

Everyone Loves a Good Mystery

Ephesians 3:1-13

July 11, 2010

Hoyt Byrum

I would love to have a dollar for every time in my life that I have said to myself or out loud, “I don’t have a clue.” Some things are just a mystery to me. I was never drawn to the world of science, such as chemistry or physics, and so much of the world I can’t explain because I don’t have a clue about how it all holds together. But from a theological point of view I do have some understanding. The world is held together by God and should he decide to bring this world to an end tomorrow, it would cease to exist.

There is another cultural way of thinking about the word “clue.” It was a game I played with my family as a child and as a parent with my children. You know the game. There is a mystery to solve and at some point in the game someone says something like, “I’d like to solve the mystery. I believe the crime was committed by the butler in the parlor using the knife.” It wasn’t too long ago that Diane and I were invited to a “mystery dinner” where we were assigned a character and we came to the dinner in an appropriate costume for that character and throughout the evening we were given clues related to “who done it” and in the end we had to “solve the mystery” with our best detective eyes on. On that night neither Diane nor I got it right.

Paul, in his letter to the Ephesian church, is boldly declaring that the mystery of God has been solved and he has been selected as the privileged one to reveal to the world the truth about God, a God who has been somewhat mysterious until now.

The first three chapters of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians Paul discloses the incredible theology of grace that invites all into the kingdom. In chapter 3 he begins to “wind down” the message and will soon transition into a beautiful prayer that asks God to help his readers understand what he has disclosed to them. And then, starting in chapter 4 Paul shifts to emphasizing lifestyle that emanates from the theology explained in Ephesians 1-3. So, let’s look at the first part of Chapter 3 to see how Paul brings his theological thoughts to a close.

3:1 For this reason, I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus, for the sake of you Gentiles.

For what reason? The reason Paul is referring to here in verse one is what he has been driving at for the first two chapters – unity in the body of Christ. He has been saying that in the church we are to be: one body, one spirit, fellow citizens, built together for God’s habitation and the dividing wall between people groups has now been torn down. So Paul has a deep understanding of his purpose in life – not to uphold the law as a Pharisee – but to make sure that the Jews and the Gentiles understand that the eternal plan of God is to graft the Gentiles into the vine just as the Jews are also branches that are joined to the same vine.

Paul, in verse one and in the following twelve verses, shares his own sense of identity within the body of Christ. Here in verse one he identifies himself as the “prisoner of Jesus Christ”. Most readers probably assumed that Paul was a prisoner of the Romans since he was incarcerated in a Roman prison when he wrote this letter but Paul says, “No, I am a prisoner of Christ Jesus – he has taken me captive and I am chained to him.”

3:2-13 These verses are somewhat of a parenthesis. He wants to pray for the readers of this epistle but he must pause first and insert some personal information before he prays. So let’s look at these “wrap-up” thoughts and next week we will look at his prayer.

3:2 Surely you have heard about the administration of God’s grace that was given to me for you,

Paul views all of life from a stewardship point of view. Whatever he has he has received from God and it is not for his own pleasure, it is to serve a purpose in other people's lives. Here he says God has given him grace and it is his responsibility to administer that grace to the Gentiles. Paul has certainly benefited from God's grace but his greatest joy and duty is to give it away. What is it that God has given to you that you need to say to yourself what Paul has said here in verse 2: *"I am the administrator of X, Y, or Z that has been given to me for the purpose of passing it on to you?"*

3:3 that is the mystery made known to me by revelation as I have already written briefly.

Here in verse 3 Paul introduces us to the word "mystery." Paul says that it is due to revelation that he has insight into the mystery of God. It isn't his superior intellect, or his extensive education that has opened the door to the mystery of God. It was God who chose to reveal to him the things of God so God gets all the credit.

I have marveled at how God continues to bring revelation to people and until He does, the minds of so many remain darkened. No amount of logic, preaching, or arguing can break through a person's darkness unless God does so through His Spirit. When a person "gets it" I often hear the person say something like, "Why didn't you share this good news with me earlier?" And I often take them to previous sermons I have delivered, ones they "heard" and say, "I've shared the good news before but God hadn't opened your understanding to it until now." God is in control of the mystery; Paul was a steward of it.

3:4 In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ,

This is what we seek this morning, an understanding into Paul's insight into the mystery of Christ. Just so we don't miss the marvelous truth that Paul is revealing, let me return to chapter 2 and capture the essence of the gospel, the mystery of God.

1. We are saved from sin – 2:1-3
2. We are saved by love – 2:4
3. We are saved into life – 2:5,6
4. We are saved with purpose – 2:7
5. We are saved through faith – 2:8,9
6. We are saved unto works – 2:10

If you haven't grasped this good news, I urge you to return to chapter 2 and contemplate these six aspects of salvation that Paul has written about and ask God for revelation, an understanding that comes from Him.

3:5 which was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit of God to God's holy apostles and prophets.

There are some mysteries that God will not reveal to anyone at any time. Only He retains the truth.

"The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law." Deuteronomy 29:29

Some mysteries, or secrets, God has revealed only to special people in times past, things revealed to the prophets and the people of Israel. On the other hand, some of God's secrets were kept from the people of God until the church age, the time we are now living in. It is through the Church that God wants all people to come to know him, Jew and Gentile, male and female.

3:6 This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.

The Jews who preceded the Church age knew that the gospel would eventually be shared with the Gentiles but they never dreamed that the Gentiles would be equal with the Jews in the eyes of God – a oneness they never understood or wanted. This whole idea that Jews and Gentiles would be one body was unbelievably radical when Paul was declaring this to be true. He was rejected by his fellow Pharisees and imprisoned over and over again for such blasphemy. We need to truly appreciate how essential this idea of oneness is for all who are in Christ and the price Paul paid to bring this mystery into the open so the Spirit of God could reveal it through those who proclaim it. A real test of our comprehension of the mystery of God is our contribution to the oneness of all who are in Christ. Are we truly reflective of this oneness? Are we inclusive, welcoming all? This, of course, was on the heart of Jesus when he prayed his high priestly prayer in John 17:

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. John 17:20-21

3:7 I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power.

Here we see **Paul's Call** – he was made a servant of the gospel – a minister of the good news of God. Acts 9:1-16 tells the story of how this calling came upon Paul when he was least expecting it. That's part of the mystery of the working of God – when we least expect it and often when we least deserve it, we receive our calling to belong to Him and to serve the good news He desires to proclaim.

3:8 Although I am less than the least of all the Lord's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ,

Here we see **Paul's identity** and **Paul's Purpose**. Paul's identity: the least of the people of God. Paul's Purpose: to preach the good news. Paul, before his conversion, had a very high position and a high ego.

I myself have reasons for such confidence. If others think they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee;

as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless. Philippians 3:4-7

It takes a pretty strong ego to say, "As far as righteousness based on keeping the entire law – my life is flawless." But when God does a work in one's heart, all sense of self-righteousness falls away. God may call that person to positions of significance but the true follower of Christ understands that such positions, or such great responsibilities, are not given to us because of our greatness, but because of God's great grace. There is an inverse relationship between true spiritual greatness and a true sense of unworthiness. Oh that we all might strive for greatness in terms of spiritual fruit but remain in the spirit of Paul, "I am the least of all the Lord's people."

3:9 and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things.

Here we see **Paul's Message**: to bring to light the unfathomable riches of Christ. He has done that in the first two chapters of this letter.

1:3 God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places – in Christ.

1:7 We have the forgiveness of our trespasses according to the riches of His grace.

1:8 His riches he has lavished upon us.

1:19 We can know the surpassing greatness of His power.

2:19 We are no longer strangers and aliens, but we are now fellow citizens with the saints and are of God's household.

This is Paul's message only because it was always God's message, now revealed to him and to us through him. He is a preacher of the gospel and for Paul, he says he preaches "Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." 1 Corinthians 1:23

With the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, and the glorious resurrection of God's son, that which was promised centuries past was now a reality. It is no longer hidden. It is no longer a promise. It is a reality.

3:10 His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms,

This is why Paul said that these riches have been hidden until now – the church had not yet been formed and the administration of God's graces would be distributed through His bride, the Church. And Paul was the privileged one to be the trumpeter who sounded the call – all can come to God through Jesus Christ in the same way. No distinctions, no limitations.

3:11 according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Paul has in incredible sense that his life is being lived according to a purpose that was designed from all eternity. Nothing in his life has been left to chance. The purpose to redeem people from their slavery to sin and into an inheritance that is glorious and kept in heaven for them has always been accomplished in Christ Jesus and from all eternity, before the world began, God has chosen to call people into a life-giving relationship through faith in His Son. But now, this eternal purpose has been revealed to all. What an incredible understanding Paul must have had that he was the one to whom God would instruct the Jews and welcome the Jews into this glorious gospel: all people equal in the sight of God and one in the body of Christ, the Church.

3:12 In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.

Here Paul is transitioning to his prayer which demonstrates the truth of this word – that we can approach the throne of grace boldly and with confidence because God is a welcoming God, not an angry God. It is not enough to have boldness if we do not have access to God. And it is not enough to have access to God if we do not come. But Paul says we have both the freedom and the confidence to come into the very presence of the one who has made us and who knows us. Never too busy for us; never too disappointed with us; never too distant from us – incredible!

3:13 I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.

Paul says to his readers, "Don't get discouraged because of my sufferings." Why? Because his sufferings were part of the deal but not such a big deal that it stole his joy from being the one to disclose the mystery of God! Because Paul knew his calling and his identity and his purpose and his message, he lived a life of confidence and freedom that no amount of suffering for this great cause could dampen his spirit. And for all who got it – who understood that the plan of God for redeeming the people of God was accomplished through Jesus Christ – it truly was their glory and no earthly struggle compared with the incomparable riches of knowing Christ.

So, having said all of this, which side of the mystery are you on? Are you still wondering about the things of God or are you living with freedom and confidence that you are "the thing of God" – His redeemed child. Are you conscious of your calling, your identity, your purpose and your message? Paul knew that only God could reveal that to others and that is why he moves into an incredible prayer to close Chapter 3, which we will look at next week. God bless. Amen

