

# The Mystery Revealed

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Date: 05 January 2025

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[ 0 : 00 ] The following message was given at a Sunday celebration at Trinity Grace Church in Athens. For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at [trinitygraceathens.com](http://trinitygraceathens.com).

Ephesians chapter 3, we're going to be looking at verses 1 through 13. 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 for you, how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly.

When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men and other generations, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.

This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

Of this gospel, I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power. To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things so that through the church, the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

[ 2 : 02 ] This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him.

So, I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory.

This is the word of the Lord. Have you ever seen Bigfoot? It's a rhetorical question you don't have to go into right now, but you might wonder, does he really exist?

Who built Stonehenge and why? How much wood could a woodchuck chuck? If a woodchuck could chuck wood. Life is just filled with mysteries, isn't it?

Perhaps the mystery of mysteries is this. Where does the other sock go in the dryer? Some mysteries remain unsolved, but there are others that are eventually brought to light.

[ 3 : 12 ] My wife's grandfather, Dennis, was a Bible translator in a primitive tribe that was isolated from the rest of the world.

Every once in a while, Dennis would be able to get some supplies from a grocery store and bring it back with him into the tribe. It was usually stuff that had long shelf life, like canned goods.

And the tribal people were always just amazed at these things. But there was one time early on that the tribespeople became visibly upset at the cans.

They got real quiet, and they looked at Dennis, and they looked at his family with these really worried faces. One of the men said, we noticed that each of the cans you brought has a picture of what's inside.

The can with the cow has milk inside it. The can with the tomato has tomatoes inside it. And the can with the bean picture has beans inside it. All of these seem good, but what about that one right there?

[ 4 : 16 ] This one has us a little concerned. The man pointed to a jar of baby food. So Dennis picked it up and turned it, only to realize that there on the label was a big picture of a smiling baby.

No wonder they're so concerned. They wanted to know if these seemingly nice people were actually eating jars of babies. Do we have the right picture?

Is this really what we're supposed to be doing? Really? Is this right? Well, once Dennis realized what they were wondering, he was able to explain the mystery.

He didn't change the can or the contents of the can, but he brought to clarity so that the people could rightly understand the picture and know what to do next.

Well, maybe you find yourself taking a second look at the label of your life. Maybe you're asking, do I have the right picture? Is this really what I'm supposed to be doing?

[ 5 : 22 ] Really? Is this right? Maybe you're a mom exhausted from staying up with a crying baby through the night, buried under piles of laundry.

You're eking out macaroni and cheese. That's the best you got. And perhaps you're wondering, is this really the plan? Or maybe you're retired and you have more time but less energy.

And maybe you're wondering, what am I doing? Do I have anything worthwhile to contribute anymore? Or maybe you struggled to get to church this morning and now you wonder, what do other people think that I'm here?

You wonder what God thinks about you being here. Maybe you feel like you're not good enough and you're asking, do I really belong here? When our passage this morning, the readers are asking similar questions.

They're looking at the label of their lives and the picture is just not making sense. They've grown up as outsiders to all the promises that they're hearing about of the Jewish faith.

[ 6 : 32 ] It's all unfamiliar. It's all new. And what's more, Paul, the supposed apostle, is in prison. The church looks like a bunch of unimpressive misfits and their leader is locked up.

They're looking at the picture and they're wondering, are we really supposed to be here? Is this right? Really? Paul wants to help them.

Even though he's a prisoner, weak and ineffective in the eyes of the world, he is brimming with joy and thankfulness.

Paul has a different understanding of the picture on the label. He's going to shed light on the mystery. He's going to bring clarity so that we, us in here, can rightly understand the picture and know what to do next.

I think the message that Paul has for us this morning is this. Even in weakness, take heart and live confidently in Christ and for his people.

[ 7 : 40 ] Even in weakness, take heart and live confidently in Christ and for his people. We'll break this out into four points. The first, the steward of the mystery, divine authority, in verses 1 through 5.

Well, Paul, he begins this section saying, for this reason, verse 1 there. Well, he's pointing us back to the previous comments as the foundation for what he's about to build on.

So what's the foundation? For both those who are near, the Jews, and those who are far off, the Gentiles, God has brought both of them together in Christ.

That's the foundation he's built. And now, Paul gives himself an interesting label in verse 1. A prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles.

Paul does not say that he's a prisoner of Rome. Which you might expect. He may have been under house arrest and possibly even chained to a prison guard.

[ 8 : 47 ] But he doesn't view himself as a prisoner of Rome. He says he's a prisoner of Jesus Christ. Paul knows that there are only really two options.

You can be a prisoner to Christ or you can be a prisoner to sin. You see, prior to his conversion, Paul was against Christ.

He violently persecuted Christians. It was while he was in the act, the very act of chasing down Christians, Jesus appeared to him and demanded his life.

Paul now belongs to a different master. And this master commissioned him to take the good news to the Gentiles. He doesn't see his imprisonment apart from his mission he's been given.

He is a man imprisoned by Christ for a mission. But after Paul describes himself as a prisoner of Jesus Christ, he screeches to a halt.

[ 9 : 52 ] He can almost anticipate his readers confusion here. They don't understand the picture on the label. How is him being a prisoner of good news?

Paul breaks at verse 2 in order to pull back and to talk through the big picture. And he begins with this explanation about a wonderful mystery from the Lord and then his role as a steward of this mystery.

A steward is entrusted by an owner to care for and manage something that belongs to him. Often during Christmas we'll have one of the kids grab the presents from under the tree and take them to the right person.

The kid didn't buy the gift but he stewards it. This Christmas my parents had an international student over on Christmas morning and you should have seen the surprised look on her face when one of the kids brought some gifts over for her to open.

Well in this case Paul stewards the gift of God's grace for the Gentiles. It's as if God handed Paul a wrapped gift and told him to take it over to the unsuspecting outsider.

[11:18] So Paul's basically rallying all of these Gentiles into God's living room and he's handing out wrapped presents with their names on them. The whole scenario is this radical mystery.

mystery. The word mystery comes up four times in this passage and notice Paul's relationship to the mystery. In verse three says the mystery was made known to me by revelation.

You see what he's what he's claiming here? His understanding, his insight did not come from himself but it was revealed to him.

Paul's not saying that he had some kind of vague subjective personal impression. He's appealing to his apostleship, his authority.

He's one of the number of eyewitnesses uniquely chosen by the Lord to bear witness to this truth. This was not his own idea that he cooked up but he's in line with the other apostles and the prophets in the spirit.

[12:27] So if his insight was really from the same spirit then we could expect that we'd see the same message he's preaching from other apostles, from other stewards.

And in Acts 10 it's exactly what we see. We see the apostle Peter receiving a vision from the Lord communicating that the Gentiles were not to be viewed as unclean but that anyone including Gentiles could receive forgiveness through Jesus Christ.

so we have another apostle being led by the same spirit to the same revelation about this mystery. Even more than that this mystery is not something that suddenly appeared in Paul's lifetime just like that.

Verse 5 shows us that the suspense of the mystery has been mounting over the course of generations. It hadn't been revealed before. So in other words Paul's insight is a long anticipated resolution to a storyline unfolding over the course of history.

Think of it this way. My wife Elizabeth was commissioned by a camp to paint murals on their buses. So she used a technique called paint by number.

[13:44] Maybe you've heard of this. So she sketched the mural on the bus and then labeled the shapes with these different numbers. Then she had campers paint the bus by each selecting one number and a paint color.

So if the person had number two and it was green, they walked around the bus and they only painted sections labeled number two with green. Well each person locked in to their specific color for a few hours.

But by the end, we could all just step back and we could see the big picture come together. The same is true for the stewards of this mystery.

This is not something one person just subjectively felt. The unfolding plan of God is embedded in history with real places, real people, real events.

Peter and Paul were painting portions of the same image but God is the artist. God is the one that's sovereign over all of us. The picture is consistent across the board.

[14:49] Paul is inviting us now to step back and observe the big picture. All things are working together according to the counsel of God's will.

And so you and I can be confident. We can be confident that the Lord is bringing it all together including your life and my life. So what is the big picture? What is this mystery?

Well Paul tells us clearly in the next verse. Point to the revelation of the mystery. Shocking inclusion. We see in verse 6 put very clearly this mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

I didn't hear everybody gasping here but this would have been shocking news to everyone reading this. You see the Gentiles were those born outside the covenant.

They did not grow up with lives ordered around the law of God but for Jews the law was foundational for every single aspect of life and the outward sign of inclusion in this covenant community was the ritual of circumcision.

[16:16] the sign represented their salvation and their ethnic identity as Jews. Now most Roman and Greek Gentiles had never had that surgery.

It was not only unnecessary it was seen as stupid. This is foolish. So the very sign Jews held most dear as their identity was viewed with disgust by the Gentiles.

The Gentiles worshipped many gods but the Jews believed they worshipped false gods. Gentile life was dominated by the most fundamental sin idolatry because they weren't rooted in serving and obeying the God of Israel.

All that they believed said and did was governed by a different set of rules, a different set of values than the Jews. They had no familiarity with the biblical storyline and they really didn't care to.

I mean think about it to them the Jews were just this weird standoffish group with no real influence. And to the Jews the Gentiles were godless, unclean, far off, cursed outsiders to be avoided.

[ 17 : 40 ] So here are these two groups. Jews and Gentiles. And Paul says the mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs.

Fellow heirs. This is family language. When the father died the children became the legal heirs of all that he had.

So Paul is saying that Gentiles and Jews are brought into the same family with the same legal rights to the father's estate.

The outsiders are brought into the living room with the family at Christmas. Not only does Paul surprise them by handing them an unexpected gift, when they open it up, they don't just find a stocking stuffer from Dollar General.

They find adoption papers to belong to this family forever. That's what they find. God is not just permitting them into the house temporarily.

[ 18 : 52 ] He is bringing the godless, the unclean, the far off, the cursed outsiders, those who were to be avoided, and he's adopting them into his family to call him father and to have full rights to every blessing of belonging.

That's what he's doing. Can you see how shocking this is? He's bringing those who have been homeless, the soldier with PTSD, the child with disabilities, the self-centered entrepreneur who can't find satisfaction in the things of this world, the backwoods hillbilly, the woman who just flushed her fentanyl and wants to be clean, the college student who is hungry for real answers.

God is bringing those who are far off and bringing them near, near, giving them the rights of being his beloved children.

But he goes on to say something even more radical than this. Not only these outsiders considered members of the same family, they are members of the same body.

At one point I was messing around with Mod Podge, which is basically a strong glue that you can use to stick different pictures together. I took some old National Geographic magazines, cut out some random facial features of different people from all over the world.

[ 20 : 28 ] So a dark eye here, a blue eye here, a mocha nose, so on and so forth. Then I glued the different parts together into one face. The Mod Podge glue was holding slices of different kinds of people all together.

Now what would you think if you saw a real life version of that Mod Podge man walking around Walmart?

What would you think if you saw this person walking around? It would be shocking. It would be terrifying. I've never seen anything like this before. Well God, he is taking some from all kinds of people and sticking them together into one new body with different parts all working together.

There's no earthly reason at all why these people should be united. and now they are shockingly one body. And what holds this body together?

Paul goes on to say that the Gentiles are partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. Jesus Christ is the glue that holds this new body together.

[ 21 : 48 ] Each piece had to be immersed in Jesus Christ by leaving their old life behind. That is our story.

That's our story. If you're a Christian, at one time we rejected the God who made us and attempted to live apart from his rule. The Bible calls this sin. We all sinned and we fell short of God's standard. And so because of that we stood condemned under the right judgment of God. the only one who could save us was the very one we sinned against.

That's a dilemma. But here's the amazing news. God came to us.

He came to us. Jesus lived the life that we failed to live. And then he died as a sacrifice in our place.

[ 22 : 54 ] He absorbed the full wrath of God's judgment against our sins so that all Jew and Gentile alike might turn from sin and trust in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sin.

For anyone who receives this gift with the hands that are open, God removes them from their old life and way of living. He takes them out. He cuts them out. And then he immerses them in the finished work of Jesus Christ, the glue, and sticks them together into one new body.

For anyone who has never trusted in Jesus Christ, I invite you to come this morning. Be a partaker of the promise of the gospel in Jesus Christ. This new family and this new body created and sustained by Jesus is intended to shock the world with a picture of unity that is only possible through the Lord's generosity.

The mystery is one of shocking inclusion. Trinity Grace, is this your family? What kind of people do you envision sitting next to you at church?

Who do you imagine sitting around your dinner table with you? I'd like to invite you to look through the eyes of faith as you walk around McMinn County.

[ 24 : 25 ] Ask yourself, what godless, unclean, far off, cursed, outsider is God planning to bring into the family, into the body?

He did it for us and he can do it again. If we're preaching this good news, brothers and sisters, we should prepare to be shocked.

Point three, the objects of the mystery. If you look at verse seven, Paul says that he was made a minister.

He didn't start out that way. In fact, Paul describes himself in verse eight as the very least of all the saints.

Paul actually makes up a word for this by taking a superlative, like I am the least, and then turning it into a comparison. So there might be less, lesser, and then least, I'm the least, and he's saying, no, no, no, no, you're the least, I am leaster than you.

[ 25 : 36 ] That's what he's saying. So in another letter, he describes himself as the chief of sinners. Why does he do that? Because he spent his early days zealously trying to destroy what Jesus gave his life to save.

The church. Paul has a clear understanding of his sin. But what's amazing about this, you don't see him wallowing in self-pity or condemnation.

Seeing his old sin rightly only causes him to see God's grace rightly. It's clear to him that there was no reason for God to save him and use him.

That was obvious. He was an enemy of the cross, killing the thing that Jesus loves. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved Paul, made him alive together with Christ, by grace, Paul is saved.

And now the persecutor of the church becomes the planter of the church. The unsuspecting Paul is transformed by the gospel and is empowered to be a preacher of this gospel.

[ 26 : 59 ] He is more fascinated with God's empowering grace than his past sin. is the same true for you. Some of you need to stop looking back at your past sin with self-pity and condemnation.

That is not godly grief. At the very heart of the gospel is the admission that we cannot save ourselves.

We are powerless to clean ourselves up. That's why we need Jesus to begin with.

But once you are a Christian, you are no longer left alone in the courtroom before God the judge. You are not there anymore. Jesus Christ is your advocate. You have been released from the sentence of death that you deserve.

[ 28 : 14 ] He knew you at your dirtiest. He knew you at your lowest, your farthest. He knew you even then and then he still came for you.

He came for you. God no longer stands against you as judge, but he stands with you as father. A father who loves you and will never, ever, ever, ever, ever cast you out.

He will lovingly train you as one of his own beloved children and he's with you now. Right now. My first job out of college was working at a crisis pregnancy center.

My supervisor was a nice lady, we'll just call her Robin, and she was passionate about helping women in vulnerable situations. I watched her on a number of occasions, warmly welcomed, prayed for, cried with, counseled ladies in crisis.

It wasn't until a few months into the job that I found out that years ago she had been worse off than any of the ladies coming through the whole center. Robin had been homeless, addicted to crack,

and living in her car with her young child and another one on the way.

[ 29 : 42 ] She was powerless to save herself. God delights to come for the godless, the unclean, the far off, the cursed outsider.

She was saved by the power of the preached gospel, and then she was empowered by God to give the saving grace that she had received to others.

This is what he's doing in the lives of his people. People who are powerless against sin. He takes people like Paul, he takes people like Robin, he takes people like you and like me, and he makes us recipients of grace, and then distributors of grace by his power.

That's what he does. He has work for you to do. Good, happy work, making macaroni and cheese and patting babies through the night, painting walls.

He has work, glorious work for you to do, and he's turning you outside of yourself to empower you for the good of others. That's what he's up to.

[ 30 : 59 ] Theologian Klein Snodgrass once said, ministry originates in and is the expression of God's grace. Ministry is the free flow of grace from God through us to other people.

That's what he's up to. So what good works does God have in store for you? How might he empower you for the good of others?

Today, this week, 2025, for Paul, God equipped him to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.

Just think of this. To the average Jew, the Gentiles would have been the ultimate enemies of God. And now Paul is saying that it is his God-empowered purpose to preach to these enemies the unsearchable riches of Christ.

So this is, if you think of it, an extension of the grace Paul received personally, from one undeserving enemy to other undeserving enemies, riches are being distributed.

[ 32 : 17 ] What belongs to Christ belongs to his people. We are brought in to marvel again and again at the revealing of the mystery.

Enemies are made into heirs by God's power. Hallelujah. Hallelujah. Hallelujah. Point three, four, the purpose of the mystery.

The purpose of the mystery. why does God do it this way? We see in verse 10, the beginning of the explanation.

Here it is. So that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known. I mean the suspense has been building since the beginning of time. Building and building and building through all history and it culminates in this.

[ 33 : 29 ] That God might display his wisdom through the church. I mean wrap your minds around this.

in verse 9 it says that this is the God who created all things. He's the only being able to create something out of nothing.

Only one. So think of the most majestic things in all of creation your mind can go to. The Himalayas, Mount Everest, Grand Canyon, or think even the most complex thing that still blows your mind like a human cell or light.

Lay any created wonder and all there are side by side with the church and the church is more glorious, a more glorious display of God's wisdom.

This is his one act that he's taking on the road. This is it. And notice that he's shining the spotlight on the church not just in front of the whole world, he's holding up the church in front of the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

[ 34 : 54 ] I mean Paul could be talking about angelic beings who spend all of their time in the presence of the living God just waiting to see what he's going to do next with bated breath leaning in saying how's God going to pull this one off?

That could be what he's talking about or maybe Paul is talking about the demonic forces in opposition to God and if so this strange shocking and vulnerable creation called the church is held up before this audience as the ultimate expression of God's wisdom that means that this church us in here just take a moment and look around at the faces around you look at this church all of us we are on display right now right now maybe this causes you to say really is this the right picture is this really right this is the plan brothers sisters if you feel exceedingly!

ordinary unworthy or even fearful at the prospect of being God's masterpiece let me encourage you you are exactly right you're exactly right we are a bunch of ordinary unworthy and fearful people

that's an accurate description for us but the wisdom of God is even more magnificently displayed in weakness cross comes before the crown the baby comes before the warrior I remember watching a little boy at a birthday party trying to chop up bubbles that were blowing around and you see these kind of beautiful defenseless rainbow bubbles floating along every time he tried to chop one they would not pop they would just split into like two or three more bubbles and then they floated along in even more directions and then the other kids would look up like oh bubbles and they get even more excited it was really funny to watch it was so funny the more that he chopped the more he accidentally brought delight to more and more kids the logic of force and violence did not destroy it only distributed the joy my friends that's what's happening in the church that's what's happening in our weakness the more the enemy tries to destroy us the more we rejoice and spread the good news of

Jesus Christ okay Rome you want to lock Paul up great he's still smiling he's still singing he's still writing joy filled letters to the church that we're reading right now thousands of years later why Rome is not in charge Rome doesn't have the key the God who created all things is with him and empowering him for the mission if this is God's mission he's not going to let it fail he's not going to leave you he's not abandoning you what he begins he will finish in your life as well that's what he's shown us since the very beginning there is no other plan no safety net no plan B God has made a people for himself his reputation depends on it so he is all in he's all in for you if this is the case we would be wise to follow in

God's wisdom to make the church the centerpiece of our lives theologian John Stott captured it this way if the church is central to God's purpose as seen in both history and the gospel it must surely also be central to our lives how can we take lightly what God takes so seriously how dare we push to the circumference what God has placed at the center no we shall seek to become responsible church members active in some local manifestation of the local church if instead like Paul we keep before us the vision of God's new society as his family his dwelling place and his instrument in the world then we shall constantly be seeking to make our churches worship more authentic its fellowship more caring and its outreach more compassionate in other words like

[ 40 : 12 ] Paul again we shall be ready to pray to work and if necessary to suffer in order to turn this vision into a reality oh my friends how might you work through God's power to strengthen this church's worship fellowship and outreach how is he stirring you to work for that end the glorious church weak as we may be but the centerpiece of his affection and all of his energy Trinity grace Paul's not done he wants us to know that God doesn't simply employ us and then just tolerate us like a bunch of workers in his factory we are his beloved children and he wants us to come to him in verse 12 he says that through faith in Christ Jesus we have boldness and access with confidence confidence there's no fear of being turned away because of some kind of ritual impurity or some form of unworthiness because of

Christ when we show up at the door all he sees is his son's perfection and he says come in my beloved child come in perfect beloved child no fear of rejection no fear of being turned away so what should we do in response to these truths after Paul clarifies this big picture he tells us do not lose heart do not lose heart I'm in prison yes you are undeserving outsiders yes but it's all going exactly according to plan

God's strength is displayed in weakness just look at the cross look at your ordinary life God's not afraid he's not shaken up he says come near I've got good work for you to do so that all can see my wisdom everything that's happening in your life right now is a part of God's plan to showcase his extraordinary wisdom through his ordinary people so even in weakness Trinity Grace Church take heart and live confidently in Christ and for his people God help us let's pray oh Lord thank you for revealing this mystery we're no longer outsiders but we've been made into your beloved children members of the same body stuck together through the gospel and the gospel alone of Jesus Christ so Lord we praise you for chasing us down when we are enemies of your cross and turning us into your masterpiece as ordinary as we are you delight to work in our weakness so we entrust ourselves once again to you the maker and sustainer of all things including our own lives I ask that you do the work that only you can do and you can finish in Jesus name we pray amen!  
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