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Sermon Notes

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The Eternal Mystery Revealed and Proclaimed

Ephesians 3:1-13

God, the keeper of mysteries

When our kids were young, they would see pictures of Christ and I before they were born, and they would often ask the question: "Where was I, Daddy?" We have learned to answer, "You were in the mind of God."

God keeps a lot of secrets!!

The Bible seems to indicate that God had a LOT in his mind before it came to be

This passage today speaks of an eternal mystery that has now been revealed

Ephesians 3:9 this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things.

Deuteronomy 29:29 The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever

1 Corinthians 2:7 No, we speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began.

Isaiah 45:15 Truly you are a God who hides himself, O God and Savior of Israel.

God hides himself and God hides his plans... and then, at the right time, he unfolds them into beautiful clarity

This includes his people, their names, their purpose, their lifespan

God has known us by name from before the foundation of the world

Ephesians 1:4-5 he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵ he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will

God has woven together a magnificent plan for his glory and our joy and he is skillfully unfolding it a little at a time

Think of a skillful story-teller, and his techniques in unfolding his story... he has the whole narrative in his mind, including the characters, the plot, and the climax. He uses foreshadowing... saying dramatic things like

“The elderly man woke up in his Brooklyn flat like he had done every day for the past twenty-seven years. He stretched and swung his feet out of bed and onto the floor. As he stood up and walked away from his bed, he had no idea that he would never sleep in that bed again. As he looked out the window at the wind blowing a scrap of paper across the street, a wind of change was about to blow into his life that would carry him away from his native land to a distant place, never to return again.”

God uses foreshadowing too... he calls it “prophecy”; God unfolds his astonishingly fascinating story one day at a time, never telling us more than we need to know.

Genesis 12:1 The LORD had said to Abram, “Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.”

Hebrews 11:8 By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.

How about the Apostle Paul:

Acts 20:22 "And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there.

So God's glorious Redemptive Plan unfolds as a mystery... a mystery kept hidden in God, who created all things

Today, we are going to immerse ourselves in the central mystery of the Bible... the mystery of Christ and his saving purposes for the nations of the world

This mystery is not a Sherlock Holmes or Agatha Christie mystery where you have to accumulate the clues and figure out what God is doing. No one can do it! But rather it is the glorious purpose of God which he had established in his own mind before the foundation of the world and now has revealed to us in Christ.

Paul the Apostle is the revealer of this mystery, and he is the secondary focus of this chapter

I. Paul, the Prisoner of the Mystery (vs. 1, 13)

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

A. The Immediate Focus: Paul, the Apostle of the Gentiles

B. One Long, Glorious Interruption (Parenthesis)

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

Ephesians 3:14 For this reason I kneel before the Father

1. Paul is about to pray for these Gentile Christians (vss. 14-21)
 - a. That Christ will dwell in their hearts by faith
 - b. That they will have a sense through the Spirit of how wide, and long, and high, and deep is the love of Christ for them
2. But, before he does, Paul wants them to know him better, and to know the work of Christ better

3. So, we have this massive interruption

Ephesians 3:1-2 For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles--² Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you...

Notice the interruption between verses 1 and 2... the NIV, ESV, put a "dash"

C. Deeper Knowledge of Paul Before He Prays for them

1. He has already introduced himself as an apostle

Ephesians 1:1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God

2. Now, he wants them to understand his special role in the Redemptive Plan of God
3. Other than Jesus Christ, the Apostle Paul was the central figure of the New Testament
 - a. God used Paul to write at least thirteen books of the NT
 - b. AND Paul's conversion is the most significant event of the Book of Acts (reported for us THREE TIMES in that book)
 - c. AND Paul's ministry in Acts of planting churches among the Gentiles is the focus of Acts 13-21
 - d. AND Paul's trials before the Jews and the Romans is the focus of Acts 22-28
4. The Book of Acts is essentially about the spread of the gospel of Jesus Christ from Jew only in the upper room in Jerusalem to Jew + Gentile in Rome and many other places in the world... PAUL is the main figure in that
5. The spectacular conversion of Saul of Tarsus from a murderous destroyer of the church of Jesus Christ to its most significant builder is amazing

6. Paul would say it's great proof of the power of God in Christ and the saving intention of God toward the Gentiles... "Because of ME, you can know how much God wants to save Gentiles!!"

D. Big Concern: Understanding Him, His Ministry, His Imprisonment

1. Paul talks a lot about himself in these 13 verses... Ephesians 3:1-13
 - a. The section begins with "I PAUL..."
 - b. It continues with many verses of description about his calling, his insights, his ministry, his preaching, his stewardship of the gospel
2. Vital for them to understand Paul's role as "Apostle to the Gentiles"
 - a. "For this reason..." goes back to Ephesians 2:11-22
 - b. Jew-Gentile unity now that Christ has come and abolished the Law and broken down the BARRIERS that kept Jews and Gentiles apart
 - c. Temple rising to become a dwelling for God through the Holy Spirit
3. Then... "for this reason..."
 - a. For what reason? For the glory of God in the building of such a magnificent spiritual temple in which he will live eternally
 - b. For this reason I Paul... DO WHAT????
 - c. Well... pray:

Ephesians 3:14-19 For this reason I kneel before the Father...that CHRIST MAY DWELL IN YOUR HEARTS... that you would KNOW THE LOVE of Christ

4. Paul especially wants them to understand his sufferings... his imprisonment (vs. 1, 13)
 - a. His great concern is that they not be shocked or put off by his imprisonment

- b. This imprisonment is not for anything SHAMEFUL...
- c. The Ephesians must understand that Paul's chains are actually their GLORY

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

- d. Paul's chains are essential to their getting the gospel and their FINAL glorification

Colossians 1:24 Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church.

- e. Paul's sufferings are their glory because by the suffering of the messengers of the gospel the church grows and grows

John 12:24 Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

Paul doesn't want them to be discouraged... or to discredit his letter or his teaching ministry simply because he is in chains

- E. A "Prisoner of Christ Jesus"... not of the Jews or Rome or any man

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

- 1. Paul knew he was in chains FOR CHRIST... it was no accident... it was Christ's expressed purpose for his life

Acts 9:15-16 the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. ¹⁶ I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

- F. A "Prisoner on behalf of you Gentiles..." for THEIR BENEFIT

- G. Desire: Not Discouragement but Glory! (vs. 13)

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

II. Paul, the Revealer of the Mystery (vs. 2-5)

Ephesians 3:2-5 Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, ³ that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. ⁴ In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, ⁵ which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets.

A. "Surely you have heard of me..."

B. Administration of God's grace

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

1. Another word would be "stewardship"... management
2. Stewards do not OWN the resources... they MANAGE them for the true owner

1 Corinthians 4:1-2 So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. ² Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.

3. It was given to him FOR YOU... for the Gentiles to receive the grace of God

C. Mystery!!! (vs. 3, 4)

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

1. Something that we could NEVER have figured out by reason or by science
2. It can only be known by REVELATION... God unfolding it to a human mind by the work of the Holy Spirit
3. Paul uses the word mystery again in verse 4:

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

4. This idea of MYSTERY is central to this section of the Epistle

D. Insight into Mystery of Christ

1. Paul's special insight into the mystery of Christ

a. The ultimate "AHA!!" moment... "I see it now! I understand who Christ is and what his purposes are!!"

2. "Christ" is the mystery... but not just the mystery of his person, his incarnation, which is very great

3. Rather it is a different aspect of the mystery... Christ as the Savior of the Gentiles in such a way that they are ONE BODY with Jews

E. The Mystery Not Previously Revealed

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

1. No one on earth had this insight into Christ; though people all over the world can discern the existence of God and his nature from looking at creation, no one can discern the mystery of Christ except by direct revelation from God the Father through the Holy Spirit

2. AND Paul says it was not made known in previous generations

a. Surprising... because God revealed Christ to Old Testament prophets

Isaiah 49:6 he says: "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth."

b. BUT the prophets did not PUT IT ALL TOGETHER

c. Jewish Christians STRUGGLED MIGHTILY with this!!!

Acts 10:28 He said to them: "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean.

Acts 10:44-45 While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. ⁴⁵ The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles.

Acts 11:2-4 when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him ³ and said, "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them." ⁴ Peter began and explained everything to them precisely as it had happened

Acts 11:18 When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life."

3. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel... it was not revealed to them the scope and magnitude of what God was planning for the New Covenant, how amazing it would be among the Gentiles

F. Now Revealed by the Apostles and Prophets

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

1. NOW... at this moment in time...
2. The "holy Apostles and prophets"... these are the New Testament revealers to the church
3. "Prophets" includes people like Jude and James and others who were not apostles but were authoritative teachers of the gospel and writers of NT books

III. The Mystery: Gentiles One with Jews (vs. 6)

- A. The Mystery Plainly Declared: Full Jew-Gentile Unity Apart from the Law

Ephesians 3:6 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.

B. Gentiles Heirs Together with Israel

1. Ready to inherit what God had promised to Abraham
2. What is that?
 - a. First, GOD HIMSELF

Genesis 15:1 After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward."

- b. Second, the world!!!

Romans 4:13 Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world

C. Gentiles Members Together of Same Body as Israel

1. Gentile Christians are not SECOND-CLASS CITIZENS!

D. Gentiles Sharers Together of the Promise in Christ... Life-giving SAP

John 15:5 I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

Romans 11:17 you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root

E. Through the Gospel

1. All of these blessings come ONLY THROUGH THE GOSPEL

IV. Paul, the Proclaimer of the Mystery (vs. 7-9)

Ephesians 3:7-9 I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. ⁸ 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, 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.

A. Paul a Servant of the Gospel

Acts 20:24 I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me-- the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace.

B. Paul's Ministry a Gift of God's Grace

C. Paul's Ministry a Display of God's Power

1. The transformation of Saul of Tarsus is a miracle of God's power

Acts 9:1 Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples.

Acts 9:3-6 As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" ⁵ "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. ⁶ "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

2. This is a MIRACLE OF GOD'S POWER!!!

3. God raised Paul from the dead spiritually and gave him a love for Christ that has only been growing and growing ever since

D. Paul's Deep Humility about Himself (vs. 8)

Ephesians 3:8 Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me

1. Paul cuts off any inquiry about his own intrinsic greatness

2. "What makes you so great that you have this special insight into God's mystery??"

3. NOTHING!! I am "less than the least of all God's people!"

4. Actually, it was IN SPITE of who I was

1 Timothy 1:12-13 I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service. ¹³ Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy

1 Timothy 1:15-16 Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners-- of whom I am the worst. ¹⁶ But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.

1 Corinthians 15:9-10 For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰ But by the grace of God I am what I am

Paul is VERY HUMBLE about himself... but he SOARS in his statement about his ministry!!

E. Paul's Soaring Exaltation of His Ministry (vs. 8)

Ephesians 3:8-9 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, 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.

1. What a magnificent calling this is!!
2. Paul was called to PREACH TO THE GENTILES
3. Just the "foolishness of preaching"... but it was transforming lives all over the world
4. And the topic was infinitely glorious: the UNSEARCHABLE RICHES OF CHRIST
 - a. "unsearchable" = "unfathomable", "bottomless"; "trackless"; "immeasurable"

Romans 11:33 Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!

- b. Paul is preaching to Gentiles how infinitely rich they will become if Christ is their treasure
- c. Turn away from the riches of this world which are nothing
- d. Turn instead to unsearchable riches...the limitless wealth of Christ... he owns all things, but that is nothing compared to the riches of wisdom, knowledge, and love IN HIM

F. Bringing to Light the Administration of the Mystery

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

- 1. Paul's ministry is not merely PROCLAMATION of the facts of the gospel
- 2. It is also a deepening understanding of the person of Christ as he reveals the glory of God the Father
- 3. Paul's task is to BRING TO LIGHT the PLAN of the mystery
- 4. Like predestination, as we've already seen

Ephesians 1:4-6 For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵ he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will-- ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace

Soaring 50,000 feet above history to give us a sense of the majesty of God's PLAN for the world

- 5. And the mystery of the future marriage of the church and Christ

Ephesians 5:31-32 For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." ³² This is a profound mystery-- but I am talking about Christ and the church.

6. And the future resurrection glory of the church of Jesus Christ

1 Corinthians 15:51-52 Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed-- ⁵² in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.

7. And the future of the Jewish nation, like in Romans 11

Romans 11:25-26 I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. ²⁶ And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: "The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob.

MYSTERIES!!!

G. Kept Hidden in God for Ages

Vs. 9 the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things.

V. God, the Purpose of the Mystery (vs. 10-12)

Ephesians 3:10-12 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, ¹¹ according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. ¹² In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.

A. An Eternal Purpose in all this (vs. 11)

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

B. God is the Focus of all this

C. A Display of God's Glory

Ephesians 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

1. Display: MADE KNOWN
2. Audience: Rulers and Authorities in the Heavenly Realms
 - a. “good angels”
 - b. The angelic audience is powerful in the book of Daniel and Revelation

Daniel 7:10 Thousands upon thousands attended him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him.

Revelation 5:11-12 Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. ¹² In a loud voice they sang: "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!"

3. Vehicle of Display: the Church
 - a. “through the CHURCH”
 - b. The construction of the church of Jesus Christ from the elect from every tribe, language, people and nation is the MOST GLORIOUS THING God has ever done
 - c. The GREATEST DISPLAY of the glory of God ever!
4. Aspect of God’s Glory: The Manifold Wisdom of God
 - a. Manifold = varied, diverse, complex
 - b. Wisdom= how wise God has been in this salvation plan of Jews and Gentiles in Christ!

So, this unfolding MYSTERY of Gentile salvation in Christ puts the MANIFOLD WISDOM of God on display for the angels to see forever!

D. A Destination for God’s People (vs. 12)

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

1. In the past, Gentiles (and Jews) excluded from God's presence

Ephesians 2:12 remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.

2. Now... in Christ... we have access with freedom and confidence

Hebrews 10:19-22 Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, ²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²² let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.

VI. Applications

A. Take Advantage of God's Saving Intention for the Gentiles: COME TO CHRIST!

1. God has been planning the salvation of people all over the world since before the creation of the universe
2. He sent his Son for sinners like you and me
3. God in his mysterious plan brought you here today to hear this gospel
4. God wants to SET YOU FREE from the invisible chains of sin and guilt that are binding you... God wants to rescue you from the terrifying wrath to come
5. FLEE TO CHRIST... now!
6. The Apostle Paul is gone... but his ministry to the Gentiles continues through his writings
7. He was the one who wrote these wonderful words:

1 Timothy 1:15 Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners-- of whom I am the worst.

8. Simple logic: If God can save someone as rebellious and sinful as Paul, he can save anyone
9. TRUST IN CHRIST!

B. Christians: Ponder the MYSTERIES NOW REVEALED

1. God has unfolded more of His eternal plan to you than to any previous generations
2. We can see what He's doing... saving multitudes from every ethnic group on earth
3. The gospel has made astonishing progress even in our lifetimes...
 - a. When I was in college, there were several nations that had no known Christians
 - b. Among them were Albania, Mongolia, and some North African, Muslim nations
 - c. Now, God is revealing more and more clearly his plan for all Gentile nations to have a witness, a remnant of elect believers standing courageously for Christ
4. Delight in the UNFOLDING OF THE MYSTERIOUS PLAN OF GOD!
5. Delight in the fact that God's plan has YET MORE MYSTERIES to be revealed
6. There are aspects of our heavenly life that will remain mysterious until Christ returns to reveal them
7. Trust God to reveal his mysteries at the right time, and in the right way!

C. Study Scripture to Understand the Manifold Wisdom of God in the Church

1. Delight in the variety and wisdom of God in the church
 2. Celebrate how the church shows the glory of God
 3. Embrace commitment to the church more and more
- D. Meditate on, Delight in, and Worship God for “the Unsearchable riches of Christ” (vs. 8)
1. Let this phrase lead you into deeper and richer worship of Christ than ever before
 2. Ask God to send the Holy Spirit powerfully upon you to worship Christ
 3. Understand how rich we are in Christ!
- E. PRAY: Take advantage of the “freedom and access” we have to God through Christ
- F. Understand the Sufferings of the Servants of God necessary to advance the gospel
1. Paul was in prison for the gospel
 2. So are many brothers and sisters today
 3. Learn about the persecuted church
 4. Pray for them!
 5. Their sufferings are our GLORY!
 6. Be willing to suffer to advance the gospel