

The Book of Ephesians

Lesson 5: The Mystery of the Gospel -- Ephesians 3:1-13

Every great story has a secret that the reader is dying to learn. There is a hidden plan, a concealed identity, a buried treasure, and the whole tale leans toward the moment when the secret is finally told. Paul reaches for exactly that kind of language here. He speaks of a mystery, something that was hidden for ages, kept in the heart of God across long centuries while prophets strained to see it and angels longed to look into it. And then, in Christ, the secret was told.

We should be careful with the word mystery, because Paul does not mean a puzzle we are meant to solve or a riddle that keeps us guessing. He means something that no human being could have figured out, a plan locked away in the mind of God until God Himself chose to reveal it. The mystery is not that we cleverly discovered God's purpose. It is that He graciously made it known to us when we never could have found it on our own.

And what was the secret? It is almost startling in its simplicity once it is spoken aloud. The mystery is that the Gentiles, the outsiders of the last lesson, are fellow heirs, members of the same body, partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. People who had been strangers are now full family members, with no asterisk beside their names. The dividing wall is not merely lowered; it is gone, and the household of God has thrown its doors open to the whole world.

Paul tells us he was made a servant of this gospel, and he calls himself the very least of all the saints, a man entrusted far beyond his deserving with the task of announcing the unsearchable riches of Christ. He even says that through the church, God is now putting His many-sided wisdom on display before the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. Think of that. The gathered, ordinary, reconciled church is God's exhibition hall, where heaven itself looks on and learns the wisdom of God. The secret is out, and we have been handed the privilege of telling it.

Group Discussion: Paul says God kept this plan hidden for ages and then revealed it, and that the church now puts God's wisdom on display before heaven itself. How does it change the way we think about the church to learn that it is meant to be an exhibition of God's wisdom, and not merely a gathering of people?

Personal Reflection: Paul calls himself the least of all the saints, yet he marvels that he was entrusted with the gospel. Where do you sense God has entrusted you with grace to serve others, and what holds you back from embracing it?

Read Ephesians 3:1-13

Study Questions

1. In verses 1 through 6 Paul speaks of the mystery of Christ. What does Paul mean by a mystery, and what is the actual content of this mystery according to verse 6?
2. The mystery is that Gentiles are fellow heirs and full members of the body, with no second-class status. Where do you still live as though you were a second-class member of God's family, and how does this truth invite you to take your full place in Christ?
3. In verse 7 Paul says he became a minister of this gospel according to the gift of God's grace, given him by the working of His power. What does it mean that Paul's ministry was a gift of grace rather than a personal achievement, and how does that shape the way we think about serving God?
4. Paul received grace not only to be saved but to serve. What gift of grace has God given you to serve others, and are you stewarding it or burying it?
5. In verse 8 Paul calls himself the very least of all the saints, yet he was given the task of preaching the unsearchable riches of Christ. How do Paul's deep humility and his high calling fit together, and what does the phrase unsearchable riches of Christ tell us about the gospel?
6. Paul held together a low view of himself and a high view of his calling. How might genuine humility actually free you to serve more boldly, rather than holding you back?
7. In verses 9 and 10 Paul says that through the church the manifold wisdom of God is now made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. What does it mean that the church is the means by which God displays His wisdom, even to the spiritual realm?
8. If the church is meant to display God's wisdom to the watching world and even to heaven, your participation in it matters. How does this lift your view of ordinary church life, and what is one way you can help your congregation display God's wisdom more clearly?
9. Verses 3 through 5 say the mystery was made known to Paul by revelation, and that it was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed to God's holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. How was this mystery revealed, and to whom? What does this teach us about the completed revelation we now have in the New Testament, over against the claim that God is still giving new revelations or that there are apostles today?
10. In verses 11 through 13 Paul says that in Christ we have boldness and access to God with confidence through faith in Him, and he urges them not to lose heart. Looking back over this whole passage, name one specific way the Lord is forming you through it, and one place where you need to draw near to God with the boldness Christ has given.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Hebrews 1:1-2, God who spoke long ago through the prophets has now spoken to us by His Son; 2 Timothy 3:16-17, all Scripture is breathed out by God and equips us completely; Jude 3, contend for the faith once for all delivered to the saints; Galatians 1:8-9, let anyone preaching a different gospel be accursed; 1 Peter 1:10-12, the prophets searched for what has now been announced to you.