

The Unsearchable Riches of Christ / Evening Service

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[0 : 00] Heavenly Father, would you open our hearts to hear your word this evening? In Christ's name, Amen. Amen. Good evening again, folks.

You are going to probably need your Bibles open for this one. So we're looking at Ephesians. We've been doing a Christmas series here.

We're going to be back into Revelation next week. But we're in Ephesians tonight. It's wonderful. The book of Ephesians, if you just read it from way to go, you'd realize pretty quick, it's mostly about the church, and I think that comes across pretty clearly in our passage.

But first, did you notice anything at all odd about that first sentence, as it was perhaps read to you, or as you look at it right now? Sort of has the feeling like there's a word missing, right?

Like it really needs a verb in there. I'll read it to you again. For this reason, I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles, assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me.

[1 : 08] It feels like there's something missing after the word Gentiles, doesn't it? Like it needs an extra bit. Like it feels like it needs to say, For this reason, I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles, I'm going to write a letter, or I'm going to the shops, or I'm going to do something.

But it kind of like just stops halfway through something. Well, it actually does stop. Paul actually stops halfway through a sentence here. That's what the dash means. It means I've stopped saying what I was supposed to be saying.

I'm going to say something else. Verse 1 is the first half of a sentence that is completed in verse 14. So, if I read verse 1 and verse 14 to you, it would make sense.

It's this. For this reason, I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ, on behalf of you Gentiles. For this reason, I bow my knees before the Father. That's the sentence. What we have here in verses 2 to 13 is what you call a parenthetical thought.

So, Paul's writing, or somebody else is writing for him. Halfway through the sentence, he breaks step for another idea. And I think it's clear why he's doing that.

[2 : 23] I think he's halfway through this important concept, and then he says, Wait, wait. He's thinking to himself, Wait, wait. I hope these guys don't think I'm making this stuff up. That's the feel you get from verses 2 to 5.

Verses 2 to 5 is a defense of his letter so far. And it's a really good one for us to hear. It's a defense of his authority.

It's a defense of what he's been talking about. Now, even today, actually, I think it's good for us to hear, because even today, people have problems with Paul. Some people, not a ton of people, but in scholarship, some people think that Paul kind of ruined Christianity pretty early on, that he took the ideas of Jesus and sort of applied his religious genius to it and invented this whole new thing. And Paul would have hated that idea. He would have hated the idea that people have thought he's just kind of making stuff up. No, of course that's not how it happened. The gospel invaded this man's life.

He was on the road to Damascus. Most of you will know this story. He's on the road to Damascus to imprison Christians, because he thought they were dangerous and crazy people. And on the road, he meets Jesus, and Jesus gives him this incredible gift, this gift of immense clarity for the things of God.

[3 : 41] So he's given this gospel clarity, and he's commissioned to tell people about it. So this is the reason he stops in mid-sentence, and he's thinking, do they think I'm making this stuff up? I should probably say something about that.

So he stops halfway through the sentence. So let's dive into it. Let's dive into this parenthetical thought, this little miniature sermon that's stuck in the middle of a sentence.

Right, let's dive into it. Okay, a couple of really interesting words he uses at the start to nail the idea that, no, I didn't invent these ideas, right? He describes himself as a steward of God's grace.

And a steward is somebody who is given responsibility for something that is not theirs. Like, if you know the Old Testament stories, Joseph was a steward of Potiphar's house, or Daniel in Babylon. Really, slaves in the ancient areas could rise through the ranks and remain slaves, but actually be in charge of a household. The master would give them the keys to the house and say, you're in charge, you don't own it, but I trust you to look after all this stuff.

[4 : 45] They're stewards. So Paul is saying, I'm a steward of the grace that was given to me. So he's like, I don't own these ideas, I don't invent this stuff, I don't invent the gospel, but I care for it, I look after it, I communicate it.

Also, this word mystery is a very good word for us to understand. To understand what Paul is trying to get across.

And the word mystery is used a lot in Ephesians. It's used three times just in our little chunk right here. Paul says he's a steward, he's a carer, he's looking after something, and the thing he's looking after, he describes it as a mystery.

Mystery. Now, when you think mystery, what do you think? Scooby-doo, right? Scoop totally, no? Can I just make a note to myself there?

Use more highbrow cultural references in the future. But what's a mystery? A mystery is like, to us it's a mystery, it's like some dark, obscure thing that's hidden, and we figure it out, we have to figure this thing out.

[5 : 56] Well, the Greek word in the New Testament means the opposite, actually. It's a mystery, it's something that is revealed to us because we would never discover it ourselves.

It's something that we would have never guessed. So, for example, salvation by grace, that's called a mystery because we would have never thought of that.

The Ten Commandments, on the other hand, they are never called a mystery because that's kind of right up our alley, the Ten Commandments. That's the kind of, we would invent the sort of the religion which is like, okay, if you do, if you obey these rules, you're good to go.

You're fine, you're in, God's on your team. So that's not called a mystery because that's something that we would sort of, would be sort of into that, would fail at it, we fail at it, but that's the kind of religion that we would enjoy, that we would fail at but would actually make up.

Salvation by grace, God dying on a cross, Jesus triumphing through losing, God's a glorification that looks like humiliation. We would never invent this kind of religion.

[7 : 09] So the New Testament calls it a mystery because it goes against our instincts. It's something that has to be revealed to us. So Paul is saying the gospel was revealed to me.

That's why he calls it a mystery. So in summary so far, we're halfway through one sentence. Paul stops mid-thought and says, I please don't think I'm making this stuff up.

God revealed this to me. It's a mystery. Folks, I hope that this gives you great confidence in the words of the Bible and in the words of Paul here that we're looking at today.

These are God's words. What an enormous treasure they are to us. That's basically the first half of our passage, verses 2 to 5.

Paul's apologetic. Okay, that's the first half. So if the first half is about Paul's idea that his thoughts and his writings come to him as revelation, the second half is the content of that revelation.

[8 : 22] So in other words, part one, I'm not making this stuff up. Part two, what is the stuff that he's not making up? That's what the second half is about. So Paul here describes the mystery, unpacks the mystery.

So we're looking at sort of verse 6-ish to 13, where Paul talks about the content of what's been revealed to him. So what is the mystery that's been revealed to him? It's very interesting. Basically, we're just going to walk through these verses one by one very, very quickly, and we'll try and unpack Paul's logic here as he explains the content of what's been revealed to him.

First, verse 6. The mystery is that the Gentiles and the Jews are fellow heirs. The mystery is this. God is making a people for himself. Now he's talking about the church here.

See, before this, God had mostly dealt with the Hebrew people as his chosen people. To bring his promises to the world. Which the implications of that is up until this point, what had separated the Jews and the Gentiles was not actually sort of ethnicity and geography and concepts.

It was what separated them was a line that God had drawn. But now God is bringing all people to him. And so verse 6 says, The Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, partakers in the same promises.

[9 : 44] He talks about them in three ways. This coming together. So you see, the thing that God is making this people, this church, is that we are members of the same body.

And he uses this picture to get this across really well. So he's talking about this community and God. And one of the pictures he uses here is that we are members of the same body.

Which is just a wild, it's kind of wild language, isn't it really? I mean, think about this. What is the closest relationship that you can have with somebody? It's probably, let's say, like a mother-child relationship.

It's very, very close. Or a husband-wife relationship. Very, very close. I mean, we're not going to get much closer than those relationships. But in those examples, there's still two bodies, right?

It's two individual bodies. Where Paul, he paints this picture here. He says, the community of God's people. This is how much of a community I want you to be.

[10 : 57] He says, you're actually, it's going to be like you're one body. The implications of this are, if the connection that we have as a community, it doesn't always feel like this, obviously.

But the connection that we have from God's perspective as a community is very precious. So we're connected to each other. Reconciled with each other.

And reconciled with God. It's a double sort of reconciliation. That's verse 6. Verse 7, Paul says, it's my job to tell people about this amazing thing. And in verse 8, he says, look, I know.

I know. If you look it down there, he goes, I know. I know. He says there, he goes, I'm the very least of all the saints. It's a great sentence. I'm the very least of all the saints. He goes, it's my job to tell people about this amazing thing that God is doing.

I know. Me, right? I'm the one that God's chosen. It's me. It's me. It's my job to tell these people. I know, it's completely ridiculous. And the word very least there, to get across the idea of how ridiculous this is in his mind, he invents a word.

[12 : 06] So very least, I have read, is, it's a brand, it's a new Greek word. Well, new 2,000 years ago, anyway. The original Greek, it's sort of apparently, it literally means the person below the lowest person.

So you've got the lowest person, and Paul is saying, there's that lowest person, and I am below, I am below that lowest person, which is obviously impossible. So if you had to, one word would be, it would be like, he's saying, I'm the least-erest.

I'm just the least-erest of everyone. And he's saying, I'm the least-erest around, because he's probably still very aware of his previous career as a killer of Christians. And sort of this absurdly gracious situation he finds himself in, of being now a steward of the mysteries of God, or the unspeakable riches of Christ, as it describes it here in the passage.

So verse 7, it's my job to tell people about this amazing mystery. I know it's ridiculous that I'm the one that's doing it. Verse 9, but I'm going to tell everyone about it. And then verse 10, one of the most remarkable verses in the New Testament, I think.

Through the church, the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. What did we learn from that? Let me go 10,000 feet and then zoomed in onto that passage there.

[13 : 28] Okay, big picture first. So you know the law of entropy, things move from sort of order to disorder, and we see that in the world. We see that in our bodies, we see it in relationships. Things move from order to disorder. Things fall apart.

And that is a side effect of sin. It happens because of sin. And God's big plan is to reverse that. It's to pull everything that's falling apart.

It's to pull everything together again. Our bodies won't fall apart. Our relationships won't fall apart. There'll be no more tears, disease, injustice. This is God's big plan.

Everything under Christ, it's going to be remarkable. That's the goal. Everything reconciled. The goal is everything reconciled. Now, how do we see, how will the world mostly see this incredible purpose?

How is the world going to see God's big intention now? Verse 10 says it's through the church. It's through the church. The passage describes it as God's manifold wisdom.

[14:32] It's a great word, manifold. It's borrowed from poetry. It means like, it's like kaleidoscope, like a, like multicolored, well-ordered, but multicolored. So this beautiful, well-ordered, multicolored, beautiful sort of purpose for the world that God has, it's on display.

It's on display through the church. F.F. Bruce, who's a scholar who wrote on this passage, he says this, the church appears as God's pilot plan for the reconciled universe of the future.

So the church, what we do here, what we do midweek, it's like God's movie trailer for the future, for eternity with God. It's a taste of the eternal future that people can witness and experience now in Christian community.

Verse 10 goes on, and this is really like wild stuff here. It says, this is, this is made known, this is made known to rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

This is a remarkable claim. So the rulers and authorities is like biblical technical language for angels and demons. So this mystery, this mystery, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities of heavenly places.

[15:51] The manifold wisdom is being made known through the church to angels and demons in heavenly places. So, so the New Testament people of God.

So what we do as a community, just existing as a community, we're not just showing the world the wisdom of God, the purposes of God, the visible world what God is doing.

The church is demonstrating to the invisible world what God is up to. I mean, it's, I know, it's sort of mind-blowing stuff. What we do testifies to angels and demons about the goodness of God.

John Piper has some quite hard words on this. He says this, Right then.

Let me summarize and finish. Paul, in chapter 3 here, mid-sentence stops and thinks, I hope they don't think I'm making all this stuff up.

[17:19] One, two. All the stuff I've been saying, all the stuff I preach, all the stuff I write, this is all, has all come from God. Three.

The big picture he gave me is this. The church is central to God's plan for the world. It is not a utility that Christians use to help them with their one-to-one relationship with God.

It's not kind of like this thing on the side, this bonus thing that we can take or leave. It is central to God's plan. And it is a trailer for eternity.

The implications for this. It means that we can't be laser-fair about something God takes so seriously, can we? Because if we see the church, how God sees it, we can't sit on our hands.

We can't sit on our hands when it comes to things like supporting the work. We can't sit on our hands when it comes to things like midweek community, developing midweek community.

[18:23] We can't sit on our hands when we think about volunteering and serving, can we? And I know these are kind of, it sounds a bit harsh and a bit like strong words, but these are good times to hear this thing, I think.

This is a good time to hear a challenge like this at the beginning of the year as we make our plans for the year. And we think about where we place our priorities in our life, where we think about where we're going to spend our money and our time and our resources.

What are we going to commit our time to? And folks, this is my challenge as we finish this Christmas series. As you do that, as you think about your year, would you consider the multicolored, wonderful, beautiful wisdom of God in creating the church?

Amen.