

God's New Society

Message 6

The Mystery of God

Ephesians 3:1-21

Introduction

One of Ruth's favorite authors is Agatha Christie. She read all 100 of her books as a child, and has seen the BBC productions on video. If you are not familiar with Agatha Christie, she was a famous English author of murder mysteries. Mysteries capture your attention by providing clues through the course of the book, and you try to figure out "who done it" before you get to the end. Ruth also enjoyed the *Columbo* television series, so Daniel got her the complete set on DVD for Christmas. Ruth can enjoy these things over and over because she does not remember the plots! Columbo was a popular 70's detective series, but Ruth had forgotten that there was a curious twist to these murder mysteries – you know the murderer from the beginning. The interest of the show is in watching how Columbo pieced together the clues to figure out who did it.

The Mystery

The central concept of Ephesians chapter 3 is the mystery of God. The word appears four times, so it is obviously important. To understand this chapter we first need a clear understanding of the word translated "mystery". In English we usually use the word "mystery" to refer to something hidden or unknown. Agatha Christie's books are mysteries because you do not know who committed the murder. But this is not what is meant in the Bible. The Greeks used the word *μυστηριον* to refer to something which is hidden to all but those who are initiated into a cult. The ancient mystery religions such as Mithra, Isis and Osiris, Dionysius, and Eleusis all involved "mysteries" which no one knew, but were revealed to those initiated into their worship. In the New Testament this aspect of initiation is absent. *Μυστηριον* means simply a truth which was formerly hidden, but now is known because God has revealed it. Anyone can know the mystery of God, but only if he hears it as God has revealed it.

And what is this mystery of God? Paul says in verse three that he has already briefly explained it, and he goes on to say in verse six that it is the participation of the gentiles in God's new society. Before Christ came, salvation came only through the Jews. They alone possessed the oracles of God. Israel alone held God's promise of salvation by a deliverer. As Paul said in chapter two, before Christ came the gentiles were "without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world." After Christ the gentiles joined the Jews in receiving salvation.

But some will protest, "The Old Testament clearly and repeatedly stated that salvation would come to the gentiles. How can this be a mystery if it is written everywhere in the scriptures?" The mystery is not that the Gentiles would be saved. Indeed this is obvious to any attentive reader of the Old Testament. The mystery involves *how* the gentiles should be saved. As you read the gospels, it is equally clear that all the Jews thought when the Messiah came he would drive out the Romans, restore national Israel, and rule as King in Jerusalem. The gentiles would be saved by joining Israel, as a few had throughout history.

But this is not what happened. Jesus did none of these things. He failed in every aspect of what the Jews expected of the Messiah. He did not drive out the Romans, He did not restore Israel as a sovereign nation, and He did not become King. Instead He died! Then He rose from the dead, ascended to His throne in heaven, sent the Holy Spirit, and established the church. No one expected this! But the act of Jesus which was almost impossible to understand or accept was to bring the gentiles into the church *on the same basis as the Jews*. This was unimaginable, incomprehensible, and reprehensible. As we noted last week, the Jews hated the gentiles, and the gentiles had no love for the Jews. The Jews considered the gentiles filthy,

debauched, and out of reach of salvation – unless they were baptized, circumcised, and became Jews. No one – I say *no one* – ever would have thought that Jews and gentiles would follow Jesus with the same status. But now they are together the members of God’s new society – and this happened because God revealed it to His apostles and prophets. Until Christ the possibility of Jew-gentile unity was unthinkable. After Christ this hidden plan was openly displayed.

The Greek words used in verse six show how vital this mystery is to God’s plan for the church. The words used are συγκληρονόμα, σύσσωμα, and συμμετοχα. They are compound words, all beginning with the prefix συν, which means together. The root words mean heirs, bodies, and partners. So a more literal translation of verse six would be “*joint heirs, joint bodies, joint partners* of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel”. Joint heirs means that what was promised to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, and all Israel is now promised to Jews and gentiles equally and fully. Furthermore, we are just as much Israel as any Jew. The one body of the church is composed of equal members. Finally, this is a full and equal partnership. There are no junior members here. The gentiles, who entered last, have equal privileges with the Jews whose ancestors rejected Christ. None are superior to the others. The focus of our united collaboration is the promise in Christ Jesus. This is the key point. *Jesus* is the promise. The promises to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, and all Israel were never about the land, a stone temple, a tribe or race. The land was promised only as a foretaste of the whole earth. The temple was only a symbol of the better temple made of people, the church composed of living stones. The Jews were the beginning of the universal people of God. Isaac was the child of promise only because he foreshadowed Jesus, the true child of promise. Thus the church replaced Israel as God’s chosen people and has inherited the promises to the Jews.

NT interprets OT

1 Peter 2:9-10 recasts the Old Testament promise to the nation of Israel for the church

The Ministry

The context of Paul’s discussion of the mystery of God is his ministry to the Gentiles
...to the Gentiles

“Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles” (v. 1)

arrested on charges of preaching to the Gentiles (Acts 21:26 ff)

seized, attacked, rescued

defense

outrage at mission to the Gentiles

powered by grace (vv. 7-12)

cf. 2:8-10

directed to the Gentiles (v. 8), to all (v. 9), to “the principalities and powers in the heavenlies” (v. 10)

“It is through the old creation (the universe) that God reveals his glory to humans; it is through the new creation (the church) that he reveals his wisdom to angels.” (Stott p. 124) (v. 10)

characterized by boldness and confidence (v. 12)

produced encouragement and glory for the Ephesians (v. 13)

centered on the church (3 centralities: Stott, pp 126-130)

the church is central to history

- the mystery “which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets” is the formation of the church (v. 5)

- Christ is visible on earth in His body, the church

the church is central to the gospel

- proclaimed by the church
- the new society created by the gospel

the church is central to the Christian life

The Marvel

the reason for Paul's prayer

points from verse 14 to 1 to ch 2 (note Paul's convoluted grammar)

"Therefore you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God..." 2:19-22

Paul prays for the Ephesians because they are now God's temple – God's glory will be revealed in them

the content of the prayer

for strength by the HS

for Christ to dwell in us by faith

"The prayer is that Christ might settle down in our hearts and control them as the rightful owner." (Boice p. 110)

for us to be rooted and grounded in love

for us to grasp the fullest dimension of Christ's love

prisoner of the Spanish Inquisition

for us to know the love that surpasses knowledge

know as experience

for us to be filled with the fullness of God

the God of our prayers

is able to do

what we ask

all we ask or imagine

above all we ask or think

immeasurably (exceedingly abundantly) above all we ask or think

Our God

is this the God of your prayer?

is this your God?

what can you imagine God doing?

Converting the nations? Islam, Hindu, Buddhist, atheist

Discipling the nations? secular Europe, immoral Africa, immature Latin America, lawless America

God has given us all the blessings of the Spirit

He is at work in us with the resurrection power of Christ

He is ruling the earth through us

has God's word changed you this semester? or are you deaf to His word?

are you living and praying differently?

are you living and praying in the power of the Spirit, or are you coasting along?
is the power of God increasingly at work in you?
are you waiting for the rapture so you can excuse your laziness?

God's power at work in Aunt Dorothy

inoperable illness, excruciatingly painful sores
grandson flying recognizance over Iraq
son taking relief to refugees in Sudan
all these face death daily; all live by grace; all expect God to do the impossible

my prayers

some of you will destroy Islam
some of you will strengthen the church in Africa
some of you will turn back the march of evil in our nation
some of you will have a transforming effect on your professions
some of you will rear large families of powerful Christians

a habit of asking for small things is insulting to God

believe the gospel

Jesus' death shows that His love is immeasurable
believe this. accept it. pray as if His love is immeasurable
pray as if God loves us enough to do the impossible

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