



# HICKORY GROVE

BAPTIST CHURCH

The Mystery of Who God Saves

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Ephesians 3:1-7

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*<sup>1</sup> For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles— <sup>2</sup> assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, <sup>3</sup> how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. <sup>4</sup> When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> This mystery is<sup>[a]</sup> that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. <sup>7</sup> 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.*

*(Pastor prays)*

The gospel of Jesus changes a man or a woman. The writer of Ephesians, a man named Paul, was an impressive guy before he ever became a Christian. In fact, he lists a resume of sorts in Philippians 3:5-6. Listen to the tenfold resume: *circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.* In Acts 22:3, Paul goes on to say that he was born in Tarsus and educated by Gamaliel, who was the most famous scholar of the day. On top of that, Paul was a Roman citizen. Before he came to Christ, Paul had the ancient world in

the palm of his hand. Some of you are like that. Paul was climbing and striving and searching and digging. And when you read his story, by Paul's own account, we find out the real gospel creates real change. So much so that after his conversion, Paul would say in Philippians 3:7-8, *But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him. Verse 10 goes on to say, that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.*

Our Christianity has grown soft, pale, and weak. There's a hell out there, and our tissue-like faith will dissolve in that inferno. So many churchgoers are ingrown and self-absorbed and easily angered and consumer-driven. We want what we want and if we don't get it, we leave. That's not the gospel, that's customer satisfaction. The gospel creates a man who says, "I want to know the suffering of Christ. I want to be like Him in His death. For me to live is Christ and to die is gain." We've lost the culture war, and Satan, our enemy, is systematically dismantling whatever God-honoring framework our country once had. As an example, same-sex marriage is a gospel issue. When Paul talks about marriage in Ephesians 5:32 he says, *This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.* It's a picture of the gospel. I feel very comfortable saying that the church is losing the gospel. It has been lessened by liberalism and has been clamped by conservatism. It has been distorted by sexualism and enthusiasm. The real gospel in the Bible is what Paul is getting at.

### The Real Gospel Creates Real Change

Let's take a look at Paul and find out a little about those changes. Here is the first point, number one:

#### **The Gospel Changes How You View Yourself**

We all have some sort of self-perception or self-image. And oftentimes, there's a big difference between who we think we are and who we really are.

Or even worse, whoever people think we are and who we really are. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great Christian martyr at the hands of the Nazis, wrote in prison—before they executed him—a poem named, “Who Am I?” It’s worth looking up. I’ll quote just part of it. “Am I one person today and tomorrow another? Am I really all that other people say of me or am I only what I myself know of myself?” What the gospel of Christ does is give us clarity in our identity. Let me show you what I mean in Ephesians 1:1—*Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God*—and in Ephesians 3:1—*For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles*. How can he be both? How can he have the position of apostle and be sitting in the squander of a prison? Paul’s apostleship determined his whole life and identity, but that apostleship was lived out as a prisoner and a slave. And he found joy in it. He didn’t spend a lifetime thinking he was cheated or didn’t get a fair shake. Any of you that are tempted to self-pity, understand that you are flirting with idolatry with yourself as the idol if you get upset that you didn’t get what you were due. The gospel shatters that attitude, and you can say with Paul, who says in 1 Corinthians 15:9-10, *For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me*. You are a child of God, positionally. He has raised you up with Him and has seated you with Him in the heavenly places in Jesus Christ. But, in this world, you are a slave to the gospel. You are willing to do, suffer, sacrifice, give up, hurt, and struggle—or even die—for the glory of the gospel. The real gospel creates real change. The gospel changes how you view yourself. Number two:

### **The Gospel Changes How You View God**

Notice again how Paul describes himself in verse one: *For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus*. In total, Paul probably spent five years in prison. An apostle, writer of half of the New Testament, and, besides Jesus himself, Paul of Tarsus has had the largest influence on the shape of Christianity. And yet he sat in filth, in prison. Not only that, he didn’t consider himself Nero’s

prisoner or Rome's prisoner, he saw the Lord's hand behind his imprisonment. Think about his mindset. He was convinced that this bad situation, being in prison, was the Lord's doing. He regarded himself as a prisoner by the will of the Master. In Colossians chapter one—the sister letter to Ephesians—Paul says, that he rejoices in his sufferings for your sake. He says that about being in prison. His view of God included seeing himself as one purchased by the blood of Christ. He is commissioned to live the gospel regardless of the suffering involved. Look, we have let the false gospel of “being comfortable” affect how we view God, so that when we suffer or hurt or are treated unfairly, we immediately feel slighted and wonder why would God do this, instead of trusting the purposes of God. God is in the midst of a really bad set of problems.

Chad and Melinda Freeman are our IMB missionaries. They are currently living in one of our mission properties. They have been out on the field in Southeast Asia for most of their marriage. Their two sons call Southeast Asia, home. Chad had back surgery that did not go well. We prayed for them on Wednesday because he is physically at the end of his rope and emotionally wrung out. Why would this happen to a young couple that has sacrificed everything? It has been very difficult for them, and even though it hurt them both, in each moment underneath their pain, they have an abiding trust in the plan of a good God that is in complete control. Do you believe that? Do you believe that God is in complete control of your life? Are you trusting that His purpose that you don't understand is good? How about the fact that you deserve more? That's the temptation for most of us who really are trying to live for Christ: doing the right things for our families and being solid employees. And when things are bad at home or your health fails or you are mistreated at work or you are ostracized at school, the temptation is to feel like you deserve more or that there is no real fairness. That's when we must expand our view of God and see His greater purpose in our lives and start asking, “How can I glorify God in this marriage? How can I glorify God in a hostile work environment? How can I glorify God in family, bad health, with wayward children, or crumbling finances?” We must make it so that the focus of our attention is not on you as much as it is on God and how to bring honor

to Him. That's what the gospel does. It takes you from a life that is all about you to a life that is all about God. It takes you from being self-centered to God-centered. So that you can say with Paul, "For me to live as Christ and to die is gain." The gospel changes how you view yourself. The gospel changes how you view God. Let's look at another point, number three:

### **The Gospel Changes How You View Your Resources**

Let me show you what I mean here. Your resources—all God has given you, your financial and emotional resources, your capabilities. Read verse one and notice the tone: *On behalf of you Gentiles—read verse two—assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you.* I just manage what was given to me, for you. And then in verse seven: *Of this gospel I was made a minister—a diakonos, servant—according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power.* All I have is subservient to the gospel. When you are gripped by Christ, it doesn't bother you to give, to give financially. Many have forgotten the gospel joy of giving to the gospel work of the church. Some people pay more on a car note each month than they give to the Lord's work at the church. And the gospel reminds us to hold loosely to things as we are gripped by the Lord. The gospel will change how you see what you've been given. The gospel will let you see that what you have been given is to be used primarily to see others come to Christ and support the gospel work around the world. Here is one last point. Number four:

### **The Gospel Changes How You View the Power of God**

Paul said in verse seven that God made him a minister. God gave him gifts that equipped him. God gave him power, but why? Paul uses the word *mystery* three times in this passage. Back in Colossians 1: 27 he says, *To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.* But here in verse six, Paul defines the mystery in broader terms. He says that 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.

This speaks to several things. I'll give you two. It eradicates racism. If you are a racist, your Christianity is not complete, or may not exist at all. This gospel has the power to take a person who has been caught in a culture of sex, adultery, lust, pornography, abortion, homosexuality, or fornication—all of which the Gentiles were involved in—this gospel removes the shame and forgives the sin. It restores the heart and sets you on a path of honoring God with your life. This is the real gospel, and the real gospel creates real change. You see God as holy, you see yourself as a sinner, and you see Christ as the Savior. Repent today and believe.

*(Pastor prays)*