

EPHESIANS – “A GREAT MYSTERY REVEALED”

Ephesians 3:1-13

July 3, 2022

Last Sunday as we finished chapter 2 – we learned the Good News that the barriers, the dividing walls of hostility between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians have been destroyed by the blood of Christ, and now they have been reconciled to each other to create this new multiethnic family (this new humanity), built together to become His dwelling place, a holy temple in which God lives by His Spirit. This means that Gentile Christians (including you and me) are no longer aliens and strangers to God and His promises, we have full membership status with believing Jews in God’s family. So, Paul’s theme for the last half of chapter 2 was **UNITY**, how Jesus, by His sacrificial death on the cross has **BOUGHT** unity for all of mankind at a great cost, the price was His precious blood. Therefore, Jesus’s sacrificial death is the power behind reconciliation, mending the vertical rift between us and God, as well as mending the horizontal rift between us and others.

Paul’s point is that the church – made up of these imperfect stones, believers from every race, language, and cultural background have been reconciled back to God and to each other through Christ for a divine purpose – to reconcile the world back to God by being ministers of reconciliation wherever God takes us on our journey through life. So, Christ’ love compels us to no longer look at anyone like we used to before God’s Holy Spirit gave us a new heart. We now treat people differently; we treat people with dignity and respect and always with love – so they can see what God is like through both our actions and words. In that way when the world looks at the church – the portrait of Jesus that they should see crystal clear is of a Saviour who reconciles – a Saviour who cares – a Saviour who makes enemies into friends by reconciling them in two directions: people to God and people to people.

As Paul begins **Ephesians 3** – he begins to pray that believing Jews and believing Gentiles would understand and grasp this amazing life-changing truth that they are now one big happy family, but then the Holy Spirit stops Paul and redirects him to this great mystery that was hidden for past generations, but now has been revealed. Then it is only once he reveals this great mystery to his readers does Paul returns to his prayer in **verse 14**. This is an unusual passage of scripture that we are looking at today, as **verse 1** connects with **verse 14** and everything in between is a detour or departure of thought. In **verse 1**, when Paul says the word “*Gentiles*” it causes him to start thinking about this great mystery that has taken place because of

Christ's sacrificial work on the cross, so Paul goes off on this rabbit trail, and doesn't get back on track until **verse 14**, when he continues his prayer for the Ephesians (which we will look at next week).

So, what is this great mystery, this divine revelation given to Paul? It is difficult for us in the 21st century to grasp the significance of Gentiles coming to Christ and being included, along with God's chosen people, the Jews, into the family of God. To understand this great mystery, we need to realize that this is a huge shift in thinking for a devote Jew like Paul, who as a righteous Pharisee, taught that Gentiles were inferior, taught they didn't have a soul and impossible for them to come to salvation, they were considered non-human, often referred to as dogs. The Jews thought the Gentiles were created to be kindling for the fires of hell. So, for Paul to make the statement in **verse 1** that he has become a prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of these Gentiles, was unthinkable. Until Paul met Christ on the road to Damascus and received a new heart that completely transformed his thinking. Paul would have never accepted Gentiles into the Kingdom of God, as brothers and sisters in Christ. So, Paul is going off on this rabbit trial, because he can't believe God's grace towards him, calling him to preach the Good News to Gentiles. For Paul, a Jew, to make the statement in **Ephesians 3:6** is ground-breaking – ***"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"*** (NIV). I also like the **Passion Translation**, ***"Here's the secret: The gospel of grace has made you, non-Jewish believers, into coheirs of his promise through your union with him. And you have now become members of his body – one with the Anointed One!"***

For most of his life Paul thought that God had favorites – the Jews received God's favour while the Gentiles received God's wrath, destined for destruction, not worth the effort to evangelize. So, the Gentiles becoming fellow heirs with the Jews, brothers/sisters in Christ was not only a mystery but was shocking. The Jews had worked extremely hard trying to follow the 10 Commandments, plus the 613 laws of God for centuries, and now for these Gentiles who had never had any relationship with God to be included and given the same benefits as the Jews was unthinkable and unfair. The Jews had worked hard and sacrificed for what the Gentiles were now given freely by grace was a difficult pill to swallow, but the Jews failed to realize that the law was given to show them that they could not keep the law – that they could never make themselves right with God in their own strength or effort – they needed a Saviour just as much as the Gentiles. Their

mistake was in not realizing that they were just as guilty as the Gentiles, because if one attempted to be right with God through the law, they had to keep every point of the law perfectly and not make even one tiny mistake. And of course, this was impossible! So, Paul came to realize that we are all equal, because we all need Jesus, Jew and Gentile alike, without a Saviour we have no hope of having a right relationship with God.

Paul is reminded by the Holy Spirit of his previous life as a devote Pharisee, how he not only hated Gentiles but also hated the Jews who had become Christ followers. Paul remembers the day when the Jewish religious leaders (Sadducees) stoned the first Christian martyr, Stephen to death, and how zealous he was in persecuting the early church, thinking that he was doing God a favour by keeping both Gentiles and Jewish Christians out of the kingdom that was reserved for the Jews. Paul here is still having a difficult time getting his head around this great mystery that God has revealed to him. The great mystery that God doesn't have favorites, that God loves everyone equally, both Jew and non-Jew alike, wanting none to be lost. This great mystery of God sending His Son Jesus Christ to die for the Gentile as well as to die for the Jew. That the gift of salvation is available to all – no one is excluded. So, Paul stops as he begins his prayer, because he is overwhelmed at the thought of God's amazing grace, and then Paul is especially thankful for God allowing him to have a part to play in bringing these Gentiles, who are part of the Ephesian church to Christ!

We need to remember that Paul was writing this letter from a dark, dingy, rat infested prison cell in Rome, and he was put in prison for carrying out God's calling on His life – preaching the gospel of Christ to these Gentiles. Paul considered it not only a privilege, but great joy to suffer for the Gospel, and was more than willing to stay in prison if it resulted in more people coming to believe in Jesus. Whether in prison or not, Paul sees all that has happened to him as a gift – he makes that clear in **verses 7-8, “I became a servant of the gospel by the gift of God's grace given to me through the working of his power. Although I am less than the least of all the Lord's people, this grace was given to me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ.”** It was grace alone that empowered Paul so that he could boldly preach to non-Jewish people the inexhaustible riches of Christ!

In humility, Paul realizes that he's not worthy of the gift of salvation that God has given him and is especially unworthy of the grace given him to preach to the

Gentiles. Paul says with humility that he is the least of all the saints because he persecuted the early Christians, causing many to be imprisoned, tortured and killed. And because of this gift of God's grace Paul does not think himself to be better than anyone else because he was a highly educated religious Pharisee. Paul reminds us often in his letters what God requires of His followers, which is to be humble and not to think more highly of ourselves than we ought. Listen to what Paul tells the Roman believers, ***"For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you"*** (Romans 12:3). Humility qualifies a believer to serve!

Prior to his conversion – Paul was considered a rising superstar in the Jewish religious world, having confidence in the flesh that he was a self-made man, filled with pride and self-righteousness, seeing himself as blameless before God in every way. But after his conversion, everything changed dramatically – Paul became a new man, as he wrote in his letter to the Philippians, ***"But whatever were gain to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage"*** (Philippians 3:7-8). From the moment of his conversion, Paul considered himself now as belonging to the Lord, totally sold out to Christ, called to serve Christ regardless of the hardships and difficulties that would come. Paul saw it as a great privilege to serve Christ, so no matter what he did or where he went, he went as one who no longer belonged to himself, but went as *"a prisoner of Jesus Christ,"* because, on his day of conversion, Paul died to himself to live full-out for Christ!

It's as if Paul was saying to himself – *"I can't believe it! I had once been involved in what I thought was pleasing to God. I was an outstanding Jew. I was a respected religious leader in the community, a devote Pharisee, obedient to the law. And then God stepped into my life and humbled me, giving me this newfound faith in Jesus Christ. And if that's not all, He gave me a ministry to the Gentiles, and none of this had anything to do with my gifts or abilities or worth as a Jew. It was all a gift because of God's amazing grace."* Paul's brutal honesty here should speak to everyone here this morning. We as well are not worthy to tell others about Christ and His saving grace, but like Paul, God's gift of grace gives us the ability to tell our story of how God reached down and saved us and transformed our heart, calling us, like Paul, to be the bearers of Good News to a hurting world, a world living without hope. So, if God could transform and use a self-righteous

rebellious persecutor of Christians like Paul, He can use anyone, and what a great privilege it is to be used by God to bring others to Christ!

Paul emphasizes here once again that the Gospel breaks down all barriers, promising salvation to all people, not just for a certain select group of people. So, the Gospel is not just for people who are similar to us, but also for those who are very different from us – those who have different political views, different religious views, different economic views, and different racial views. Therefore, we are not to have any hang-ups or prejudice, but willing to go to anyone that God leads us to share the Gospel with, being a servant to all. Having the same attitude as Paul, who made this claim in **1 Corinthians 9:19-23 (The Passion Translation)**, *“Now, even though I am free from obligations to others, I joyfully make myself a servant to all in order to win as many converts as possible. I became a Jew to the Jewish people in order to win them to the Messiah. I became like one under the law to gain the people who were stuck under the law, even though I myself am not under the law. And to those who are without the Jewish laws (Gentiles), I became like them, as one without the Jewish laws, in order to win them, although I am not outside the law of God but under the law of Christ. I become weak to the weak to win the weak. I have adapted to the culture of every place I’ve gone so that I could more easily win people to Christ. I’ve done all this so that I would become God’s partner for the sake of the gospel.”* Like Paul, we are to find common ground with all those we come into contact with, so we can influence and save some. Now, this doesn’t mean we ever compromise our faith – it just means that we let go of the non-essentials of the faith to build relationships with others that desperately need Christ in their lives. So that is the first great mystery that Paul reveals in this letter – everyone is included – we are all ONE IN CHRIST – a new humanity!

The other great mystery that is revealed in these verses – is the mystery of suffering. Paul states in **verse 1**, that he is a prisoner of Christ Jesus. We realize that Paul wrote this letter from his prison cell in Rome, but he doesn’t say, *“I am a prisoner of Rome;”* instead, he says *“I am a prisoner of Christ Jesus.”* And then in **verse 13 (The Passion Translation)**, Paul states how Christians are called to suffer for each other, *“My dear friends, I pray that you will remain strong and not be discouraged or ashamed by all that I suffer on your behalf, for it is for your glory.”* The great mystery Paul is telling us about here is that even though we suffer, it can bring glory to God, and it can work out for good. Unfortunately, suffering is a part of life, and if given the choice we would choose to be free of all

types of suffering. No one likes to suffer, and no one would choose to suffer! No one would say, *“I can’t wait to suffer some more. I’m looking forward to suffering again next week. I can hardly wait!”* However, physical, emotional, and spiritual suffering comes at times, and we have to deal with it with the strength that the Lord gives us individually and the strength He has given to us corporately as His church – we are not called to suffer alone, we share in each other’s suffering.

As we suffer – we have to remember that God is never the source of our suffering, but can use our suffering and hardships for His good. A great example is found in the life of Joseph, who was sold into slavery by his brothers and suffered in an Egyptian prison for 18 years, until he became second in command to Pharaoh. Looking back at his life, Joseph tells his brothers in **Genesis 50:20**, ***“You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.”*** Looking back, we can often see the good that came out of our times of suffering. Looking back to 1988 and 1989, I can now see the good that was accomplished in my life when we went through those devastating church split. I don’t believe that I would be a pastor today if it wasn’t for that testing ground of suffering, because it was during that time of suffering that I learned to forgive and learned to lean on God and not on my own understanding, as a result, coming closer to God and getting more serious about my faith. We have to remember that the author of suffering is always the devil, but God can make you stronger and better during your time of suffering if you allow Him. And if you won’t allow God to make you **BETTER**, you will end up becoming **BITTER**!

It is said that hindsight is 20/20! How many of you have endured a period of hardship or suffering and then after you got through it, you could look back and say, *“As bad as I thought that was at the time, when I was right in the middle of it, I am now a better person because I endured and learned something. I can look back and say that I grew in my faith.”* If you can look back and say you grew closer to the Lord through your suffering, then you need to praise God and say along with Joseph, ***“(Satan) you intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good.”*** This is the other great mystery that Paul is speaking about here, the insight to understand the good that God has accomplished in your life through hardships and suffering!

The Apostle Peter said that Christ suffered in the flesh for us, and we should be willing to do the same, ***“Since Christ, though innocent, suffered in his flesh for you, now you also must be a prepared soldier, having the same mind-set, for***

whoever had died in his body is done with sin. So live the rest of your earthly life no longer concerned with human desires but consumed with what brings pleasure to God” (1 Peter 4:1-2). Our calling is to die to our desires for all the comforts in this life and be committed to pleasing our Lord!

Many years ago – Max Lucado wrote a book called “*On the Anvil*.” His book speaks about the different kinds of tools in a blacksmith shop, and how these tools represent different groups of people within the church. Max Lucado says that some tools are hardened, sharpened and refined by the blacksmith, ready for use. They represent people that have gone through the fires of tribulation and adversity and are now ready to be used by God. The only thing required of these tools is that whenever God uses these sharpened tools, they tend to get dull, so they need to return to the blacksmith shop to get re-sharpened and then get back out there to be used by God. The other kind of tool in a blacksmith shop is one that is imperfect and needs to be fashioned by the blacksmith into something useful. So, the blacksmith needs to take this imperfect metal and place into the hot coals and pump the bellows to make the metal glow red hot, because it’s only when the metal glows red hot that the blacksmith can see the imperfections and flaws and work them out by putting the heated metal on the anvil and get rid of the imperfections with his hammer. The point is that as imperfect humans, we all need to go through the fire of suffering, because it is only then that the flaws and imperfections in our character become visible. That may be what God is doing in your life right now, working out the flaws and imperfections so He can use you for His glory. So, you may be wondering why you are going through a rough time right now, but maybe God has you on His anvil, using His hammer to shape you into a useful tool that He can use for His kingdom purposes!

Paul’s point throughout this letter is to remind us that UNITY is very costly. For Paul, it cost him his freedom. He was in prison because of his preaching unity – that Jew and non-Jew could become one humanity. In fact, in the book of Acts Paul was in prison at least seven times and at times for years. And then God also used this mystery of UNITY to educate the angels in heaven according to **verse 8**, ***“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.”***

The rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms are the angels – this unity of Jew and non-Jew was also a mystery to the angels in heaven who are always paying attention to what is happening on this earth – they are watching us and are amazed at the wisdom of God – bringing UNITY to two groups that hated each other and

make them into one new humanity – brothers and sisters IN CHRIST. UNITY is also costly to us, it cost us our pride, causing us to humbly accept everyone that God puts in our path, whether we like them or not. We have to love them as brothers and sisters IN CHRIST – without exception. And then UNITY cost Jesus His life – Jesus died to not only to reconcile us back to God, but also to get people to love one another and be united to one another.

THE CHURCH IS GOD’S SECRET – THE GREAT MYSTERY REVEALED!

Paul’s point here is that the Church was God’s idea from the beginning of time, but He kept it a secret until Christ arrived on this earth and died to make us ONE, and that’s why the church is central to the ministry of the Gospel. The church may be weak at times, it may fail at times, it may go through seasons of confusion, disorder and division, but the church is the institution that God has chosen to bring people from all nations into the kingdom of God as one new humanity. So, the church is central for others to hear the Good News of the Gospel and know that they are included and accepted into the family of God.

And lastly, the church is central to Christian living, helping us to live out our calling with freedom and confidence. Paul ends this section with **verse 12-13**, by telling us to never be discouraged because IN CHRIST we have free, unreserved access to God at all times, ***“In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.”*** God gives us the boldness and confidence to step out in faith; knowing that He goes with us every step of the way!

Paul is an example for us to follow – as he was willing to pay any price to see the church unified and grow and mature in faith. Therefore, the church is not an option for believers to come and go as they please; instead, the church is essential to living out our faith. The church is where believers gather to become equipped to live out their divine calling in this world. The church is where we worship God, where we serve one another in love, and where we get set on fire and get encouraged to go out and tell the world the great mystery that has now been revealed to us, telling the world about the unsearchable riches that are available to everyone once they come to believe and surrender their lives to Christ Jesus as their Lord and Saviour. The church is the only hope of the world and like Paul, we should see it as a great privilege to gather together as God’s people, God’s family – to spur one another on and show them how much God loves them!

I heard a story that most churches today are like a group of Porcupines on a cold night trying to get close to each other to keep warm. They need each other but they keep needling each other! My prayer is that SCCC not be that kind of church!