

The Mystery of Christ

Ephesians 3:1-21

Key Verse: 3:6

by Steve Stasinos

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

This morning we want to look into the mystery of Christ. This mystery was first introduced to us in 1:9-10, “And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment – to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.”

The content and nature of this mystery is simply this: God loves all people on earth, Jew and Gentile alike. God is not willing that any should perish. So God, in his love, planned and carried out the work of the gospel that men dead in sins might be made alive with Christ. In this gospel, he has united Jew and Gentile under the cross of Jesus. This mystery has continued to unfold down through the generations. We call this the world salvation plan of God. In the cross of Jesus, we are all included in this salvation plan. Let’s listen to Paul’s words, and understand this mystery of God’s love and purpose in Christ.

First, the mystery of Christ (1-6).

Look at verse 1. “For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles...” Paul was writing this letter from a Roman prison. Let’s think briefly about how he ended up there. Paul was a Jew. Politically speaking, his nation was under Roman rule. As a young man, Paul could have despaired, or succumbed to hedonism. But he did not. Instead he devoted himself to the law of God, and Jewish culture and religion. By the age of thirty, he was already well known in his nation. He knew God’s laws, but he did not know God’s heart. When Jesus’ apostles began to share the love of God through the message of the gospel, Paul violently opposed them. Instead of love, he was full of hate. The Risen Jesus came to Paul on the road to

Damascus. Jesus said to Paul, “I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness... I am sending you to (your own people and to the Gentiles), to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they might receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.” (Ac 26:16-18) As a Jew, the thought that God wanted to forgive Gentiles was shocking to Paul. But he was not disobedient to the vision God gave him. As Paul preached the gospel to the Gentiles, something revolutionary happened. He realized the love of God was not just for him and the Jews. The heart of God was broken for all the Gentiles as well. God helped Paul to be a good shepherd for Gentiles, building up many churches among them. At the same time, Paul saw increasing tension between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. In order to promote unity among them, once he collected large offerings from many Gentile churches and brought them to Jerusalem to help the poor in Israel (Ro 15:23-29). When he arrived, there was a riot in Jerusalem, because many Jews simply hated him for associating with Gentiles. He was arrested, and put in prison. A few years passed. Paul appealed his case to Caesar, in order to go to Rome and testify to the Gentiles there. Paul did not see himself as a victim of false accusations. He saw himself as the prisoner of Christ Jesus. This title brought a smile to his face. Once he had acted in hatred. Now he was in prison for the sake of the Gentiles. He had become a man of love toward his most hated enemies. This was a profound mystery.

Look at verses 2-3. “Surely you have heard about the administration of God’s grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly.” Paul repeats the word “mystery” four times in this chapter (3,4,6,9). The idea that Jews and Gentiles be united for any reason was unthinkable. Jews and Gentiles did not associate with each other. God himself had told his people to remain separate from the Gentiles. But now, in Christ Jesus, and through his blood, he has brought them near to himself and near to each other. Ephesians 2:15-16 tell us, “His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.”

This has immediate consequences for all of us who are in Christ Jesus. Look at verse 6. “This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together

of one body and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.” Through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel. The reason the Jews were so upset with Paul was because they wanted to cling to their position as God’s people alone. But now, through the gospel of Jesus Christ, we are heirs together with them. We now have access to the best blessings of being God’s holy people. Just as God blessed Abraham, we are also blessed (Ge 12:2,3). Just as Israel was called to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, so we too can be a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God that you may declare the praises of God (1Pe 2:9).

We are also members together of one body, and sharers in the promises of God in Jesus Christ. Once we were separate from all these things, without hope and without God in the world. But now, through the gospel we are being made one. On Friday night we heard the news of the death of Barnabas Kojo, who was a missionary from Nigeria to Ghana. His wife, missionary Chiaka, was grieved and saddened, as were we all. But we do not despair. Instead we claim God’s promise that he will wear a crown of righteousness. Jesus said, “I tell you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.” (Mt 8:11) In the kingdom of God, many Gentiles, including Msn. Barnabas Kojo, will come from the east and the west and sit at the table together with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Because of this mystery, Msn. Chiaka has hope and vision to remain in Ghana to continue the work God began through her husband Msn. Barnabas. Because of this mystery of Christ, we have fellowship with God, and the hope of God burning in our hearts.

This mystery of Christ continues to unite all kinds of people under the cross of Jesus. As I look out at you, I see people from all kinds of different pasts, races, and generations. Who can explain this? It is the mystery of Christ at work in each individual, taking a dead person in sins and transgressions, and creating a masterpiece of God’s design. We only praise the Lord for this mystery in Christ.

Second, the glory of the church of Jesus Christ (7-11).

Look at verses 7-8. “I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God’s grace given me through the working of his power. Although I am less than the least of all God’s people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.” When we think of a gift of grace, we tend to think of material blessings. For example, one person may say, “By God’s grace, I graduated the university after eight years.” Another man might say, “By God’s grace, I’m going to marry a godly woman on Saturday.” I would say, “My wife Amy, and our five years together is the gift of God’s grace.” But Paul considered his life as a missionary to the Gentiles as God’s best gift of grace to him. According to Paul, through the working of God’s power in him he has stood as the servant of the gospel, and would continue to do so. Paul had born much spiritual fruit. Yet he said he was less than the least of all God’s people. He said so because he loved Jesus and respected others.

Look at verses 8b-9. “This grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things.” What are the unsearchable riches of Christ? If you want to be truly rich, listen up! In the world, we boast about this and that, and feel bad comparing ourselves to others. But when we have Christ, we have all things. 1 Corinthians 3:21-23 reads, “So then, no more boasting about men! All things are yours, whether Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future – all are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God.” Colossians 2:9-10: “For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority.” To know this Christ, who is above all, is to be truly rich.

Paul says he made the administration of this mystery plain to everyone. Now he is talking to Gentiles in Ephesus, who did not have the Old Testament. So he did not quote heavy prophecies. Instead, he focused on Jesus Christ and his love, power, wisdom, grace and mercy. As we communicate the gospel this Fall, may God help us to make it plain to everyone, focusing on Jesus.

Look at verses 10-11. “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, according to his

eternal purpose in Christ Jesus our Lord.” God united Jew and Gentile and all of us under Christ, and thus raised the church of Jesus Christ. Through the church the manifold wisdom of God was made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms. This had me stumped for the longest time to know what Paul is talking about. But I think I got a clue.

The church of Jesus Christ surely works in this world, uniting people under the cross of Jesus and his authority. But the impact is not only in this world. Otherwise, it would only be temporary and inconsequential, like a merger and acquisition. Rather, the real impact is in the heavenly realms, which are eternal. When Peter made a confession of faith, Jesus said, “...on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” (Mt 16:18-19) When one sinner repents, there is great rejoicing not only here, but in the kingdom of heaven (Lk 15:7). When we pray in this world, more than things in this world are affected. The impact is felt in heaven, and all rulers and authorities tremble in awe of the glory and wisdom of God.

Regardless of what is going on in this fallen world, the Church and the drawing together of people under the authority of Christ is glorious and powerful. We must open our eyes to see these things. If our eyes are only fixed on what happens around us in this world, we will be sad. Our hope is beyond what we can see. The rulers and authorities, however, can see this. The way God chooses to bring his people to his glorious kingdom is through the faithful preaching of the gospel. God is God, and could have chosen many ways to do so. But God chose us to go out on the college campuses this fall and reach students for Christ. God saves sinners through redeemed sinners. Why? I don't know! It is the mystery of Christ! We can only but thank him.

Third, Paul's prayer for the Ephesians and us (12-21).

Look at verses 12-13. “In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.” Paul knew that the Ephesian Christians were very anxious about what would happen to him. They were worried and discouraged. When people are discouraged, they usually

stop coming to God and become preoccupied with themselves. So Paul encourages them to live in Christ and through faith in Christ. He urges them and us to approach God with freedom and confidence. Paul himself gives the example, saying, “For this reason I kneel before the Father.” (14a) In his cold prison cell, Paul knelt down before God the Father of all people and began to pray for them.

What was his prayer topic? He doesn't mention political relief, although Christians were persecuted. Nor does he give a vague and abstract prayer, like, “God, please bless the Ephesians.” He focuses on their spiritual condition. Verses 16-17a. “I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.” His one prayer topic is we may be strong in our inner being.

Once we were all dead in sins and transgressions. Now, through Christ our inner spiritual being is made alive. However, our inner being is still weak. We easily doubt God's love, and become quickly discouraged. In our weakness, we stumble over temptations and fall into sin. It is because we are weak in our inner being.

So how can our inner being become strong? When we want to be strong in studies, we must exercise our brain, through doing much homework. When we want to be a strong athlete, we must practice again and again, until exhaustion, and then rest. To be strong in our inner being, we need the glorious riches of God. Christ must dwell in our hearts everyday. By the work of his Holy Spirit, we must exercise our faith in the power of God. It is God who makes us strong. I am amazed at the inner strength of Chiaka Kojo, who lost her husband and yet in the same day encouraged all of Africa and UBF worldwide through her testimonial mission report. This is the love of God.

Look at verses 17b-19. “And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.” We want to have this love and be rooted in it. But it is not a matter of

knowledge. It is a matter of power. Paul prays that we may have this power source of love, for Christ, from Christ and among one another, to grasp the love of Christ. To love is to have power. Emotionally crippled people cannot recover on their own. A generation of children mortally wounded by their parents' divorces cannot cure themselves alone. It is the love of God that dwells in the body of Christ that makes the inner man strong.

This love of Christ is not one dimensional, or only for second generation missionaries, or American shepherds. It is wide and long and high and deep! This love reaches out to all people everywhere: wide people, long people, high-minded people as well as deep-thinking people. It reaches out to Muslims, Africans, Latin American people, American people, Korean people, yes, and Canadians too. May God help us to be rooted and established in this love. May this love make each of us strong in our inner being, so that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith. May this love make us God's instruments of hope to all our college campuses this fall.

Look at the benediction in verses 20-21. "Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen." The world and its situations change. But as we come to God in prayer and depend on him, we can overcome it all. God's immeasurable power is at work within us. The work of preaching the gospel lasts throughout all generations. This is the mystery in Christ. To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen. Let's pray.