

Glorious Mystery

Ephesians 3

One of the things that we worry about as Christians in America is that the tide has turned in people's attitudes toward Christianity. No longer is it seen as a good thing and a benefit to society, but now it's seen as a negative thing and some have a very hostile attitude toward Christians. So we worry about what's going to happen. Will there be persecution? What will it look like? When will it happen? How will things be different? And the whole point of persecution is containment – keep people quiet so they don't share their beliefs with others. Christians are fine as long as they don't spread their beliefs. Yet from what I can tell, the reason we're here is to do that very thing. That's why we did the Hope Alive event yesterday – it was to spread a little bit of hope into our community.

Toward the end of the evening an older gentleman named Dave was standing alone under the pavilion watching us start to clean up. The band had just finished and he said, "I guess I missed it." I didn't know what to say so I asked him if he wanted a brat or hot dog and he happily agreed. So we went over to many of you who were serving food and we loaded him up with about 10 hot dogs. He made mention that he'd be able to eat them for the next three days and he was very thankful.

I left at that time and went to clean something up, but when I looked back I saw the most beautiful sight. There was everyone from our food crew gathered around Dave with their hands on his shoulders praying for him. I don't know what's going on with Dave, but I know that we gave him some hope in Christ yesterday because of what we did.

The enemy doesn't want us to do that and there are going to be times where persecution will come and we will have to suffer in some way if we are going to continue to try to tell people the good news about Jesus. When that happens we are going to feel some fear and we are going to be tempted to keep our mouths shut. The question I have for you today is this: "What is going to keep you from keeping your mouth shut?"

That's exactly what our passage for this morning is about. We're at chapter 3 in Ephesians today. We've been studying this letter that Paul wrote to a church of new believers in the ancient city of Ephesus and this morning he's going to tell them why he didn't keep his mouth shut, even when he suffered for it, and why he was more than willing to go through suffering to tell them about Jesus.

Ephesians 3:1

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

Ephesians 3 can be confusing because Paul jumps around a little bit. In this verse he's about to tell them about a prayer he prays for them in light of what he just wrote at the end of chapter 2, but he doesn't get there until verse 13 – he veers off onto a different topic for 12 verses before coming back to the prayer. It's like a Holy Spirit inspired rabbit trail.

In verse 1 he described himself as being a “prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles” and something about that triggered another thought in his mind that he felt like he needed to address. The last time he saw them, which was about 3-4 years earlier, he said goodbye to them and told them some news that was very troubling to them. Acts 20:22-23 records that he told them: “*And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there,*”²³ *except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me.”* And when it came time for him to leave it says in Acts 20:26-28: “*And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all.*”³⁷ *And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him,*³⁸ *being sorrowful most of all because of the word he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they accompanied him to the ship.”*

He went from there to Jerusalem and then to the Temple. There were some Jews from the region around Ephesus that were also at the Temple and they hated the fact that Paul had been preaching to the Gentiles in their area, so when they saw him at the temple in the middle of a bunch of Jewish worshippers, they saw the opportunity to get rid of him. They stirred up a riot against Paul by making false accusation against him, and he would have been killed, but before he was the Romans stepped in and arrested him. That was 3-4 years earlier and he was still in prison awaiting trial. So the reason behind his imprisonment was that he had been preaching to the Gentiles in Ephesus.

So when word of his imprisonment got back to the Christians in Ephesus, he knew they would be very upset, which is why he takes some time at this point in the letter to address that issue. He does it in kind of a big picture, roundabout way, and shows us why he saw his imprisonment in a much different light than the Ephesians. He begins by thinking back to his call into ministry.

Ephesians 3:2-6

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. ⁴ When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, ⁵ 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. ⁶ 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.

So in thinking back to his call into ministry, he describes it in verse 2 as: “*the stewardship of God’s grace that was given to me for you,*” and then he says that stewardship was that “*the mystery was made known to him by revelation.*” That sounds kind of confusing, but I think I can clarify it a little bit.

The best way I thought of to explain what a stewardship is, is to think of it like a package containing something very, very valuable given to a messenger to deliver to someone. So when God called Paul into ministry, he gave him an extremely valuable package – a stewardship of God’s grace – that he was to deliver to the people in Ephesus.

Now, what was in that package? Paul refers to that as “the mystery of Christ.” He says in verse 3 that the mystery was made known to him by revelation and in verse 5 that it was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to the holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit – of whom Paul was one. So it’s this “mystery” that God revealed to Paul and then gave to him to deliver to the Ephesians.

And finally in verse 6 he tells us what 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.*” That’s the most surprising and the greatest news any Gentile, especially at that time, could ever hear. Last week we talked about how Gentiles were “*separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.*” (Eph. 2:12) But Paul had been given the awesome privilege by God to tell them that was no longer so – to tell them the incredible news that “*Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.*”

I remember when I was at the end of my freshman year of college, one of the things that I wanted the most was to be an R.A. the next year. An R.A. is a Resident Assistant who’s put in charge of planning fun events for their floor and

helping students build relationships. A lot of my friends were applying for it and if you got the job you got a bigger room, you got your *own* room, you got to go on a fun retreat before school started, and you got to be part of other fun activities as well. So I filled out my application, did the interview and waited. All my other friends got their letters of acceptance and they were really excited, but I hadn't got mine yet, so I was nervous. At that time in my life, it meant a lot to me and I wanted the position really bad. But no letter. I was the only one who hadn't heard yet and I was worried that I wasn't going to get in. But finally the letter came and I remember feeling so excited when I found out I was in!

The news that Paul was given to tell the Gentiles was far more exciting than that, and he was the one that got to break it to them. He was the first one that got to tell them – “You're in! You get to be included in all the incredible blessings of the kingdom of heaven!” And he saw that as an incredible privilege. He writes about that in the following verses.

Read Ephesians 3:7-9.

Of 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.⁸ To 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,⁹ and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things,

I think what Paul is saying is clear – he saw it as an incredible privilege to have been called by God to preach the gospel to Gentiles, especially considering his background of being a persecutor of the church. He saw his role as a missionary as a huge, undeserved blessing and privilege. But he saw that there was even more value to it than that. Not only was he given the privilege of preaching Christ to the Gentiles and bringing the mystery to light that had been hidden for ages in God, but in doing so he was also being used by God to carry out a great purpose in the heavenly realm. And that's what he writes about next. God called him to bring the mystery to light so that Gentiles would know the unsearchable riches of Christ, and...

Read Ephesians 3:10-12.

so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.¹¹ This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord,¹² in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him.

We may not think about it very often, but there is an unseen realm in heaven, with thousands and thousands of angelic beings of all different kinds, and they are involved and watching as the events of history unfold. What they saw for hundreds of years was that God had chosen a nation of people through whom he would demonstrate his glory to the whole world. But as time went on there became a dividing wall of hostility between them and everyone else that was impossible to overcome. So the Jews had access to the truth about God, but because of the hostility between them and everyone else, the Gentiles did not. They were completely cut off. And the hostility was so great that no angel could even imagine how Gentiles and Jews would both come together to worship the one true God.

But God had a plan from the very beginning – his eternal purpose. And that plan came into fulfillment through Jesus Christ. Because of what Christ accomplished on the cross, the impossible dividing wall of hostility between Jews and Gentiles was torn completely down and through him both Jew and Gentile could be united together as one body – a holy temple that would be a dwelling place for God. The unimaginable had been made possible through Christ... But nobody knew it yet – not even the angels. The new church had begun, but it was made up of only Jews.

Until God called Paul... and gave him a package to deliver to the Gentiles, like those in Ephesus. And when he delivered that package, not only would Gentiles see the light and come to know the unsearchable riches of Christ, but the angels in heaven would see the manifold wisdom of God and the thing they thought was impossible was happening right in front of their very own eyes. God's eternal purpose was realized through Jesus Christ.

Paul looked at his ministry as a preacher to the Gentiles as an awesome privilege from God that not only had glorious earthly repercussions, but heavenly ones as well. So he looked at what he was doing and everything that went along with it as a tremendous gift from God. Which is why he says this to the Ephesians in verse 13...

Read Ephesians 3:13.

So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory.

We are part of something much bigger than we can imagine and God has called us, like Paul, to keep telling people about Jesus even if it means we are going to suffer for it. I'll ask you the same question I asked at the beginning: "What is going to keep you from keeping your mouth shut?"

There are people around you – people that God has put around you so that you could show them who Jesus is – people who the angels look at and think: “That’s never going to happen.”

God has given us the awesome privilege to deliver to them the priceless package of the good news of Jesus so that they might know the unsearchable riches of Christ. And by the power of that gospel and the power of the Holy Spirit, God can transform even the hardest heart so that angels will watch in wonder and say, “Look! He’s done it again! God’s done it again...” That’s why we keep sharing no matter what the cost.