

Eph. 3:1-6 - The Mystery of the New Temple

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[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

Turn with me, if you will, to Ephesians chapter 3, Ephesians 3. After a brief detour last week, we're back in Ephesians again this morning.

We're going to be talking about a mystery Paul writes about in these verses. There's very little I love more than a good mystery.

I grew up on the Hardy Boys, read all of those that I could find, and I still love a good intriguing drama with the suspense of whodunit and how's everything going to turn out.

The mystery Paul talks about is a little different from those, but it's really good news for us. Listen as he mentions this mystery three times in these six verses.

[1 : 02] Ephesians 3 at verse 1, hear God's holy word. For this reason, I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles, surely you have 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. In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men and other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets.

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 grass withers and the flowers fade, but these words of our God will stand forever. Let's pray together. Father, our hope is that because these are your words, because they indeed are living and active, that you will be at work in our hearts this morning.

That's why we've come to put ourselves under your word, to submit our hearts to it, and we would pray, Father, open our eyes that we might behold wonderful things in your word.

[2 : 27] Do that by your Spirit, we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Our nation has been horrified this week as stories have come from Oklahoma University about a fraternity on a bus singing and chanting very disgraceful racist words.

We've been horrified. Rightfully so. As new information has come out and new videos have leaked, just can't believe that this is happening.

Most of the interviews I've seen say something like that. I mean, it's 2015. I can't believe that stuff like this is still going on. And I can relate to that feeling.

At one level, I agree. You'd think we could have left hatred like that behind by now. But on the other hand, it's not just one group of young people that struggles with separating from others based on a unique aspect of their identity, is it?

For others, it may not be skin color. Think about the increasingly polarized state of our politics in this country. Where identifying as Democrat or Republican or actually neither but any other name you want to use means that I'm not likely to work alongside you, someone else of a different political commitment or affiliation.

[3 : 56] But it distances me from you. It identifies me as against you. I can't work with you in many cases. We see it to some extent with our country in general. That we're Americans and so there's us and the rest of the world.

Some of them we even have names like Third World. Two steps removed. We're defined as Americans. We find our identity often in our success.

Be that our lifestyle, our morality, our power. Something that we feel sets us apart from everybody else. And what you realize very quickly is that we as people have a natural tendency to find our

identity in some aspect of ourselves that distances us from others.

From those who don't share that particular trait. It can be race, politics, or nationality. It can equally be many other things. I remember when I was a child and desperately wanting to fit in.

To belong somewhere. That the best way to do that was to find a group that I could be a part of and belong there where others didn't belong.

[5 : 09] You could say things like, I'm an athlete and therefore I'm distinguished from others who aren't. But I belong in the we're the athletes group.

That doesn't work for me anymore. Unfortunately. But I've just gotten more creative as an adult. I think of other things that can set me apart.

Things that we look at that give us value. That help us belong somewhere. It could be our parenting philosophy. We're good moms and dads who do things like this and would never do that or say this. Our educational level. We honestly feel we're above some others who don't know what we do or talk as we do or think the way we do.

Even our theological persuasion. We've got it right and others don't. Presbyterians are really good at that. But regardless of what it is, we see this tendency to find our identity, our sense of belonging in something about ourselves and thereby separate or distance ourselves from others who aren't described the same way.

[6 : 27] Who don't have that trait. And Jesus says, not so among my people. Jesus says the way it's supposed to work is like this.

That the defining identity of my people is not something particular about them at all. It's that they're connected to me. They belong because they are in Christ, Ephesians has been saying.

And that that shared reality of being in Christ connects them also to each other. Even otherwise very different people connected by that. Go back and remember chapter 1.

Do you remember talking about everything that happens in Christ? Every spiritual blessing that is ours in Christ? The new identity that Jesus gives us because of what He has done?

Because He has given His life for us? Now as we get to chapter 2, what Paul says is, it's not just a new identity for you. That new identity in Christ connects you.

[7 : 31] The fact that you're connected to Him connects you to many others. All His people are connected in Christ. That's why we've been using this image for this sermon series.

It's not just an image of saying we're connected to God in Christ, although that's certainly true. But that reality connects us also to each other.

And so that arm in arm and hand in hand, because of Jesus, that's what His people are to look like. And that's actually the mystery that Paul is unfolding here in chapter 3.

That previously separated and disconnected enemies like Jews and Gentiles are now connected together because of Jesus.

Look how he says it in verse 6. The mystery, he's going to tell us what it is, the 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.

[8 : 33] That's the mystery. He tells us when Paul uses the word mystery, it's actually different from the things the Hardy Boys solve. He actually is talking, when he uses that word, of something that is now apparent and understood, but that has been more hidden in the past.

Something that was less clear than it is now, and now it's more fully revealed. In particular, when Paul uses it, it means the truth revealed in a new way in Jesus the Messiah.

That was previously less clear in the Old Testament. Look at verses 4 and 5. In reading this, you'll be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ.

That's the Greek word for Messiah. The one who's promised to come. That's the mystery. The mystery was not made known to men and other generations in the way that it has now been revealed by the Spirit.

In other words, something has come into focus better. Something has been more fully revealed than it was, and it's something that happens in Jesus. Now you know the Jews and Gentiles had a great distaste for each other.

[9 : 44] Jews viewing Gentiles as unclean and unworthy. Greeks largely viewing Jews and any non-Greeks as barbaric and not civilized like they were.

The animosity between these groups was every bit as strong as the racial tensions in this country that I alluded to earlier. It was race, ethnicity, and religious heritage all tied up in one.

Defining their basic identity against the others who were clearly not like them. But you may also be thinking, what does Paul mean?

This is a new revelation of this mystery. I thought the Old Testament already talked about the salvation of the Gentiles and that that was part of God's plan. And it was.

And it absolutely does talk about that. There are clues, so to speak, all the way back to Abraham where the nations are to be blessed through God's people.

[10:44] But the promised Messiah is always pointed to as the time things will really change. Things are really going to be different. And Paul's saying it's even more dramatic a shift than the Jews had realized.

Let me explain what I mean by that by talking about the temple for just a few minutes. The temple's a huge issue in Ephesians and the temple in Jerusalem is a marvelous structure in any iteration of it.

A wonderful work. And this is one picture of it. You see the big central location there in the middle? I'll describe that in a minute. And then the courtyard around the outside. I'm going to show you a diagram so we can talk a little bit more clearly in just a minute. But I want you to see the picture because the diagram's going to lose a lot of the grandeur and beauty of this temple.

But there's the temple in Jerusalem. And then let's look at the diagram for a second. Here's a diagram of the temple. That large center structure that you see is right at the center of this diagram with a dark black line around it.

[11:52] It's called the Holy of Holies. The very center of the temple. The place where God dwelled. It was holy because God lived there.

In the Old Testament, that was where He took up residence among His people in the Holy of Holies. And so that was the center of the entire temple complex. And near it, surrounding that, you had the court of the priests.

That next little block around it where only the priests could go. And beyond that, you had what was called the court of Israel. Places where Jewish men and women could come.

They could offer sacrifices. There were altars there. The worship of God happened there. And Gentiles did not. No Gentiles. Too close to the presence of God for Gentiles.

They couldn't come into the court of Israel where the Jews could come. They can't get near God. And so it's the outer courtyard, the court of the Gentiles, where they stop.

[13:03] That's as close as they can get. They're unclean. They're unworthy. They can't approach any closer. They can't go in with the Jews to worship their God, to be near Him. They're separated by walls and stairs from the presence of God.

Unclean. Unworthy to enter any closer. Look back at the picture. You see the walls around that center area? Do you see now that this outer courtyard is where the Gentiles were?

And huge, beautiful walls and stairs saying, you stay out there in the courtyard. That's where the Gentiles were in the temple. And they took this very seriously.

The penalty for a Gentile entering the court of Israel was death. Paul, a Jew, experienced this firsthand. He says at the beginning of our passage this morning that he is in prison for the sake of the Gentiles.

Verse 1. What does he mean by that? How's Paul in prison for the sake of the Gentiles? Look back at Acts. Paul actually went through a lot that had to do with the temple to end up in prison.

[14:14] If you look in Acts, you'll find out that Paul was in this very temple we've been talking about in Jerusalem doing some purification. And look at what happens. Acts chapter 21, verse 27.

The Jews from Asia, from places like Ephesus, saw Paul in the temple and stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him, crying out, Men of Israel, help! This is the man who's teaching everyone everywhere against the people and the law and this place.

Against the Jews and our law and this temple. Moreover, he even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place. They get stirred up against Paul to the point of, look at verse 30, what happens?

All the city was stirred up. The people ran together, seized Paul, dragged him out of the temple, shut the gates and as they were seeking to kill him, the death penalty for bringing a Gentile into the court of Israel, word came to the tribune of the cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion.

This is no small city. The temple's big enough. The whole city in confusion. An uproar over this man, Paul. Now it turns out that Paul hadn't actually brought a Gentile into the court of Israel.

[15 : 28] But the message that he's preaching, they still can't stomach. He's going to the Gentiles. And that lands him in prison. The prison, in fact, from which he writes Ephesians.

They're still angry at what they hear he's been teaching in places like Ephesians 2. The message to the Gentiles that the barriers between Jew and Gentile have been broken down and that together they're being built into a holy temple in which God lives by His Spirit.

You remember that from the end of chapter 2? Jew and Gentile now together built into a holy temple where God lives by His Spirit. And the Jews say, Ridiculous!

Never! Take His life! Paul, you're removing our very distinctiveness. There's going to be nothing that separates us from them anymore.

You're destroying our unique identity. Maybe some of them, Paul, could become a little bit more like us, but never this. Wipe the temple out and build a new one?

[16 : 34] No way. No way. Do you hear what Paul's saying in a passage like this one in Ephesians 2? Where at the end of that chapter he's saying the whole group, Jew and Gentile alike, are going to be a holy temple to the Lord.

And he's going to dwell there by His Spirit. Do you hear what he's saying when he says that? He's saying that the mystery is not merely that Gentiles could now be invited into the Jewish part of the temple near to God, but that Jesus was building an entirely new temple altogether.

A new structure completely with Jesus as the cornerstone. Now God dwells not in Jerusalem, not in a building where He's contained, but His presence shows up in His people who are connected to Jesus.

Jews and Gentiles. Amazing. Something completely new. The mystery of the new temple is solved, Paul says. It's fully unfolded. The presence of God used to be contained in this temple and now Jews and Gentiles and all sorts of people are connected to Jesus and are being built into a new temple.

because the presence of God will be there. And that's what made the temple special. That's why it was holy. Because God was there.

[17 : 55] Because He lived there and now He lives with them. And that makes all the difference. Being connected to Jesus, having the presence of God show up is now the thing in common that so supersedes all the differences you thought were so important.

Now Paul says the mystery is that together, together, together, Jews and Gentiles. We don't even have English words for what he says in verse 6.

In fact, Paul's probably making up some Greek words. What he does is he takes a prefix for with or together and just throws it on the front of three different nouns. So that Jews and Gentiles are now heirs together and members together and sharers together.

How could you not be a sharer together? It's redundant. It's for emphasis. They're together. Jews and Gentiles, no distinction. All of God's riches, all the privileges of membership in God's people, all the benefits of His promises now held jointly, together, in Christ Jesus.

That new identity is so redefining that the differences fade. And what most matters, what most defines us is shared. The Gentiles aren't just in the temple, they're stones making up the temple, right up alongside the purest Jew with no distinction.

[19 : 27] You don't have to be circumcised, purified, catechized to be a part of this temple, do you? Do you feel the scandal in that? Probably not a lot.

You're not a first century Jew. But that was radical. That was a dramatic shift. In fact, I'll say it this way, you don't have to be American, Southern, Presbyterian, or Republican, do you?

It's a little less friendly, isn't it? We're just getting started. Your religious heritage doesn't define you in God's temple. You're not a more honored stone because your theology is more accurate.

Your past is more pure or your worship style is more relevant. You're not. That needs to rattle some of us so that we see where we've made an idol of something good.

Where we've found something that's important and we've used it to find our sense of identity and belonging and keep others at a distance. We find our identity over and against someone else.

[20 : 37] But guess what else is true? You're not left out or disconnected or a less honored stone because of the reverse of these things. Your history, the past sins you've committed or sins that have been committed against you, they don't define you in God's temple.

You're not left out. You're not a second class Christian. There are no second class Christians. What defines all of us is that because we are connected to Jesus, God is there.

God is willing to dwell with you despite the shame you have from your past or your present. Isn't that good news? God will dwell with you and that makes all the difference.

You belong. Your identity is found in someone beyond yourself. in your connection to Jesus and God's dwelling in you by His Spirit. He's in each of us individually and there are passages that talk about that but the idea in these verses is of the corporate temple.

All of us diverse people together in Christ are in one unified building to house the very presence of God where God dwells by His Spirit.

[21 : 51] God dwells there. Oh, if God dwells there what sorts of amazing things might happen? Things we couldn't otherwise predict or expect.

I love it when we see evidence of these beautiful realities in our local community here at Southwood in our relationships. You can catch a glimpse of it week in and week out in small groups.

Let me read you a comment made by a Southwood member last week on our small group blog. She wrote this, Coming from a place where commonalities brought people together I had my share of complaints when I first came to Southwood and felt so deeply that these are not my people but I've been astounded at the grace of God that unites those who confess their need and delight in a Savior who has rescued us.

When I look around on Communion Sunday I ponder this amazing gift. People from different backgrounds, ages, stages and perhaps even understanding of the Gospel and I think with humbling gratitude these are my people.

We're brought together because of Jesus regardless of our differences. Small groups have been a valuable place for me to discover what true unity is all about. Amen.

[23 : 09] We get a glimpse of it in working alongside our ministry partners both locally and globally praying for someone in South Sudan. I was reminded of this again at the work day last weekend as I had the joy of shoveling mulch and pulling weeds alongside brothers and sisters who live in different parts of town who have different perspectives on life and how they think about things who have different skin colors and who are part of the temple that God's included me in too.

I got a glimpse of it at Bible school last summer when I saw a video of a retired submarine captain washing the feet of young kids.

An elder in the church but kneeling down to those I don't know a lot of years younger than he is.

Anything else gives away his age.

Beautiful. What connects us is not age or intelligence hobby or household income it's Jesus and so God builds us together and shows up in remarkable ways right in the midst of us.

Imagine what God might do if he was really there not just in these moments not just in a few examples I can give you but through us corporately all the time if he was there where and how are you experiencing his presence among his people it's good isn't it when you're a part of that.

[24 : 50] We've also got to ask ourselves the question this morning not just where are we experiencing it but where are we missing these opportunities? Where is diversity lacking or a barrier coming up?

Where are we separating ourselves from brothers and sisters we should be celebrating with?

Here's the rub for us God says if I've taken up residence there if I've connected them to my son you dare not back away and disconnect from them if I'm willing to dwell with them you dare not move further away don't rebuild a barrier Jesus has torn down that's Paul's warning to the Jews and Gentiles in Ephesus with whom has your heart built a barrier that shouldn't separate you who doesn't perform up to your standards who doesn't get the gospel the way you think they should I encourage you to dig down just a little there when you think about those questions you don't have to go far what you'll likely find is the thing or one of the things you're using to define yourself so that you belong and they don't quite fit in or measure up you wouldn't you wouldn't say it that way you're not trying to kick them out of heaven or even the church but be honest with yourself you think you're a little better than they are a little worthier a little more important in the kingdom you say I'm I'm just more mature and you mean I'm I'm more valuable others of you say I'm more real or transparent you mean more important what's the thing you're basing that on what's the thing when you feel that in your heart that that's what allows you to feel that way what makes you belong more or be better on the positive proactive side who are you connecting with moving toward developing relationship with who's not like you in age perspective marital status race church background what barrier are you proactively continuing to push down that tries to creep up remember it's not just okay if a few of them become a little more like us the gospel says we have to deal actively with the

thing that makes us feel we belong and gives us unique identity and separates us from them that's an issue in our hearts that we must deal with

I assure you that Jews and Gentiles didn't immediately look and act the same just because they all met Jesus in fact Paul says in some ways they shouldn't there are things they shouldn't do the same people with different backgrounds and experiences may dress parent act speak and so forth differently from you but they may well be rescued by the same Savior and indwelt by the same Spirit as you and if we're going to let God tell us what matters what really defines us and makes us belong if he gets to be in charge of that I hope he does that's it that's all where he shows up and dwells that's what matters that's what brings you together and he dwells in the temple the temple built of those connected to his son that's the only thing that defines them or makes them belong don't you make a higher standard than God has we belong with him he says we don't need another club to include us one last thing before we're done this morning for those of you who are here and thinking to yourself this just confirms everything that I thought about the church already they're just one more club like all the rest just one more click with a different set of things that set them apart separate them from others

I hear that concern and understand it in fact I've watched it and I've done it a lot of times found a way to make myself feel good and thereby separate from others a lot of times churches and Christians act like that separating ourselves from others saying you need to be more like us to belong here and be a part of our community we've said it with our words and with our actions and we need to ask your forgiveness because among other things when we've done that we've lied to you about Christianity we have there's actually a difference with Jesus from all the other clubs you'd lump us in with there's actually a difference with Jesus instead of pushing away and separating from you

[30 : 27] Jesus draws near and invites you in all of you that's what the incarnation Christmas is all about and reminds us of that Jesus moves towards us and enters into relationship he doesn't stand far off and demand that you be better and change to get into his club he invites you to come into his family where we're all defined not by something about us but by being loved by him not by how well we've cleaned up but by how wonderful our savior is where we're all dressed in rags until he gives us the perfect robes of his righteousness welcoming inviting safe that's the kind of community you should find in Jesus followers even though you often don't and I would say to you this morning don't let that be a reason that keeps you from

Jesus instead come help us help us live and love others more like he does may we be a community where finding our identity only in Christ binds us to each other deeply and moves us towards others constantly let's pray to that end father if that's really going to be true of me if that's really going to be true of Southwood if that's really going to be true of the church of Jesus Christ in Huntsville and around the world your spirit is going to have to convince us it's safe to be defined by being in Jesus not by all the other things we love to take credit for things about us that we feel like would distinguish us Holy Spirit would you do that work would you start here in our hearts and in this church and would we be a place that indeed reflects the welcoming and inviting heart of our Savior would we find ourselves completely dependent upon him and on nothing else father send your spirit here do that work in new and different ways moment by moment in each of our hearts we ask in Jesus name amen for more information visit us online at southwood.org