



THE MYSTERY REVEALED: NO OUTSIDERS!

SERIES: THE RESTORATION OF MANKIND

Catalog No. 902

Ephesians 3:1-13

Ninth Message

Brian Morgan

February 21, 1993

Have you ever asked yourself what it is that drives you to do most of what you do? A brother shared with me at a recent men's retreat for a church in the East Bay. He was troubled by deep depression which manifested itself in frequent job changes. This continual need for change indicated that he was running from something, he felt. When I asked him to share a little about his background, he said that his father had rejected him as a boy, and this rejection greatly damaged his sense of worth. Later in life, his own nine-year-old son died from leukemia, and this tragedy resulted in the break-up of his marriage. He confessed he had never truly grieved over the loss of his son, but rather had continued his habit of running away from problems. Even after he came to Christ and was remarried to a Christian spouse he still made frequent job changes.

This man's story is typical of so many in our generation. It has been my observation that pain from our past is behind much of what drives us. How ironic, to think that the source of our pain is the feeling that we are outsiders in our own families. We respond to this rejection by building walls of protection to block out the pain and distance ourselves from people. But, rather than protecting us, these walls form tombs that deny our souls passion and feeling. We continue living and coping as best we can, of course, but we stop feeling. In the prison that we have constructed to protect ourselves, we fall into despair and begin to loathe our very existence.

The New Testament has a term for this condition: it is called "*losing heart*." I prefer the phrase used in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the OT, however: it translates a Hebrew word meaning "to have a sickening dread," "to loathe something," or "have long-standing revulsion towards something." Rebecca used this phrase when her son Esau married outside the covenant: "I loathe my life because of the daughters of Heth!" said the heartbroken mother (Gen. 27:46). The very thing she dreaded had happened, and she loathed her life as a result. She had lost the desire and determination to go on.

As we resume our studies in the book of Ephesians, beginning this morning in chapter 3 of Paul's letter, we will see that the circumstances in which the apostle found himself — he was imprisoned in Rome — could easily have led him to lose heart. Actually, he was keenly aware that because of his situation, others were losing heart. His rejection by his own people, following his decision to follow Christ and take the gospel to the Gentiles, had hurt him deeply. He was cast into a prison, from where he wrote this letter. He harbored no expectations of justice or release. Yet he wrote, "I ask you not to lose heart at my tribulations on your behalf, for they are your glory." What was it about Paul's understanding of his circumstances that caused him to feel, not loathing, but glory? He tells us in this text that he had acquired a revolutionary understanding of a certain mystery. This knowledge set him free from despair, and placed him on a stage to play a role that would have eternal significance in the drama of human history.

In our text today, therefore, Paul shares, first, biographical material regarding his calling as a preacher, and second, the purpose and meaning behind all of history, what he calls the "mystery."

This mystery that Paul refers to is revealed in three movements. It is rather like a play in three separate acts, and this is how I propose to take this text. There are some unusual things about this drama, however. Each act has different actors, and each act is played before a new audience. Furthermore, as the play progresses, with each act the mode of communication changes.

It is essential that Christians come to an understanding of these matters, for if we don't comprehend our part, and which of the three acts we are to play in, then we will have no sense of the divine purpose for our lives. In this drama, therefore, we will discover the key to history, the key to our own significance, and the key to not losing heart.

In the first act, which covers verses 1 through 6 of this third chapter of Ephesians, God himself takes the stage. He is the only actor on the boards as the play opens. The audience, present by invitation only, is quite limited — just Paul and the other apostles.

I. Act 1: The Mystery Revealed To Paul 3:1-6

For this reason, I Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles,— if indeed you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace which was given to me for you, that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, [as I wrote before in brief, referring to which you can by reading understand my insight into the mystery of Christ], which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as now it has been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit; (3:1-5)

(a) The Definition of a Mystery

The English word "mystery" commonly refers to something that is obscure, secret and puzzling. In the Scriptures, however, the mysteries of God are secret in the sense that they cannot be discovered apart from divine revelation. They are shut up to human wisdom. But these mysteries are absolutely essential to our existence, since they reveal the answers to the great questions of life: Why are we here? Where are we going? What is the purpose of life, of history? Can we be certain of the outcome?

(b) The Mode of Communication:

Direct Revelation

Paul says that God, in a direct revelation, had made known to him a mystery which had never before been revealed to the sons of men: "in other generations was not made known to the sons of men" (5); "which for ages has been hidden in God" (9). And he had received this mystery as a gift of God; it was not a product of his learning or upbringing.

Next, the apostle goes on to explain the mystery, in verse 6:

(c) The Content of the Mystery

...that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel...

It is hard to grasp how shocking these words would have seemed to a Jew, especially a Pharisee, in Paul's day. The Pharisees came into existence in Israel during the Hasmonean rule, around 63 BC. They were a pressure group who were deeply troubled by the compromise of purity in Israel. Though the exile was over, and Israel had returned to the land and was in control of the temple, the Pharisees abhorred the corruptness of the ruling priestly classes. They feared paganism from without and assimilation from within. The restoration which followed the exile was not yet complete, they felt, thus they summoned Israel back to the great ancestral traditions, insisting on the purity regulations and the study of Torah. If Israel would live up to these exacting standards, they taught, the Messiah would come to liberate the nation, punish her pagan enemies, and rebuild the temple.

The zeal with which the Pharisees sought to impose their agenda took on revolutionary overtones on occasion. Whenever there was a power vacuum in Rome, for example, they took part in Jewish revolts against the Roman conquerors. Before his conversion, Paul himself, by his own admission and by the evidence of others, demonstrated this kind of revolutionary zeal. He was outraged at the message of the early Christians announcing Jesus as Messiah. These heretics welcomed not only the outcasts of Israel, but the hated goyim — even their Roman oppressors! As far as Paul was concerned, saying that the Gentiles were fellow-heirs of the promise would be as shocking as telling a survivor of Auschwitz today that God would freely offer forgiveness to Adolph Eichmann; or to a Jew who survived the Gulag in Russia, that God would lay out the welcome mat for the hated secret police, the KGB. No wonder Paul tried to hunt down and imprison all who professed the name of Jesus.

But all that changed on the Damascus Road when this zealous Pharisee had a vision of the resurrected Jesus. It was then he learned, in a new revelation, that the Servant Messiah had come to earth to take on the role of Israel. And his shed blood had such efficacy that it would cleanse not just Israel, but all the nations of the earth.

This then is the mystery of which Paul speaks in these opening verses of chapter 3. Henceforth, the Gentiles would be regarded as “fellow heirs,” “fellow members of the same body,” and “fellow partakers of the promise in Jesus Christ through the gospel.”

As “fellow heirs,” they would partake in the same blessing that was given to Abraham and to Israel. The Gentiles, who once had trodden under foot the Holy Land and defiled the temple, were now welcome to possess the land and enter into the temple. Actually, the New Testament declares that the Gentiles, through Christ, would *become* the new temple.

And second, they were now “fellow members of the same body.” In the OT, it was theoretically possible for one to lay claim to an inheritance through adoption and still not be regarded as a full family member. But it would not be so in the body of Christ. In this new organism, every fellow member had full status, and they would function in very significant ways.

A study at the OT shows that none of the prophets went so far as to say this. For example, the vision of Isaiah 66 describes the

Messianic age, when the Gentiles would come to Jerusalem carrying their offering. Some of the Gentiles would even function as priests— some, but not all. In the NT, however, the apostles Peter and Paul declare that not just some, but all members of the body are priests and full family members. William Hendrickson, describing this alliance between Jew and Gentile in the new arrangement for living, says this is “not an alliance, or friendly agreement, or outward combination of the two in partnership, but a permanent fusion, a perfect spiritual union.”

Third, says Paul, the Gentiles have become “fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” The “promise” here is the gift of the Holy Spirit. We discern this from his letter to the Galatians: “in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith” (Gal. 3:14). So Gentiles had equal status with Jews who are sons of Abraham.

Paul amplifies this, also in Galatians, where he wrote, “If you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, heirs according to promise.” Gentiles, therefore, have significance as full family members. The prophets, of course, did refer to Israel being a “light to all the nations,” and of the whole earth being blessed through Abraham's seed, and that all nations would come to Jerusalem to find the Messiah. But they never spoke of the mystery of the new creation, the new humanity called the church.

Here is how John Stott describes this, in his commentary on Ephesians,

But what neither the Old Testament nor Jesus revealed was the radical nature of God's plan, which was that the theocracy (the Jewish nation under God's rule) would be terminated, and replaced by a new international community, the church; that this church would be ‘the body of Christ’, organically united to him; and that Jews and Gentiles would be incorporated into Christ and his church on equal terms without any distinction. It was this complete union of Jews, Gentiles and Christ which was radically new, and which God revealed to Paul, overcoming his entrenched Jewish prejudice (*The Message of Ephesians* [IVP, 1979] 118).

It is my opinion that God is still relentlessly pursuing Israel and that they will finally repent and turn to Christ. But when they do so, God is not going to set about establishing another creation. We are not going to go backwards, into the past, again. Rather, he will graft the Jews into this new creation, the body of Christ (which Paul describes in Romans 11). This is why Paul does not despair. He had been given a unique foreview from his place among a very limited audience as history was played out before him. God himself had opened the apostle's eyes to show him and his fellow-apostles something no one had ever seen or even dreamed of before, the unveiling of the new creation, the new humanity.

So here in Act 1 of this play God himself is the main character. Paul and the other apostles make up the audience in this private showing of history in the making.

In Act 2, we find that Paul and his fellow apostles, the audience of Act 1, are now invited to come on stage as participants. Preaching, not direct revelation as in Act 1, is now the mode of communication. And, as the curtain rises, all the nations of the earth are seated in the audience.

II. Act 2: The Mystery Revealed To the Gentiles 3:7-9

...through the gospel, of which I became a minister, ac-

according to the gift of God's grace given to me according to the working of His power. To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God, who created all things;

(a) Paul's New Obligation

Having heard the mystery explained by God himself in Act 1, Paul, together with the other apostles, now takes the stage. He has already made reference to "the stewardship of God's grace given to me" (3:2), thus he now sees his role as a servant to make the gospel known to all the nations: "I was made a minister" (3:6b).

The entire focus of his life had changed. Instead of adopting a defensive posture and battling to preserve the purity of Judaism against the inroads of the barbarian Gentiles, he now lives for their salvation. He saw himself as a privileged servant, under obligation to dispense this mystery in full, just as an executor of an estate is charged to administer the whole inheritance to the heirs for their benefit and advantage, and to make sure they possess it in full. And not only is the apostle given the obligation to preach, he receives the resources to do so.

Paul welcomes this obligation, not from a sense of duty, but appreciation. "To me, the very least of all saints," says the apostle, "this grace was given..." The former persecutor of Christians, the zealot who watched as Stephen was stoned to death, cannot fathom why he was chosen to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. So appreciation became the driving force of the apostle's life.

I have noticed that our most significant ministries here at PBC/Cupertino are ministries to outsiders: unwed mothers, abused women, refugees from foreign lands, the poor, AIDS sufferers, etc. It is significant, too, that none of the leaders of these valuable ministries are working because they feel bound to do so. They are involved because they feel privileged to share the good news of salvation to outsiders and help lead them into one family in Christ.

(b) Mode of Communication: Preaching

In Act 1, as we have seen, the mode of communication was direct revelation. Here in Act 2, the mystery was to be communicated through preaching to all the nations: "to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ." To preach the good news which is "unfathomable" ("not to be tracked out"), inscrutable, incomprehensible ("like the sea, too deep to fathom, or the earth, too vast to explore") (John Stott).

When the gospel is preached, according to Paul, a miracle occurs. Preaching "enlightens all men with the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God, who created all things." The Creator God, the one who created light out of darkness (Gen.1:1) is the very one who enlightens the minds of sinners to behold the wonderful mystery of salvation in Christ. Just as the eyes of the blind man were opened through the miracle that Jesus performed, so Paul himself would see miracles accomplished as God enlightened the minds of sinners who had been living in darkness.

So the God who created all things is now in Christ restoring his creation and uniting all things in Christ. This is why Paul does not lose heart. His suffering results in our glory. The focus of his life has changed from a persecutor of the Gentiles to a preacher of the gospel of grace. Although he is writing these verses in prison, he does not regard himself as Caesar's prisoner.

On the contrary, he is a prisoner of Christ, and Caesar is his captive!

Two weeks ago I led a memorial service for Sheri Almborg who died of cancer at the age of 30. She had been part of our congregation for just a few months, and I first met her when I visited her in the hospital before she died. Sheri wanted but a few things in life: to be married and to have children, and to have her life count for Christ. Most of the four hundred people who attended her memorial service did not know the Savior. At that service her father read a letter that Sheri had written to him when she was a high schooler, telling him how much she loved him. Then he read a letter he had written to her, telling her of his love for her. He told the assembled crowd that Sheri's dearest wish for them would be that they come to know Christ. Her suffering, their glory. I am convinced that in the end, we will yet see Sheri's wedding, and we will behold her spiritual children who were born through her suffering.

In Act 3, the stage changes once more.

III. Act 3: The Mystery Revealed To the Angels 3:10-12

In order that now might be made known to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenlies through the church the manifold wisdom of God, in accordance with the purpose of the ages which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and confident access through faith in Him.

(a) The Recipients Of the Mystery: The Angels

Here, the stage is enlarged to accommodate all the new people of God, Jew and Gentile alike. The curtain rises, and as you and I and all the church look out over the audience, we see that it is made up of angels, the silent heavenly beings.

(b) The Mode of Communication: The Church On Display

The actors do not speak directly to the audience this time. Rather, the angels are watching as the church speaks, not to them, but to God in prayer. The most beautiful scenes in the drama *Les Miserables*, I think, are not when the actors sing to the audience, but when the hero sings his prayers directly to God, at his conversion, when he intercedes for a son, and finally at his own death, when he prayed, "forgive me all my trespasses, and take me to your glory." This is what the angels are doing in Act 3 — listening to the prayers of the faithful.

In a sense, the angels are attending graduate school as they observe the saints and listen to their prayers. In the OT, the angels took a course which I will call *Division and Separation 101a*. Then they learned of the holiness and transcendence of God. All through the OT, barriers were established to guard the holiness of God, the sanctity of the temple and God's people. Only Jews were allowed to enter, and they had to be priests who were purified and cleansed, who observed the right dietary laws, etc. But in the NT, the angels study a new course, which I call *Demolition and Access 101b*. Now, through the blood of Christ, all the walls have been broken down and the saints enjoy immediate access to God. Thus Paul describes these silent heavenly beings watching us in awe as we freely come to the Father, "in whom we have bold and confident access through faith in Him." And the glorious news is that this precious blood of Christ is so powerful it not only cleanses the outcasts of Israel from their impurity and sin, but even the Gentiles are welcomed into the temple, entering freely into the holy of holies. The cleansing is so complete, we even become the new temple! Seen in this light, Paul's sufferings, which might look like a defeat to the Ephe-

sians, are actually the blessed tool that drives him to the throne room of grace in prayer. And when he prays, the watching angels are awed by the access which is his through the blood of Christ.

(c) The Grand Finale

Paul says that this manifold wisdom of God, which is to be displayed by the church to the angels, was in accordance with the eternal purpose of God. (Or, literally translated, it was “the purpose of the ages.”) What a privilege to be living in the age that Paul says was the whole goal of history, the creation of the church, a new humanity under Christ where all things are united. The church is not some temporary arrangement; it will endure forever.

“So don’t lose heart because of my tribulations on your behalf,” says Paul, “for they are your glory.” In the OT, Joseph’s tribulations saved Israel and preserved his nation during a time of famine. His sufferings had national significance. Paul’s sufferings were even more significant. They were to have international and eternal significance: he suffered for you and me.

Let me draw four implications from this text.

IV. Implications of the Mystery

(a) Protection From Imposters

First, this mystery of which Paul speaks protects us today from impostors who would try to mislead us. The mystery, as we have seen, was revealed in a three-act drama. There were three different modes of revelation, different actors, and different audiences. We have learned that we are now in the third act. If someone comes along, therefore, claiming to have received a secret revelation from God, you can rest in the knowledge that this mystery about the culmination of all of history has been public domain for 2000 years. Everything has already been revealed by God to his apostles, and they in turn passed it on to us through the preaching of the word. There is no more to come.

(b) Get Into the Play!

Second, this text challenges us to become involved in the play. Sitting in the audience is not good enough; every Christian is invited to be on stage and to partake in the drama. The play cannot continue without you. There is a special role for you that no one else can play. What a tragedy when some, because they feel unworthy, insist on trying to remain in the audience! Remember, you will have capacity for ministry to the degree that you have been hurt in life (2 Cor. 1). If you have been rejected, as Paul was rejected by his own people, that very rejection is your entree to ministry. The man whom I mentioned at the beginning of this message felt free to share with me because he had been invited, despite all his problems, to be involved in the music ministry at the retreat. This filled him with such a sense of

his own worth that he felt free to share his vulnerability, and his openness encouraged the other men to do the same. So, walk confidently on to the stage, knowing that God has designed your part specifically for you. Notice, too, that the stage keeps growing. Resist the temptation to hoard ministry to yourself. Keep welcoming others to come onstage with you.

(c) Know Your Audience and Play Your Part

Third, know your audience, and play the correct role. Paul was rejected by his own people, but he did not insist on forcing himself and his teaching on them. His rejection created a stage for another audience — the Gentiles — who themselves felt rejected. Although he was reluctant at first to go, he went before them to preach the good news and welcome them as fellow-heirs. The most receptive audience to the gospel are the outcasts, so the Christian’s task is to find them and preach the message of salvation to them. Seek out those by whom you are most threatened. Then, rather than building walls to keep them out, welcome them — unwed mothers, victims of sexual abuse, AIDS patients, political refugees, the homeless — and share the gospel of salvation with them.

And know your role. The method of communication in Act 2 was public preaching, but when Paul faced suffering and opposition, he prayed in private. I think at times we reverse these. When Christians get upset at the world, they preach privately to each other and to opponents of the gospel. Then, when we face opposition, we pray publicly, organizing public prayer marches to demonstrate how pious we are. We pray in public and preach in private. But I think we’re aiming at the wrong audience. People are not impressed by our public prayer. What convinces them are our tears of acceptance in the gospel. Thus I think this text is saying we should pray in private and preach in public.

(d) Be Motivated By Appreciation

And finally, be motivated by appreciation. This is what keeps the play moving throughout the ages. As a young man I was pursuing a wonderful pagan life, I thought, but God drew me into the audience to watch the great drama of salvation unfold. Then, after I came to faith, he introduced me to the best teachers of his word, men and women filled with integrity and truth. I contributed nothing to their message; everything was handed to me as a gift. Today, as I turn 42 years old, I have to ask myself, who am I that I now search the unfathomable riches of Christ and preach them to you and to the nations, you who are so valuable in the eyes of the Savior? Who am I that so many people from across the world, persecuted outcasts, have become my dearest friends? I find it hard to believe that I, the least among all the saints, have been allowed to play a role in this great drama, this “mystery ... as now it has been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit.” I can only respond in humble appreciation to God who gave me all of this as a gift of his grace.

© 1993 Peninsula Bible Church/Cupertino