likeness in Christ.

That we might reflect God's character who seeks to love, gather and grow people in Christ. That's a big prayer actually. But in verses 20 to 21, Paul reminds us that we have a big God who can answer such prayers.

And so this year, why not pray this for yourself, your family and your church? Pray that God's Spirit might give us the power we need for Christ to dwell more thoroughly in us.

Pray for God's power that we might know Christ's love more deeply and be motivated by it so that together we might reflect more fully the likeness of the God who has revealed his mystery to us.

[27 : 22] For then we will show to the universe just how great our God's wisdom really is. Let's pray. our Heavenly Father, we thank you that you have revealed to us your mystery to gather and grow people from everywhere, both Jew and Gentile in Christ.

By your Spirit, strengthen us to live in light of this, we pray, that we might show your wisdom to the world. now to you who's able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to your power that is at work within us, to you be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations forever and ever.

Together. Amen.