

Manifesting the Manifold Wisdom of God
The Mystery of the Gospel (Ephesians 3:1-13)
Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on February 21, 2016

Introduction

- ❖ If you're just joining us for the first time, we've been walking through the Apostle Paul's letter to the Ephesians, and we've come to a section that doesn't get much attention. You're probably not going to hear too many sermons on this passage or do many bible studies on it. That's because it's really a digression. It's a deviation, an excursus. He's going off-topic.
 - In chapter 2, Paul just finished recounting how God graciously treats sinners better than their sins deserve, with great love and kindness. So that even when we were dead in our sins, he made us alive together with Christ (cf. 2:1-10).
 - **But not only did he make alive dead souls in Christ, God brought together divided peoples in Christ.** He reconciled Jews and Gentiles by reconciling both to himself, by creating in himself a singular new humanity. A multiethnic, multicultural, multinational family that God loves. A temple that God lives in. That's the Church (cf. 2:11-22).

- ❖ **And now in chapter 3, Paul wants to offer a prayer for the Church, particularly the local church he's writing to.** He starts in v1, "*For this reason [in light of all the gospel truths unpacked in chapter 2] I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles—*". Paul is about to pray but suddenly trails off. He digresses for twelve verses. And then picks right back up in v14, "*For this reason I bow my knees before the Father*".
 - So because our passage is essentially a side note, it often gets overlooked. But that's unfortunate because, in these verses, we're taught a lesson that carries a much larger significance than you probably think. It's bigger than you. It's bigger than us. It's even bigger than this world. **There's a cosmic significance in these verses.** The full import of this passage reverberates through the cosmos.
 - To miss this is a tragedy. To miss this is to resign ourselves to small-minded thoughts of God and the gospel. Our faith grows more myopic and zeroed in on ourselves and our own concerns. **Ironically it takes a digression like this to bring us back on track with God's plan, with what he's doing in the Church, in the world, in all things in all of reality.**

- ❖ So what is it? What's this plan? Well it's a mystery. That's how Paul describes it (vv. 3, 4, 9). This morning we're going to break down this passage in three sections: **1)** The mystery unravelled, **2)** the mystery embodied, and **3)** the mystery manifested.

The Mystery Unravelled

- ❖ Let's begin with our first point: The mystery unravelled. Start reading with me at v1, "*For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner for 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.*"
 - **So what prompted Paul to go off on this tangent?** He's about to pray for the Ephesians and makes reference to himself and to the fact that he's presently incarcerated. He's a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of the Gentiles.

- ❖ Understanding the historical context is important here. **He's under house arrest in Rome awaiting trial before Caesar himself.** Why he was arrested and how he ended up in Rome is recorded for us in detail in Acts 21-28. And there we learn that his initial arrest was occasioned by a riot in Jerusalem instigated by Pharisaical Jews who opposed Paul's teaching that Jew and Gentile could – not just be friends – but be brothers if they both come to Jesus.
 - So it's true. He is a prisoner for the sake of Christ, on behalf of his apostleship to the Gentiles. **And suddenly Paul realizes that his suffering could be a cause for concern.** The Ephesians could lose heart at the thought that he, of all people, is in chains. What's to become of us? Why would God let this happen to Paul? What if it happens to us? Look at how Paul ends this section in v13, "*So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory.*"

- ❖ **So lest they lose heart at Paul's suffering, he feels it necessary to digress and to remind them that his suffering is not a sign of failure.** It doesn't mean God has abandoned him. No, his suffering simply comes with the territory. It comes with the calling. **He's been called to faithfully steward a very precious treasure called the gospel.** But in v3, Paul has another way of describing it. He calls it a mystery.
 - Now that word *mystery* needs to be further defined because it's not the kind of mystery you have in mind. We tend to think of a mystery novel where there's some sort of hidden puzzle that needs to be solved by applying your intellect and wit.
 - **Well the way the word *mystery* is used the NT is similar in that it's something hidden, but the key difference is that it's a hidden truth you would never piece together, you'd never solve.** It's so surprising, so counterintuitive, that you'd never get it – unless the mystery was divinely and graciously revealed to you.

- ❖ In Paul's day, there were plenty of mystery religions (cults) centered on esoteric knowledge. Where only intellectuals – only a small class of the elites – were privy to the secret of salvation. It was very exclusive, very elitist.
 - But that's not how Paul viewed Christianity. Yes, we're dealing with hidden knowledge. He says in v5 that the mystery of Christ, "*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.*" (cf. 3:9)
 - So the mystery of Christ was once a secret, but now it's been revealed by the Spirit, to apostles and prophets who have recorded it in Scripture. **So now it's an open secret intended to be shared and proclaimed to all who will hear.**

- ❖ If you think about it, there's a huge implication for our evangelism. **This means you don't become a Christian by applying your intellect to figuring out the gospel.** It's not a puzzle you need to solve before you're ready to become a Christian. A number of our college students are going out later today on the Rice campus to engage their peers who have previously submitted questions about the gospel, Christianity, or the Bible in general. I think it's a worthy and valuable effort to outreach.

- ❖ **But students, just remember that no one thinks their way into the kingdom of God.** The salvation of your peers does not hinge on your ability to help them intellectually unravel the mysteries of the faith.
 - **The mystery of Christ is now an open secret laid bare in the pages of Scripture.** Your prayer should not be, “Lord, may I have all the answers to their puzzling questions so they can figure you out.” No, instead pray, “Lord, may I have the courage to clearly communicate the mystery of Christ as revealed to me in your Word, so that you might save, by grace alone, this classmate of mine.” That’ll take a huge burden off you. There’s no mystery to solve. Just one to share.

- ❖ ***So what exactly is this mystery?*** What has already been revealed? The answer is in v6. This is the mystery unravelled: *“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.”*
 - It’s essentially a summary of what Paul unpacked in the second half of chapter 2. **The mystery is God’s work through Christ to create a new society, a new humanity, out of *not just diverse groups of people – but alienated and hostile groups of people.*** People who are at each other’s throats.

- ❖ **By reconciling us to himself through the cross of Christ, God is able to reconcile us to each other.** In other words, through union with Christ, Jews and Gentiles are united with each other, and together we have equal access to our one heavenly Father.
 - In v6, Paul has three different ways of describing our unity. We’re **fellow heirs** of the inheritance of Christ (cf. 1:11). We’re **fellow members of the same body**, the body of Christ who is our head (cf. 1:22-23). And we’re **fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus**. Meaning even the Gentiles can be recipients of the OT covenants of promise which find their fulfillment in Jesus the Christ, the Jewish Messiah (cf. 2:12).

- ❖ Now by the end of v6 and into v7, this mystery of Christ is essentially equated with the gospel. V7 says, *“⁷Of 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.”* **So to have the gospel revealed to himself was God’s grace and so too is the responsibility to minister that same gospel to others.** To preach it to others. Gospel revelation and gospel responsibility are gifts of God’s grace.

- ❖ Keep reading in v8, *“⁸To 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, ⁹and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things”*.
 - **Paul is keenly aware that he’s the least likely candidate to become a minister and preacher of the gospel.** He hasn’t forgotten nor has he hidden the fact that he was once the chief prosecutor and persecutor of the Church (cf. 1 Cor. 15:9; 1 Tim. 1:13-16). So making him an apostle to the Gentiles seems ridiculous. Makes no sense.
 - It’s like appointing Bernie Madoff to chair the Federal Reserve or choosing Lance Armstrong to head the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency. That’s crazy. They’re totally unqualified. Just look at their history, their past.

- ❖ It's the same with Paul. He has a sordid and shameful past. **He has a history of prejudice and violence that should disqualify him.** BUT GOD. God's grace interrupted Paul's life and radically changed the course of it – as it changed him into a new creation, a new man.
 - It was grace that covered his sordid past with the blood of Jesus. His history no longer stood to condemn and disqualify him. So it was never too late for him to be used by God to do a mighty work for the cause of Christ. **He had never (and could never) have gone too far for God's grace to reach him.**

- ❖ In Tokyo, in 1918, a hardened criminal by the name of **Tokichi Ichii** was hanged for murder. He had been imprisoned more than twenty times in the past. On one occasion, after attacking a prison guard, he was gagged, bound, and hung from the ceiling so that his toes barely touched the ground till he apologized. He never did.
 - Before his sentencing, he received a New Testament from two missionary women. They visited him regularly to read from the Gospels, and he was struck by the mercy of Jesus to forgive his executioners as he hung on the cross. Soon after, he came to know Christ and this same mercy for himself.

- ❖ So when Tokichi was finally sentenced to death, he accepted it as *"the fair, impartial judgment of God."* Nearing his death, one of the women directed him to the words of 2 Corinthians 6:8-10 concerning the suffering of the righteous. He was particularly moved by the words, "As poor, yet making many rich."
 - He wrote these words, "[The phrase "As poor, yet making many rich"] *certainly does not apply to the evil life I led before I repented. But perhaps in the future, someone in the world may hear that the most desperate villain that ever lived repented of his sins and was saved by the power of Christ, and so may come to repent also. Then it may be that though I am poor myself, I shall be able to make many rich.*"

- ❖ If God's grace was able to reach a man who called himself, "the most desperate villain that ever lived" and a man who called himself the chief of sinners, the very least of all the saints – men who could make a good case to back those claims – then God's grace can reach anyone.
 - **I don't care what's in your past, it doesn't matter what you did or what was done to you, the point is – God's grace is available to you in the present.** Your past (no matter how bad it is), your history (no matter how shameful it may be) has not moved you beyond God's reach to save you and change you, to make you his workmanship, to recreate you for good works prepared beforehand for you to walk in (cf. 2:10).

The Mystery Embodied

- ❖ This won't make any sense to the world. It's counterintuitive. **What makes sense is that only good people who try to live good lives get good things from God and get to do even greater things for God.** So for bad people to get good things and do great things for God, it baffles us. It puzzles the non-believing world. But that's what you'd expect mysteries do. They cause you to scratch your head.

- ❖ That leads to our second point: the mystery embodied. I said it last week and will say it again, I believe what really ought to cause the world to scratch its collective head is the Church, when they look at the Church. **Because the body of Christ is the mystery of Christ embodied. The Church is the gospel made visible.**
 - We often leave the gospel as a set of abstract principles and propositions. And then it's hard for non-Christians to grasp. It's too theoretical. **We tell people the gospel (good news of Christianity) is of how God saves sinners, dead in their trespasses, by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone** (cf. 2:1-10). That sounds great, but it's hard for the world to get that unless we give them a picture of that.
 - That's the Church's job – to embody this truth. To make it visible. That's what Paul says in v10, “*so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known*”.

- ❖ When Paul says the church makes known the mystery of Christ (or as it says here, “*the manifold wisdom of God*”), he's not saying we do that through our evangelism, or community service, or any particular activity. No, it happens by our very existence as the Church, our very makeup, who we are. We embody this mystery of Christ, this gospel.
 - **It's been said that the church is not a museum for saints but a hospital for sinners.** But if we, as a church, give off the impression that to be a part of us you have to have your life together, that you first have to clean up your mess, then that's the message we're embodying – we're a museum for saints. And that's what a lot of people think the Church is – a place where only good people congregate.

- ❖ But when the church begins to operate like a hospital for sinners – a kind of hospital where even the doctors and nurses are sick and equally in need of healing and salvation – then the world will begin to scratch their heads and wonder, “*What kind of place is this? I thought it was a place for perfect people.*” No, this is a place for reborn people, dead people made alive together with Christ by the sheer grace of God.
 - Church, what kind of message do we embody? **What kind of impression are we giving off to our non-believing neighbors and friends?** By looking at us, do they get the impression that they have to clean up their lives first before they can join us? Or can they come as they are (dead as they are) and find a loving community that not only preaches but embodies the mystery of Christ, the gospel of grace?

- ❖ Paul says in v10 that God's plan, from the beginning, was to make known his manifold wisdom through the church. That word for “manifold” (*polupoikilos*) is pretty interesting. It literally means *many-colored*. It was used to describe flowers or woven carpets and tapestries. A derivative of that word is used in the Greek OT to describe Joseph's coat of many colors, his coat of *manifold* colors.
 - **Joseph's coat was described as so beautiful – not because of its monochrome sameness – but its manifold diversity.** The point here is that the beauty of God's manifold wisdom is made visible when diametrically diverse peoples, who come from a wide range of colorful backgrounds, are brought together in one body.

- ❖ This is why we should embrace and embody diversity in our church. Not because it's the "in" thing to do. Not because we're trying to retain millennials. **No, we pursue and pray for diversity because we want to see more of God, more of God's manifold wisdom.**
 - We don't want to be a church where everyone is largely the same. Because that won't lead to any heads being scratched. That's not a mystery to anyone. **Everyone loves being in a community where everyone else is largely the same as you.** That's human wisdom. But God's wisdom, his manifold wisdom, is found in diverse communities that are united in one Lord, one faith, one baptism.
 - Just as we can't help but praise the artist when we see a beautiful tapestry of shapes and colors, people can't help but praise God when they see a church that embraces and embodies diversity in all forms.

- ❖ This is why committing yourself to a local church and using your diverse gifts to serve one another is so critical to the Christian life. God's plan to make his gospel visible and bring praise to his manifold wisdom is *through the local church*. Not you, the individual Christian.
 - **You and I are like individual pieces of a stained glass window.** By ourselves, we're rough and jagged around the edges. We're not much use for anything alone. **But if placed together with other rough and jagged pieces, we're a sight to behold.**

- ❖ Think about what this means. **If you're trying to show the non-Christians in your life more of God, you're selling them short if you're the only Christian friend they really have.** For them to really see the beauty of God's manifold wisdom in the gospel, they need to be exposed to Christian community, to the local church. Because it's only *through the church* – not through the Christian – that God's manifold wisdom is made known.
 - This is why inviting seekers to youth group, to small group, to church on Sundays is so vital to our evangelism. But of course this means we need to be mindful of what they'll encounter if and when they show up. ***Will they see a display of monochrome sameness or a tapestry of God's manifold wisdom?***
 - Ultimately that's something God will bring about, but it doesn't mean we just sit on our hands. We have to assess and identify what hinders greater diversity in our church, and then make the necessary sacrifices of comfort and convenience – for the sake of building a community that more resembles a tapestry of manifold diversity.

The Mystery Manifested

- ❖ That's God's will for us. His plan. His eternal purpose. Let me read v10 again, "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. ¹¹This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord*".
 - Let's conclude with our third point: the mystery manifested. Here's a question to ask: **Clearly the church is God's eternal purpose to manifest his manifold wisdom, but who are we manifesting this reality to?** Who's the audience according to Paul?

- ❖ It says, "*to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.*" Some think Paul's talking about worldly rulers, kings and queens. **But in the context of Ephesians, Paul uses "rulers and authorities" to refer to spiritual forces, to angelic beings, good and bad.**
 - For example, look at chapter 6:12. Paul says, "*For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.*"

- ❖ So what Paul's saying is that God's eternal purpose, his plan from before the foundation of the world, was to reconcile in Christ a divided and sinful humanity to himself and to each other – and this drama of redemption is to be acted out.
 - **We, as church members, are the actors, the church is the stage, and the angelic beings in the heavenly places are the audience.** So we're doing church, manifesting the manifold wisdom of God, for the viewing pleasure of angels and demons.

- ❖ Now I know what you might be thinking. *What's the point of that?* Why would God spend thousands of years carefully carrying out this intricate drama of redemption that involved the sacrifice and death of his own Beloved Son – for an audience of angels? Why? And why is Paul telling us that? What does that have to do with us?
 - Well who said it had to do with us? **Sometimes it takes a verse like v10 to confront the humanistic tendency in all of us to read to Bible as if it were a book about us.** And to hear the gospel as if it were a story about us. But it's not. The drama of redemption certainly involves us. But we're not principally the audience. We're principally the actors. And I'm not suggesting that it's all about the audience, the angelic realm. **No, it's all about God, the writer, director, and producer.**

- ❖ We're told that angels and demons are not omniscient creatures. As God's plan of redemption for this world and for us creatures uniquely made in his image – as it's been unfolding over the centuries – **the angels and demons have been curiously and longingly looking to see where the plot would go, how the story would progress** (cf. 1 Pet. 1:12).
 - And now with the death and resurrection of Israel's Messiah; with the reconciliation of God's people to himself by a work of grace; and now the inclusion of the Gentiles, along with Israel, into the one body of Christ – a powerful message has been sent.

- ❖ The devil and all his forces are reminded that a decisive victory has been won. **The very existence of the Church – as it persists throughout the centuries as a diverse body unified by the gospel – is a stark reminder to "the spiritual forces of evil" that they lost** – that their authority is broken, that their final defeat is inevitable.
 - **That's why the church exists: For God to stick it to Satan.** For God to glorify himself, to exalt his Son as head over all things, to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of the cross (Col. 1:20).
 - **Let's be clear: This – doing church, being the church – it's all about God.** I think it's great that a digression like this passage help get us back on track with God's eternal purposes, to remember what and who it's all about.