

The Mystery Revealed, Ephesians 3:1-13

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Introduction

Good morning, my name is Brad and I'm one of the pastors. Today we are carrying on with our sermon series in the letter of Ephesians, which we have subtitled, "Into the Fullness of Christ". I hope you have been enjoying the journey so far. To help, I would encourage you to consider using our free trial of the Dwell app, which allows you to experience having the word of God read over you, just as the Ephesians experienced Paul's letter.

Today I invite you to turn in your Bibles with me to Ephesians 3:1-13. The title of today's sermon is "The Mystery Revealed". And the main idea that will rise to the surface from today's passage is simply this: Do not lose heart—that is, in two broad ways:

- 1) Do not lose heart—the mystery is revealed - vv. 1-6
- 2) Do not lose heart—the mystery is glorious - vv. 7-13

With that said, if you are able, please stand with me to honor the reading of God's word. Again, today's passage is Ephesians 3:1-13. Church, hear the word of the Lord:

For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles—² assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you,³ how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly.⁴ When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ,⁵ which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.⁶ 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.

⁷ 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.⁸ 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,⁹ and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things,¹⁰ so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.¹¹ This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord,¹² in

whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him. ¹³ So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory. Ephesians 3:1-13

The Lord has spoken to us. [Congregation] Thanks be to God! You may be seated.

Exposition

Anyone remember how creepy the show *Unsolved Mysteries* was? I thought maybe it was just that creepy because I was a little kid when it was popular. But then I went back and watched an old episode—no, still creepy. You had the music that would haunt your dreams. And then the host with the voice that would haunt your dreams. And almost every episode seemed to have some story of a person being lifted up from the earth in an alien abduction, which of course would haunt your dreams (even despite the cheesy reenactments). But what made it all work was that it described actual unsolved mysteries. There’s something about an unsolved mystery, about being blinded to the truth, that’s deeply troubling to us.¹

For proof, just consider how we’re troubled by the current unsolved mystery of how long this crisis is going to last. Things felt hopeful leading up to Easter because we had something to look forward to. Now what is there?

Here’s what Paul gives us to look to: not just a mystery revealed, but what he describes as *the* mystery revealed. Not a murder mystery, but

²⁶ the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. Colossians 1:26

It’s what missiologist Lesslie Newbigin called “the open secret”—open in that it is preached openly throughout the world; secret in that it is revealed only through the eyes of faith.² It’s what Paul has been talking about in Ephesians 2. So when he begins today’s passage with “For this reason,” he is referring back to these things.³ And what’s in his heart—which is so relevant to our situation today—is that God’s people would not lose heart.

¹ *Unsolved Mysteries*, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0094574/>

² Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995)

³ Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), Loc 4844

1) Do Not Lose Heart—the Mystery is Revealed - vv. 1-6

That brings us to his first reason: do not lose heart—the mystery is revealed. Read with me in verse 1:

For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles— Ephesians 3:1

What Paul begins here, he actually will not continue until verse 14, and next week's sermon. Yes, that means today, in its entirety, is a digression. Now we all know what it can be like when a preacher goes down a rabbit trail! But this is a really important rabbit trail. What seems to have distracted Paul is his current situation, and how that might be discouraging to the Ephesian believers.

We might think, 'How in the world could they be discouraged?! They've been soaking in the gospel!' Well, maybe it's for similar reasons that we find *ourselves* discouraged. We've been soaking in the gospel throughout this crisis, but there are still moments where we lose heart. It's like two contrasting realities:

- We are seated with Christ in heavenly realms—but we can only leave our house for essential travel.
- We are united forever to the universal body of Christ—but we can only come within six feet of them.

Here were the contrasting realities for the Ephesians:

- Paul was their trusted authority—but he was writing them from a Roman prison.
- Paul was their beloved apostle—but he was suffering for their sake.

In East Africa I watched over and over as persecution fell on an individual believer, they were usually emboldened by the Spirit and the privilege of suffering for Christ. But when persecution landed on those whom they had led to Christ, especially their family, it nearly drained the life out of them. There's something especially discouraging about watching someone you love suffer—and even more so when you have something to do with that suffering.⁴

⁴ Arnold, Loc 5367

The Ephesians may have been disheartened by this contrast. So Paul continues in verse 2,

² assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, Ephesians 3:2

His statement here is a little bit lost in translation, partly because he leaves it hanging until verse 13. The idea is, 'If you remember my stewardship of God's' grace, then (verse 13) do not lose heart.' It's like he's saying, 'I know you might be conflicted in mind and burdened in heart because I'm rotting in jail, but I'm not throwing a pity-party for myself—I'm humbled to be God's *steward* for you.'⁵

Now a steward is someone who manages someone else's property. Ephesians 2 has told us that God's people are like a household; and so Paul is a steward of God's household—he manages the church with a message of grace.⁶

How did that grace first come to Paul? He says in verse 3,

³ how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. Ephesians 3:3

He doesn't say God's grace came because he was so devout or disciplined or studious; but that it was a mystery made known by revelation. In other words, it was something unknowable that was made known by something beyond himself.

In the days before his conversion you could've preached and pleaded with Paul *to the death*, and nothing would've dawned on him until *Jesus revealed himself* on the road to Damascus. 1 Corinthians tells us that

¹⁴ The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. 1 Corinthians 2:14

And the same is true for you, and your children, and your neighbors. This is why Paul is constantly praying for us in his letters (just like we talked about last week), because he

⁵ Arnold, Loc 4884

⁶ Arnold, Loc 4903

knows these things will not dawn on us and stick with us unless Jesus reveals them to us.⁷ We are totally dependent!

And that's why we know Paul isn't bragging when he says in verse 4,

⁴ When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, ⁵ which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. Ephesians 3:4-5

His use of the word "mystery" goes back to the book of Daniel. There, God's Old Testament people were exiled in Babylon, and the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, had a dream that no one could interpret. Yet Daniel cried out for mercy and God revealed it to him. And it turns out the dream was actually a prophecy of a King of Kings. In God's mercy the mystery had been revealed, and the mystery was Christ.⁸

In an even greater way that mystery was then revealed to apostles and prophets like Paul. For him, mercy from the God of heaven came while he was traveling to Damascus to persecute Christians there. Jesus literally revealed himself to (then) Saul in light that blinded him. Paul described it later as the loss of everything.⁹ And it only stopped blinding him when a Christian named Ananias laid his hands on him and he was filled with the Holy Spirit. The mystery had been revealed, and the mystery was Christ.

Yet Paul continues in verse 6,

⁶ 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. Ephesians 3:6

- So is the mystery Christ, or is the mystery the church (one body of people made up of both Jews and Gentiles)? Well, it's both!

A common tool used around the world for sharing the gospel is called C2C - Creation to Christ. In it you basically tell the story of the Bible from creation to Christ—that God created the world perfectly, but humanity rebelled against him; so God chose a people for himself, but they rebelled against him; so eventually God sent his own Son to die for the rebels and rise again, that they might be saved. It's beautiful. Here's my only problem with it: that's not the gospel. God didn't send his Son just to restore individual

⁷ Arnold, Loc 4966

⁸ Daniel 2:1-49; Arnold, Loc 4946, 5171

⁹ Philippians 3:8

rebels to himself. He sent his Son to also restore them to one another. Just think, the scales didn't fall from Paul's eyes until a brother in Christ prayed for him. The gospel is C2C - Creation to Church.

So the mystery is Christ *and* the church. For the Ephesians, their very rights to God depended on this. The same is true for us. While the rest of the world is putting their hope in everything getting back to normal, you already know there is far greater hope than that. Therefore do not lose heart, church—the mystery is revealed.

2) Do Not Lose Heart—the Mystery is Glorious - vv. 7-13

This brings us to Paul's second reason to not lose heart: that the mystery is glorious. Earlier this week, seemingly out of nowhere, I exploded with anger toward my household. I yelled at Katie in front of my girls and then stomped out of the room. It was awful. And even after repenting and reconciling with everyone, there was this question that hung over my head all week: how can you call yourself a pastor? You're supposed to be the example. And you know the only way I was able to answer that question? By these same words in verse 7:

⁷ 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. Ephesians 3:7

I wasn't called and I'm not sustained by my performance, but by his grace; his grace that gives me the power to repent and believe and change.

I think Paul can digress for so long because he was captivated by this same grace. He never seems to view the responsibility of stewarding this mystery apart from the ridiculous grace by which it came to him. He says in verse 8,

⁸ 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, ⁹ and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, Ephesians 3:8-9

To get his point across here Paul creates a whole new word. It's not enough to describe himself as the "least"—so he adds an ending to the word that would translate something like "leaster". Now this is not an ancient humble brag. What he's honestly referring to is this: if you took an accounting of the whole world in the days when the church was first established, and you looked for:

- the most *unlikely* person to become a Christian
- the most *unworthy* recipient of God's grace
- the most *unexpected* preacher of the gospel

by far, without question, it would have been Saul of Tarsus. This was the guy named after Israel's first big and impressive-looking king, Saul. And to express just how big and impressive he was, Saul of Tarsus led the persecution of the early church. His whole life was about measuring up to God, higher than everyone else—especially Christians and Gentiles.

And yet because of the *unlikely, unworthy, unexpected* grace shown him by Jesus, he would eventually cling to the name Paul, which simply means, "small". It would forever be a reminder that there in the dirt of Damascus, big Saul became small Paul.¹⁰

And it would forever be a reminder to the whole church, to both Jews and Gentiles, *to us*, how gracious our God is. Because Paul wasn't just called to be a Christian or a preacher, but the person through whom God would fully reveal his mystery of Christ and the church, of Jews and Gentiles in the same body. You see, Paul was in prison not just because he preached the way to God was only through Jesus Christ, but because he proclaimed *equal rights* to God through Jesus Christ¹¹; such that, verse 10,

¹⁰ so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. Ephesians 3:10

Well this just took an interesting turn. The mystery is revealed not only before "Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel"¹² as Jesus said to Paul at his conversion, but to rulers and authorities in heavenly places. It might be helpful to think of it like a cosmic theater:

- In the audience are angelic and demonic beings.
- On the stage is the church.
- And the drama we're acting out is the perfectly written script of God.¹³

¹⁰ Hughes, Loc 1705; Arnold, Loc 5129; Bryan Chapell, "Living Stones: Bound for Glory, Ephesians 3:1-13," <https://www.bryanchapell.com/blog/living-stones-bound-for-glory>

¹¹ Francis Foulkes, *Ephesians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: IVP, 1989), 106-107

¹² Acts 9:15

¹³ Hughes, Loc 1748

And the more it plays out, the more it displays the manifold wisdom of God, which literally means the “multi-colored” wisdom of God.¹⁴ In a world of desert brown, God’s wisdom is like Joseph’s coat of many colors—beautiful, awe-inspiring, a picture of gracious favor, and yet invoking jealousy and hatred among those who reject such grace. When we look upon the church through the lens of this grace, and stand in awe of God’s multi-colored wisdom, we can cry out with David,

³ As for the saints in the land, they are the excellent ones, in whom is all my delight.
Psalm 16:3

And we can rightly lament this season of being separated from one another; and we can endure yet another zoom call and another livestream if that’s what it takes to be with God’s people right now.

And if we are tempted to get the mystery out of balance by putting too much emphasis on the church, or by aiming our gratitude mainly toward Paul, he reminds us,

¹¹ This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, ¹² in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him.
Ephesians 3:11-12

Multiple times throughout my day I have to say to my daughters, “I’m sorry, daddy can’t play with you right now, I’m working.” But let us not forget that is never how we’re turned away from the throne of our Father. Because Jesus Christ came to fulfill the Father’s plan from before the world was made, not as a big and impressive-looking king unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but as one who in every respect was tempted as we are, yet was without sin; and because he measured up to God and yet still chose to die in our place, so that in his rising he could apply his relationship with God to us who believe, we can now draw near to the throne of grace with confidence.¹⁵ We have as equal rights to God as the greatest saints in history. His door is always open.

¹³ So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory.
Ephesians 3:13

He finishes his rabbit trail where he started it, urging the Ephesians to not lose heart. But this conclusion shows us the message isn’t just, “Don’t be discouraged,” but also,

¹⁴ Hughes, Loc 1770

¹⁵ Hebrews 4:14-16

“Glory (or take pleasure) in these things.”¹⁶ What Jesus suffered to accomplish for you, and what Paul suffered to apply equally to you, this isn’t your shame, it’s your glory. They were glad to bear it, so may you be glad to receive it. Do not lose heart, church, the mystery is glorious.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, discouragement has a way of blinding our eyes to the truth. In his book *The Screwtape Letters* by C.S. Lewis (which you can listen to for free on Audible right now by the way), he writes from the perspective of a demon named Screwtape as he seeks to discourage the faith of a Christian. At the end of the book, when that Christian dies, as his body is being lifted up from the earth almost like the scene of an alien abduction, Screwtape describes it like this:

[We] have let a soul slip through [our] fingers...It makes me mad to think of it. How well I know what happened at the instant [the angels] snatched him from [us]. There was a sudden clearing of his eyes, was there not, as he saw [us] for the first time, and recognized the part [we] had had in him, and knew that [we] had it no longer. Just think...what he felt at that moment...sheer instantaneous liberation. One moment it seemed to be all our world...next moment all this was gone, gone like a bad dream...Did you mark how naturally [he] entered the new life? How all his doubts became in the twinkling of an eye, ridiculous...As he saw [us], he also saw [the angels]...He saw not only them—he saw [Jesus]...[He who] is blinding, suffocating fire to [us]...[this Christian] could look [upon] him.¹⁷

My friends in Christ, what you face in these days is no unsolved mystery. Yes, it is hard to see what’s ahead in this crisis. But keep your eyes on the One who is keeping you, and one day you will see him.

Three small, practical ways to keep from losing heart based on today’s passage:

- Gratitude - As you experience discouragement, intentionally recount to yourself and to God what you’re grateful for. This is how we glory in the gospel that gives meaning to suffering.

¹⁶ Foulkes, 106-107

¹⁷ C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*,

https://stories.audible.com/pdp/B002V8DJ16?ref=adbl_ent_anon_ds_pdp_pc_cntr-4-0

- Confession - As you experience discouragement, intentionally release the rawness of your struggle to community. This is how we glory in the gospel that unites us to one another.
- Stewardship - As you experience discouragement, intentionally reveal the mystery to those for whom it is still unsolved. This is how we glory in the gospel that gives us such privilege.

And my friends who are not in Christ, may God use this message, before the day in which you are laid in the dirt and lifted up from the earth, to open your eyes to his mystery, so that you may turn from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that you may receive the forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are changed by faith in Christ.¹⁸ As I pray for you now, would you pray for yourself? Let's pray.

¹⁸ Acts 26:18

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