

Gospel Conviction: *It's no secret*
Ephesians 3:1-6

"This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs...in Christ Jesus through the gospel."

Introduction: Everyone likes a good mystery. Growing up we used to read The Hardy Boys, the adventures of teenage boys Frank and Joe as they would live normal lives but solve extraordinary crimes or mysteries by courage, wit, and shrewdness (Nancy Drew had to do all of this alone!). Each story was filled with intrigue, tension, and like every good puzzle, the payoff of discovery in the end. Mystery can hold your attention but ultimately drives you to a conclusion, a resolution of dissonance, and the satisfying "AHA" moments (I knew it! 'no way it was old Mr. Smith!'..." I didn't even see that one coming!"). Mysteries are useful when they are solved, when secrets are eventually revealed.

We've been talking for a few weeks about the unity of God's church, birthed in the gospel and grown through the embrace of a reconciled life together. For us today, understanding who we are in God's church is imperative to maintain unity together in order to accomplish the mission God has left us, both in growth in holiness and making disciples. But the unity of the church in the gospel was pictured primarily in the **oneness and unity of Jews and Gentiles in the church**. This creates some tension for us since we have not felt or lived the effects of the tension between these two groups, which can unfortunately diminish our awe of the greatness of the power of the gospel itself. But this reality of unity was a true **mystery, a secret hidden for centuries with only the most subtle of Easter Eggs to discern the answers until Jesus came, died, and rose again**. Now, it's important to understand not only why God uses mystery, but more importantly to understand the God behind the mystery.

Why and how does God use mystery in the Bible?

- **God uses mystery because some things are not for us to know** – One of the things that I've learned as a parent is that we are truthful about everything, but my kids are not always ready for certain realities. Some information, even if given, would not be comprehended, or understood, or be helpful. There are certain things about God and why He does things that are simply understood by us as "**He is God and we are not**". His thoughts and ways are higher than ours (Isa. 55:8-9) and some things He's given to us (and what He has given to us is sufficient) by revelation, while others he keeps hidden from us (Deut. 29:29). This is ultimately a comforting and glorious thought, since God is in control of the unknown, the lingering thoughts we have about the make-up of the universe. If we could figure out all secrets, we'd by definition BE GOD, and if that were the case, we'd be in a hopeless condition. "He is God and we are not" is one of the most hope filled phrases we could ever utter.
- **God uses mystery to reveal enough information for us to walk by FAITH** – We think we'd want to know all mysteries, but the reality is this: the unknown keeps us dependent and functioning in faith, trusting a good God for all things. If we KNEW everything, especially the future, we'd be functioning by sight or works, which means we could not please God (Heb. 11:6). God tells us what will happen in the future, but does not give every bit of information we'd want. We know that a partial hardening has come on Israel, but it will end when the fullness of the Gentiles comes in (Rom. 11:25). When will that be? We know this mystery: "*we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed* (which of course is the theme verse for our nursery ministry) *in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet.*" (1 Cor. 15:51-52a). Again, when will that happen, we do not know, but we can bank on the fact that it WILL.

- **God uses mystery to reveal how sinful man can be reconciled to a holy God** – Perhaps the greatest puzzle to decode in all of human history is just this: how does a holy God deal with the sin of the people He created for His glory? All people for all time have tried to answer that question with man at the center, with human effort and work used to try to appease God. But God is clear about this mystery: *Great indeed, we confess, is the **mystery of Godliness**: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.*” (1 Tim. 3:16). What is the answer to the mystery? CHRIST! He is the mystery revealed (Col. 1:26), proclaimed (Col. 4:3), and made known to the nations (Rom. 16:25).
- **God uses mystery to reveal the glorious nature of His church** – God’s mystery is for us to know when it is revealed (Eph. 1:9). God does not play games or withhold vital information for us to live and have joy. He’s not an author of those terrible stories where the answer to the mystery is that it was all a dream! He makes clear what He wants us to know. What He has revealed in the church is that EVERY BELIEVER, Jew or gentile, male or female, slave or free, rich or poor, barbarian or Greek, is ONE IN CHRIST! If we skip ahead to Ephesians 3:6, we see the answer to the riddle of the church: Gentiles are FELLOW HEIRS, members of the SAME BODY, and PARTAKERS OF THE PROMISE with Jews in Christ through the gospel. If that does not resonate with you this morning, let’s see if we can walk through this text together so that we can understand and feel the immensity of this earth shattering truth.

The Results of Proclaiming the Mystery: Persecution (1)

For this reason, I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles —

Commitment to Repetition

As Paul begins a new section, we should notice a few things. 1) Paul connects what he will say in the coming verses with what he had just finished in the previous. His point in chapter 2 was the fact that Gentiles (non-Jews) were dead individually and hopeless corporately as a people. Individually they were under the wrath of God because of their sin, and corporately were far off from the promise of Messiah, without hope in this world. Now, the Jewish nation was better off in the sense that they were given the promise of Messiah, a Temple, covenants, and a nation. However, all of this simply revealed their abject sin and rejection of God, which meant even though they were near, they were still in need of salvation. **In Christ, by His life, blood shed on the cross, and resurrection**, God not only reconciled both groups to Himself, but tore down the dividing wall between them, putting an end to the system of Judaism and the keeping of the ceremonial Law. The Law was a tutor to show sinfulness and the need of salvation, and Jesus fulfilled the law and offered Himself as the perfect sacrifice for sin itself.

At first glance of chapter 3 it seems like Paul is covering the same ground as he did in chapter 2, and the answer of course, is that is exactly what he is doing! In fact, he’ll say the same thing in Colossians 1:24-28 with only a variance of emphasis. **Why the repetition?!** Repetition is how we learn! Not learning a phrase by rote so we can regurgitate it, but hearing mysteries revealed so that we can know these truths well, see them clearly, love them deeply, so we can live principally. That’s really the goal of preaching, teaching, and reading Scripture, is it not? We do not preach in a bunch of “how-to’s” or situational responses, and we definitely do not want you dependent on us to answer every circumstance you’ll face in your home or work. What we DO want is that you will know God so well, love Christ so completely, and have a clear and full understanding of God’s Word that you will be mature, competent, and ready for every situation. We aspire to principle driven, Lordship living, having God’s Word and Christ as the means and the goal.

Now, note how this first verse sets up. Paul is like most of us: he'll start a phrase and then immediately starts another thought before finishing the first. Anyone have someone in their life that does that. Notice that there is no verb in verse 1, but there is a longing for one. There is one supplied WAY DOWN in verse 14 where he picks the prayer up again. We will see that his prayer was centered on the church knowing and being filled with the knowledge of Christ and fullness of God. But before he prayed, he reiterated these truths once again.

Context of Imprisonment

"I, Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ on behalf of you Gentiles..."

We started this epistle with the understanding that Paul wrote from a prison in Rome. This was no ordinary imprisonment, since he was living in a house, chained to a guard, and able to receive visitors. He was awaiting a trial, and had been waiting for about 5 years at the time of writing, after spending 2 years in a prison in Caesarea (Acts 24:27), several months in transit to Rome, and another two in Rome itself. The question that the Bible answers is this: *why was he in prison in the first place? What was so egregious that a Roman citizen would be locked up for so long?* **The answer: for the VERY TRUTH he articulated in Ephesians 2 and 3.**

After Paul's missionary journeys were completed, he desired to go to Jerusalem, though Agabus the prophet warned him against it (Acts 21:11), predicting that in going to Jerusalem Paul would be bound and delivered over to the Gentiles. But Paul was not easily persuaded, and said he was willing to be imprisoned and even die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus (21:13). This is called foreshadowing. According to **Romans 15:22-33**, we know that Paul had taken up an offering from the churches in Macedonia and Achaia to help the poor in Jerusalem, stating rightly, *"For they were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in the spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessing."* (Rom. 15:27). So, Paul was arriving in Jerusalem with encouragement and help, which should have been reason to rejoice, but that was short lived.

As he arrived in Jerusalem and spent time with the elders and brothers, including James, he began to share all that God had done in his travels, and how God had saved so many among the Gentiles, which lead to **glorifying God** (Acts 21:18-19). But Paul's arrival also caused tension among many Jews, who heard he was telling Jews and Gentiles they no longer had to keep the Law, like circumcision and the customs of the ceremonial law. The counsel was given, because that was the reputation, Paul should participate in a purification ritual in the Temple to show his commitment to the Jews, and Paul, willing to be all things to all men (1 Cor. 9:19-20) to win the more, went through that ritual (Acts 21:26). However, it did not deliver the desired affect. The crowd was stirred up by the Jews from Asia, accusing Paul of teaching against the Law and they brought FALSE charges of him bringing a Greek into the Temple. After beating him, arresting him, and bringing him to the Gentile authorities, Paul gave his testimony and defense, which included his being raised as a committed Jew under the Law, how he was so zealous that he persecuted and killed Christians, how he approved of Stephen's death and martyrdom, and how Jesus revealed Himself to Him on the Damascus Road. But what truly set the crowd into a frenzy: **And He (God) said to me, "Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles."** (Acts 22:21). At this, the crowd raised their voices, shouted, threw off their cloaks, and flung dirt in the air! (Acts 22:23). This was the impetus for Paul's being beaten, trials, and imprisonment. In other words, Paul was willing to repeat the reality of Jews and Gentiles united in the gospel because he was willing to go to prison and death for it!

In our economy, that may not seem like a worthwhile exchange. But let me ask you this: *what would you go to prison for? What realities of the gospel would you be willing to risk telling others if it meant great cost to yourself?* We talked a few weeks ago that Canada has passed a law to potentially imprison someone who would counsel someone in a lifestyle of transgenderism or homosexually to repent and turn to the Lord. *Would that stop us from doing it?* Paul knew that the gospel was both **transformational and convictional**, meaning he knew it was the answer to people's sin and greatest problem, and he BELIEVED it was worth dying for. There are certain times in life where we are confronted as to whether we truly believe this stuff or if it's simply a cultural nicety. I talked with Josh Starkey about his mother-in-law Kathy's funeral, and after reflecting on her life lived to the glory and reality of the gospel, those in attendance walked away with the reminder that the gospel is real, is true, and is worth living and dying for! There is nothing token about the gospel. It is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes (Rom 1:16)

The Running of the Mystery: Stewardship (2)

Assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you,

Stewarding God's mystery – Paul then begins his parenthesis or digression with reminding them of what they already knew. Paul knew he was simply a **steward, an administrator of God's grace and church**. The Greek word is "*oikonomian*", which means a house manager. The root word "*oikos*" means household. So, Paul was not the originator of the message or the mission, but he simply had oversight of God's church, God's household. We remember this indelible reality: this church is not "ours" or "mine", it is God's. We are called to be faithful stewards, to manage what has been entrusted to us. That is why we never change the message or compose our own mission apart from what God has given.

Stewarding the church's mission – God has used stewards throughout Biblical history. In the OT He used Israel as a conduit to glorify God and display His glory among the nations. When Christ came, He was proclaimed among the nations. Christ declared that it was going to be the church, in this age and era, that God was going to use as a conduit, a channel, to reach the nations. This does NOT replace the role and future of Israel, which God will restore in the future, but it means that for now, the church has a distinct role to carry the message of grace to the world, in Simi Valley, So Cal, The U.S., and around the globe.

The Revelation of the Mystery: No Secrets (3-5)

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 in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.

Revelation levels the playing field – **How was the mystery made known? Through REVELATION.** They mystery of the gospel is that a Gentile and Jew are on the same ground together in Christ. Gentiles could be saved in the OT, but they could only do so by becoming a Jewish proselyte. God saved INTO the Jewish nation. And truth be told, if one reads the entire OT, you could not really see any other way or plan that was coming, until we had the NT. Now we might see some of the sublet Easter Eggs, but only in veiled ways. God revealed something new that had been planned before the foundation of the world, that He would bring about salvation through a Messiah who would be both man and God, a Messiah who brought SPIRITUAL release from the captivity of sin and NOT political freedom from Roman oppression. Though Jesus WILL establish a kingdom on this earth, what was not known was this era and stage of the church. This revelation was made known NOW through the apostle and prophets, the foundation layers of the church who God used to bring what was hidden for millennia to light.

Revelation standardizes change – Revelation is what brings ultimate change to humanity. Paul was the recipient of revelation on the road to Damascus, not because he was SEEKING God but was trying to destroy the church. Revelation came to the disciples who were fishing and were called out by Christ. Revelation is what has happened to every believer in Jesus Christ, as light shone in our heart so that we could see the glory of God in the face of Christ. It is the hope for all who are caught up in deception, who are wandering, and seeking satisfaction other places than Christ.

Cory Edwards is our friend, intern, and future church planter, and he has been blogging about his experience in preparation for a move to New Hampshire. Listen to what he wrote a few days ago:

“With the new year bringing in yet another set of challenges, fears, a solidification of cultural norms that would seem so different to us just two years, I say this with complete honesty that I continue to find joy despite all of it. Does this mean I am a ray of sunshine 24/7, that I’m all smiles all the time, no of course not. I still can be grouchy, and I still don’t like hugs. Where I find this joy is then not from myself, but from the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Prior to my salvation my view of this world was primarily based in philosophical ideas that put man at the center of making his own joy. If you were to follow these ideas to their logical conclusions the possibility of finding joy would be slim. Rather what you are left with is l’absurde (the absurd). Which is what many of the French existentialists that I use to frantically read would describe as the angst one feels when trying to find meaning or joy in a meaningless world. That’s the thing about the message of the gospel. I didn’t find anything on my own, I didn’t logically work my way to God’s mercy and love, I didn’t embark on a mental journey and after many trials of angst and searching I triumphantly overcame the void and found my meaning. The gospel shows that God found me. He sought-after a broken, agitated, confused, burnt out sinner and he loved me first and saved me. Because he did these things first, I not only can love him, but love and delight in his Word, and from that there is a desire to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ. From that the truths of his Gospel encourage me, and give me meaning in light of him who saved me.”

What a testimony of God’s faithfulness and revelation! Gives us hope that if God can save us (and Cory), and open our eyes, we have hope He will continue to do so with those that we love so much.

The Realization of the Mystery: Gospel Unity (6)

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

Fellow heirs – Common Future

Same Body – Common Purpose

Partakes of the Promise – Common Hope

The mystery revealed is the gospel of Jesus Christ, that has brought those far off and near, those without hope in this world, and brought them together in Christ. Now we have a common future of inheritance, a common purpose of making disciples among the nation as one body working together in harmony, and

partakers of all the promises in Christ. We are recipients of this truth, stewards of this message, and common members of a most uncommon Savior and church.