

The Mystery Revealed

Ephesians 3:1-13

Rev. Brian Bill

February 10-11, 2024

A riddle is a question which requires a lot of thinking skills. To answer a riddle, one must think “outside of the box” to get the answer, which is often unexpected. Here are some examples.

Q: What is orange and sounds like a parrot?

A: A carrot.

Here’s another one.

Q: Kate’s mother has three children: Snap, Crackle and _____?

A: The answer is Kate.

This is a good example of how riddles, by using our existing expectations, can trip us up. Even though the answer is right in front of us, we’re tempted to continue the predictable pattern and miss it completely.

This one will take some brainpower.

Q: What was mysteriously unknown in the past but has been made majestically known in the present? Here’s another clue: “*Where is $1+1=1$ true?*”

A: The answer is the church where God established a new pattern by forming Jew and Gentile into one body as we learned last week in Ephesians 2:14-16: “***For He Himself is our peace, who has made us both **one**...that He might create in Himself **one** new man in the place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in **one** body through the cross.***”

Because of our union with Christ, our differences are put to death so we can live in communion with one another.

In our passage for today, while we won’t have to solve a riddle, we will seek to understand the word “**mystery**” because it’s used four times:

- Ephesians 3:3: “***How the **mystery** was made known...***”
- Ephesians 3:4: “***The **mystery** of Christ...***”

- Ephesians 3:6: “**This mystery** is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body...”
- Ephesians 3:9: “**And to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God...**”

In English, a “mystery” is understood as something obscure or inexplicable, much like a challenging riddle to be solved. However, the word “mystery” in the Bible is different because it refers to a previously hidden truth that is now made known by the revelation of God. I like Warren Wiersbe’s definition: “*A mystery is a truth that was hidden by God in times past and is now revealed to those who are in His family.*”

Listen as I read Ephesians 3:1-13: “*For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles—² 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.*

⁷ 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,¹⁰ 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.¹³ So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory.”

Here’s what we’ll see today: *Our mission is to make known the mystery and majesty of the gospel.*

1. The call of Paul to the mystery (1-4). In verse 1, the Apostle Paul links the reader to the truth that Jews and Gentiles are now one in Christ: “*For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles.*” Paul was in prison because he was preaching that Gentiles did not have to become Jewish in order to be saved. Notice his high view of God’s sovereignty. While technically he was a

Roman prisoner, Paul knew he was a ***“prisoner of Christ Jesus.”*** He knew God was in control, not Nero, and had put him right where He wanted him.

I’m encouraged by what happened to Paul when he was preparing to pray because it happens to me all the time. As he reminded them of his situation, he became sidetracked and chased a “spiritual squirrel.” He doesn’t pick up his prayer again until verse 14: ***“For this reason I bow my knees...”*** Do you ever get distracted when you pray? Speaking of prayer, I’m calling our church to pray next Sunday night from 6:00-7:15. In order to help us stay focused, we’ll be moving between different “prayer stations,” as we pray for different topics.

Paul starts his digression in verse 2: ***“Assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God’s grace that was given to me.”*** Paul saw himself as a manager of God’s resources, knowing he had been entrusted with the message of the grace of the gospel. Even though Paul spent three years at Ephesus, there may have been new believers who were not aware of his story.

In verse 3, he writes, ***“How the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly.”*** This previously hidden message came to him by revelation from God. The word ***“revelation”*** means, *“to unveil, to uncover, to take the lid off, to pull the curtains back.”* This is spelled out in Galatians 1:12: ***“For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.”*** Paul wanted them to know he wasn’t making it up and he wasn’t just following someone else.

It makes me smile when Paul the preacher says he wrote about it ***“briefly”*** because no one ever believes a preacher when he says he will be brief! I think of the sermon Paul preached in Acts 20:7-12 when ***“he prolonged his speech until midnight”*** and a young man named Eutychus fell asleep and then fell out of a third-floor window and died. When Eutychus was brought back to life, Paul went back to preaching until the sun came up!

Verse 4 shows us Paul intended his letter to be read by believers: ***“When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ.”*** Don’t miss this. If you want to understand the ways of God, you must be immersed in the Word of God. The more you read, the more you’ll understand. As we meditate on the majesty of God, the mysteries of God will become clearer.

Our mission is to make known the mystery and majesty of the gospel.

2. The plan of the mystery (5-6). Check out verse 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.”* Verse 6 clearly defines what the mystery is: *“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.”*

- **We are fellow heirs.** Born-again Jews and born-again Gentiles are joined together and experience all the covenant benefits of God’s grace. We see this in Galatians 3:29: *“And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.”* Everything promised to Israel in the new covenant is ours through Jesus Christ.
- **We are members of the same body.** There is no distinction between the Jew who comes to Christ and the Gentile who comes to Christ. Both are brand new creations, and both are enfolded into one body. 1 Corinthians 12:13 states: *“For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.”*

An example of being in one body with other believers happened this week when I received a note from my good friend Pastor Tanner from Word of Life Church in Rock Island: *“Thank you for all Edgewood does to show the love of Jesus to the hurting...I hope it helps you continue the blessing.”* Included with the note was a check for Celebrate Recovery in the amount of \$1,000! I immediately texted Tanner to thank him and then wrote a note expressing our thankfulness for their partnership in the gospel. By the way, Word of Life is one of the five other Rock Island churches we’re partnering with for our Easter outreach on Saturday, March 23.

- **We are partakers of the promise.** Gentiles are now recipients of redemption. In Romans 11:13-14, Paul explains this is meant to make the Jews jealous and cause them to trust Jesus alone for salvation: *“Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them.”*

This can only happen because of the gospel. *Our mission is to make known the mystery and majesty of the gospel.*

3. The preaching of the mystery (7-9). In verse 7, Paul reflects on his calling as a preacher: *“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.” Paul knew everything he had, and everything he was called to do, was a gift of God’s grace. God also gave him the energy and power he needed to accomplish this task. The word “***power***” in Greek gives us the word “*dynamite*.” This is similar to Colossians 1:29: “***For this I toil, struggling with all His energy that He powerfully works within me.***”

As a way to combat any pride, Paul declared in verse 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.***” The phrase “***very least***” means, “*far less, less than the least, far inferior.*” Interestingly, in Latin, the name Paul means “*little*.” My mind goes to 1 Timothy 1:15 where he says, “***The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.***” Paul knew he was part of something much bigger than himself.

Notice how this doesn’t keep him from preaching the gospel. Actually, he can’t stop sharing the good news because he can’t get over how God would choose to use someone like him to “***preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.***” The word “***preach***” means, “*to announce good news.*” The word “***unsearchable***” means, “*fathomless, past finding out, impossible to trace step-by-step.*” All this should cause us to worship as we recognize He is God, and we are not.

I’m often moved by reading the sermons of Charles Spurgeon. Check out his insight: “*I am bold to tell you that my Master’s riches of grace are so unsearchable, that He delights to forgive and forget enormous sin; the bigger the sin, the more glory to His grace.*”

Job 5:9 says there are things we will never understand, and that’s a good thing: “***Who does great things and unsearchable, marvelous things without number.***” Job 26:14 states, “***Behold, these are but the outskirts of his ways, and how small a whisper do we hear of him! But the thunder of His power who can understand?***” Romans 11:33 calls us to wonder and worship: “***Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and how inscrutable His ways!***”

The deacon and pastoral teams met with our search consultant from Vanderbloemen this past Tuesday night. This meeting was actually rescheduled because we had to cancel 10 days earlier due to bad weather. I can remember

being discouraged when the airport was closed, and our consultant had to cancel his flight. *But God!* In the meantime, three more candidates applied for our open staff positions, making four for the Administrative Pastor position and three for the Children's Director role. This allowed us to receive resumes and hear summary reports on each candidate.

I was reminded of a statement I often say: *"God is always at work, and sometimes we get to see it! The challenge is to trust Him even when we don't see it."* God's ways are often inscrutable, but we know He is at work. Another pastor says it like this: *"God is always doing 10,000 things in your life, and you may be aware of three of them."*

Isaiah 55:9 says: ***"For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."*** Even though God's ways are way beyond our ways, Paul's aim was to make his preaching plain and practical. While I don't always achieve this, that's my goal as well.

We see this in verse 9: ***"And to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things."*** To ***"bring to light"*** means, *"to enlighten, to make plain."* Paul wanted this message to go to everyone, to all people everywhere. I like the pattern found in Nehemiah 8:8 where we read of small group leaders: ***"...read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading."***

Our mission is to make known the mystery and majesty of the gospel.

4. The purpose of the mystery (10-11). When I came to Ephesians 3:10 in my daily reading of Ephesians about a month ago, it stopped me in my tracks. I've thought about this verse a lot and am still not sure I totally understand it. I shared it with the pastoral team this week and we all marveled at its majesty and mystery. That's quite a build-up, isn't it? Listen as I read it slowly: ***"So that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places."***

The phrase, ***"so that"*** indicates the purpose behind the revealing of God's mystery. Notice how God communicates ***"through the church."*** God's intent was that through the ministry and mission of the church, His manifold wisdom will be made known.

The word **“manifold”** means, *“greatly diversified, variegated, intricate, multi-colored, and beautiful.”* In classical Greek, the adjective **“manifold”** referred to the beauty of an embroidered pattern or the variety of colors in flowers. Genesis 37:3 in the Septuagint, which is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, uses this word to describe Joseph’s coat of many colors. This same word is translated as **“varied”** in 1 Peter 4:10: ***“As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace.”***

The phrase, **“made known”** is emphatic and means, *“displaying, narrating, declaring, and revealing,”* similar to what a gifted teacher does when unfolding and explaining complex truths. Notice the church is to reveal God’s manifold wisdom to ***“the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.”*** This refers to the angelic realm, which includes both good angels and bad angels, or demons.

Evidently, these spiritual beings follow an order and ranking in the heavenlies, a word that is used five times in Ephesians. Ephesians 6:12 gives us a clue to who these spirit beings are: ***“For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”***

Paul is pulling back the invisible curtain just as Elisha prayed at Dothan in 2 Kings 6:17: ***“...O LORD, please open his eyes that he may see.’ So the LORD opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw, and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.”***

1 Peter 1:12 says the angels are so curious about salvation that they peer over the portals of Heaven to watch God at work: ***“It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look.”*** Literally, this reads, *“the angels stoop to look.”* Luke 15:10 tells us the angels rejoice at the repentance of a lost sinner. In 1 Corinthians 4:9 Paul says, ***“...We have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men.”***

One commentator writes, *“This explains how God will reveal His wisdom, and to whom He reveals it. He will reveal it by His work in the church, and He will reveal it to angelic beings.”* Brothers and sisters, we are surrounded by invisible spiritual beings who are looking intently at us, trying to learn how God’s love led Him to redeem those who repent and receive Him.

Kent Hughes writes, *“All of this demands a view of the Church so high that it challenges belief...our text calls us to recognize and revere the immense centrality of the church...the bottom line is, the church is not an option for believers, nor is supporting it an option...Paul’s gospel was Christ and the Church.”*

The church is God’s plan to make plain His plan of salvation to the whole cosmos! When we carry out our mission as a church by gathering, growing, giving, and going with the gospel, even spiritual entities are being enlightened. This tells us we are redeemed for something greater than our own personal salvation and sanctification. We are called to instruct the invisible world about the wisdom of God and the redemption of all ethnicities, races, and people groups.

This week I was gripped by a sermon Ray Pritchard preached on this verse called, *“Something Big is Happening Here.”* Here are some excerpts...

Paul sees what happens here on earth as being closely connected to events in the spiritual realm...what happens to us on earth has a purpose that goes far beyond us personally...God intends to use us as a demonstration of His wisdom to a whole galaxy of angelic beings who watch with great interest as we move through life on our way to heaven...lots of things that happen aren’t just about us...when we face hard times and when life makes no sense whatsoever, we need to stop and say to our ourselves, ‘Something big is happening here.’ God never wastes anything...we are giving lessons to a heavenly audience.

That means when the gathered church of Edgewood lives on mission for the glory of God, demons are getting schooled. When we live all out for the Lord, we are a tangible reminder to fallen angels that their authority has been broken, and that Jesus Christ is the victor! The progress of the gospel to our neighbors and the nations will not be hindered.

The church thus becomes the university for angels, and each saint a professor. Since angelic beings are interested and instructed by our lives, our conduct before them is important. I turn to Spurgeon again: *“O be not, ye converts, ignorant of the word of God; be not oblivious of the operations of God in your own souls! The angels desire to look into these things. Do you look into them?”*

Angels watch us because we are part of the mystery! Oswald Chambers puts it like this: *“All Heaven is interested in the cross of Christ, all Hell is terrified of it, while men are the only beings who more or less ignore its meaning.”*

Here are five implications.

- **We shouldn't just focus on what we get out of a service, or whether we happen to like the music or the message.** What happens in church is of intense interest to angelic powers, both good and evil.
- **We must prioritize the church and plan our schedules around it.** The church is not an afterthought or a marginal organization but is central to God's purposes and plans! If the church is that important to Him, shouldn't it be to us? I think of an old Keith Green song, "*Jesus rose from the dead, and you, you can't even get out of bed.*"
- **We are not an audience just watching a show.** God is the audience and spirit beings are peering in to learn about redemption. This should cause us to be filled with reverence and rejoicing.
- **Ask God to revive us again.** Frank Peretti writes: "*There is no more dangerous place to be than where the Word of God is preached with authority and when people are praying. All of Hell is alarmed when dead religion wakes up. Demons scream and those in bondage are set free. And Satan doesn't like it at all.*"
- **Angels cannot be redeemed but we can.** They had one shot, but you have many. Why not put God's wisdom on display today by repenting of your sins and receiving Jesus as your Savior and Lord?

I like how Wayne Barber captures it:

"When we start living obediently, doing the things that God has told us to do, the angels look at us and say, 'What has happened to him? Why, we were around here last year, and he acted like a sinner. Man, look at him now. He is living like a saint. What happened in his life? Look at him. Look at him. He just sinned against his wife and look; he is going to ask her forgiveness. What is going on here? What is this redemption?' When Jesus is in your life, friend, it is not only touching a lost world, but it has also opened the eyes of the angels who haven't got a clue. They are looking intently. The audience is an invisible audience, but we are an invincible teacher through the Church."

Another pastor writes: "*To the fallen angels, the church, which exists because of Christ's triumph at the cross, displays God's wisdom and reminds them of their impending doom. The fallen angels thought that they had triumphed at the cross,*

but God displayed His wisdom by using that very means to gain ultimate and final victory.”

Ephesians 3:11 tells us the church has always been God’s plan A, and there is no Plan B: ***“This was according to the eternal purpose that He has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord.”***

Our mission is to make known the mystery and majesty of the gospel.

5. The privilege of the mystery (12-13). Paul ends this passage with two practical privileges in verses 12-13: ***“In whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him. So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory.”***

- **We can have confidence.** The word **“boldness”** has the idea of *“freedom of speech,”* meaning we can express ourselves to God without fear or shame. Through faith in Christ, we have the right of address and the right of access. As a result, we can have confidence as we come into His presence.
- **We can have courage.** The phrase **“lose heart”** means, *“to grow weary or faint hearted.”* It also means, *“to turn cowardly and to give into the influences of evil around you.”* Brothers and sisters, we must remain unshaken in our faith and unashamed of the gospel, no matter what happens. When we go through hard times, we can be assured that God is working His way and His will for His glory and for our good.

I heard something about a big game today. Experts are predicting the Super Bowl will be the most viewed US-based telecast of all time, in large part because Taylor Swift has revived interest in pro football among younger adults. On top of the capacity of 65,000 fans expected at Allegiant Stadium in Las Vegas, a whopping 72% of Americans say they will be watching on TV or online. By the way, as of Wednesday, the average price of tickets sold on StubHub was \$8,600!

I have an assignment as we close. If you watch the game today, imagine that instead of the Chiefs and 49ers on the field, the church is on the field, and the field is white for harvest. Instead of fans in the stands, the entire stadium and the sky above is filled with myriad upon myriads of angelic beings glued to the gospel activity of the church, and they are clapping and cheering every time they see a sinner cross the goal line of the gospel.

Here are a couple more riddles.

Q: I am a gift that anyone can unwrap. What am I?

A: Salvation!

Q: I can live and breathe and yet I was dead. Who am I?

A: A Christian, who is now alive in Jesus.

If you're not a Christian, it's time to be converted because the riddle of redemption has been solved. If you're ready to be saved, you could pray this prayer with me.

Lord Jesus, for too long I've kept You out of my life. I confess that I am a dead sinner headed for an outpouring of Your righteous wrath. I repent of my sins and by faith I gratefully receive Your gift of salvation. Thank You for Your love, for Your grace, and for Your mercy. With all my heart I believe You are the Son of God who died on the cross for my sins and rose from the dead on the third day. Thank You for bearing my sins and giving me the gift of eternal life. I believe and now I receive, so that I can be born again and become Your child. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Child Dedications

9am – Oliver Malone

10:45am – Grace Langworthy

Closing Benediction

“Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to the gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.” (Romans 16:25-27)