

Part 5: Mystery and Majesty

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We have been working through the book of Ephesians here at Sovereign Hope in a series called: Beautiful Occupation. And I would like to give each of you a challenge this week, and that is to sit down and read the book of Ephesians out loud in one sitting.

This is an important exercise when it comes to studying God's word because it reminds us that more than isolated chunks of sentences, these books in God's word are complete units. Just like a letter you would write to your friend, or a book you would read to your kids, each individual book carries in it a structure and a narrative that builds on itself. Weekly preaching through these books tries to keep these themes together, but a healthy student of God's word learns to have a diet of small deep dives, along with broader fly-over views.

This kind of exercise is incredibly important when it comes to passages like the one we are in today. If you remember last week when we were together Paul laid this wonderful foundation for the church: that God's people are no longer a specific race of people, but we are a multi-ethnic, diverse society of people who have been covered by the blood of Jesus.

And he ends with this amazing ode to what Jesus is doing with the church where he says this: **Ephesians 2:19-22**. Here is this weighty picture of what the church is doing: the church is together a society of people who are being built up into a dwelling place for God by the Holy Spirit in Jesus Christ.

And because of this wonderful task Paul wants to pray for the church, so he begins right away to pray. He's done this before back in chapter one where he begins his prayer with: "For this reason." And now he starts again, **Ephesians 3:1**. But then he stops himself.

And if you look ahead, Paul doesn't get back to praying until **Ephesians 3:14**.

So here we have at the end of chapter 2, this wonderful picture of the church being an active organism built up as a dwelling place for God. And by the end of chapter 3, Paul begins to pray for the church in light of this charge. But what happens in between? What distracts Paul so much so that he literally stops his letter mid thought and explains something else?

Paul wants the church in Ephesus, and us in here today to understand with greater clarity the significance and importance of the church in light of the gospel and God's plan for all history. It is as if Paul is saying, "Now I want you to understand the significance of what I'm saying here."

And he is going to address this point of emphasis by means of backstory. Now if you ask my wife there is one thing I can't stand when it comes to TV shows that we watch, and that is a flash-back episode. It is my experience that when a show has to revert to a flash-back episode, going back in time to find a story line, that the writers have lost the narrative and now they are grasping at straws.

But this is not true for God's word. This is due to one important truth: God's word is not merely a story, and God's word is not merely teaching, God's word is the divine interpretation of history itself. It helps us understand things that at one point we may not have understood.

In other words, God's word helps us understand the mystery which lies between the God who controls all things and the people who only get small pieces of that picture at any given point in time.

Haven't you had times where your life seems frustrated by a mystery? The unknown of why you are going through this specific season? What am I supposed to be doing? Or even more spiritually, what does God really want from me?

Well the backstory that Paul is going to give us today is a backstory which pulls back the curtain of mystery. It brings clarity to those who only have pieces of the big picture. And here are the three stories that we are going to see today: **The story of Paul**, **The story of God**, and **The story of You**.

Let's start by looking at our first portion of scripture today which is **Ephesians 3:1-7**.

Here we see our first point this morning: **The Story of Paul**. And now we see what interrupts Paul's prayer is an appeal to the significance of gospel he, and the other apostles for that matter, are proclaiming.

And in this passage of scripture we see two aspects of his story that he is emphasizing. The first is his unique calling, and the second is his specific purpose. Paul was uniquely called by Jesus himself (vs. 2,7) for the specific purpose of preaching the gospel to Gentiles (vs. 4-6).

In chapter 2, Paul has gone out of his way to stress that salvation is by grace through faith, not on the basis of our own works, and in light of that Paul begins to speak of his own conversion.

Now Paul assumes the church in Ephesus has heard about his conversion because if there were a first century Facebook, his conversion story would have been the viral video on your news feed. But Paul specifically wants the church to understand how his conversion affirms his doctrine of grace.

For those who aren't familiar with the story of Paul, let me make explicit what Paul is assuming to be implicit in this text. At one point Paul was named Saul, and Saul was the most committed and legalistic Jew there was.

Legalism is simply holding yourself or someone else to a standard which is not the gospel. You can be legalistic in the way you approach God by inverting the order of obedience. The gospel says God has saved you therefore obey, legalism says obey so that God will save you.

This was Saul. He kept the Old Testament law so rigidly that he said if anyone could have been saved by obeying the law it would have been him. Look at **Philippians 3:4-6**. Paul is saying that if anyone could boast in his ability to earn his salvation by perfectly obeying God, it would have been him.

So much so that he became a persecutor of early Christians. Saul was so convinced that in order to please God you had to obey God perfectly according to the law, that he saw it as his mission to kill those who thought salvation was by grace apart from the law.

But God was gracious to Saul. While Saul was on the road to Damascus in Acts chapter 9, the resurrected Jesus spoke to Saul in person and struck him with blindness and said "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"

And Jesus led Saul to the house of one Christian disciple where Saul repented, believed and was baptized. And look at the interchange between this disciple and Jesus: **Acts 9:13-16**.

And here we see Paul's unique calling: he was called by Jesus himself to proclaim the gospel of grace to the Gentiles. By God's invasive grace and perfect plan, the very people whom Paul was putting to death became the very affection of his heart.

Do you see the power of grace? Grace came into the heart of a man hardened against the gospel, killing the church and in so doing persecuting Jesus himself, but by grace his heart was saved.

This has been Paul's point all through this book, you cannot earn God's favor. Only Jesus met God's law perfectly and what makes Jesus so wonderful is that without distinction he gives that perfect righteousness to his people by grace.

And the grace that saved Paul now became the purpose of Paul's life: **Ephesians 3:4-6**.

Paul's purpose in life, the purpose that his conversion proves, is that he is now declaring the very mystery of Christ. The very person who once built his life on the exclusivity of legalism is now proclaiming broadly the mystery of Christ which is: that in Christ Jesus, through the gospel Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the same promise.

Isn't that wild to think about? Can you imagine Hitler not only changing his hostility towards the Jews, but championing the inclusion of the Jews into the German heritage?

This is the power that grace had on the heart of Paul. He went from the greatest apologist of the law the chief apologist of grace. He went from the greatest threat to the church to someone who is now imprisoned joyfully on behalf of the church.

Brothers and sisters if you do not believe in the power of grace to shape the history of a person then you do not understand the witness that Paul is to us today. No other writer in the New Testament stresses salvation by grace through faith like Paul does. Why?

It is not only because Jesus himself commanded Paul to do it, but it is because Paul himself realizes that it is salvation by grace alone which saved him. Paul was the most influential missionary the world has ever known and what lays at the heart of his passion for building churches was the message of grace that it's Jesus and only Jesus who takes outsiders and makes them insiders by grace.

Now before we move on I want to linger on this point for one moment. This passage that we just read, that the mystery of Christ is that Gentiles belong in the household of faith, was probably the most shocking part of this letter to the initial readers of this letter. But to us, it is probably the most yawn worthy.

We know that Jesus has made it accessible for other races to have access to God through faith and repentance. But I want us to press this doctrine of inclusion by grace deeper into our hearts for one moment.

Paul's zeal for the church hinged on this idea that grace and grace alone can capture the heart and set captives free. Which means this for us: our hope in evangelism is not that there are people conducive to conversion, but instead a God zealous for salvation.

If grace and the gospel of Jesus takes outsiders and makes them insiders then there is not a person we meet who we should think is "unreachable" or "uninterested" in the gospel. As we have been working through Ephesians I have been convicted of the times and places where I assume people to be uninterested or unreachable by the gospel.

It's not by race or skin color, but often due to my business, due to the context in which I meet people, or due to the fact that I've already shared the gospel once with this individual I write them off as a lost cause. But so long as salvation is by grace there are no lost causes to the gospel.

What would our church look like if this doctrine of grace shaped our evangelism? Isn't this Paul's very point here? The church is built out of people who were unreachable and uninterested, the church is built of those who didn't belong, but when the power of the gospel was proclaimed by faithful believers they were changed miraculously and wonderfully by grace.

This is the stewardship that not only Paul shares, but we ourselves share. Peter says that everyone who has been saved is responsible for stewarding this powerful gospel: **1 Peter 4:10**.

This wonderful doctrine captured Paul's heart and it can capture our heart as well. Paul gave his life for the church because grace captured his heart. That's the story of Paul. But next Paul transitions from his story to God's story. And here we see our second point today: **The story of God**.

Paul played a part, but behind everything that Paul did, God was writing a bigger story. Read with me **Ephesians 3:8-11**.

In the same way Paul could not understand the story of his life outside of the mission that was given to him. So here Paul is saying that you cannot understand the word of God, the person of God, or the plan of God without understanding the mission of God.

Paul was called to preach the unsearchable riches of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles. Commentators wrestle to find the right aspect of that word translated as "unsearchable." And if you were to take a survey of different translations you would see it translated as inexplorable, untraceable, unfathomable, inexhaustible, illimitable, inscrutable, incalculable and infinite.

And this is the tension of the mystery and wonder of the gospel. Paul says the richness of Christ is beyond words, but he writes so that we might perceive it. Here he says it is his job to preach this unsearchable wonder.

How? Here we have a message so phenomenal that we cannot rightly or adequately communicate it and a mystery so profound that we can hardly grasp it. As you share the gospel or even disciple those around

you, I'm sure you've wrestled with this tension. But Paul says, "Go on with the message, go on in the weakness, go on with your profound limitations with the mission." Why?

Look again: **Ephesians 3:9-10**.

Why is Paul willing to give his life to the proclamation of free grace? Because as individual men and women come to see the unsearchable riches in Jesus Christ, those men and women are added to the church, and the church in its diversity begins to display the monumental and mysterious plan of God in a way individuals themselves struggle.

God's plan was always to display his wisdom and mercy to the world through his church. That's what he says next in **Ephesians 3:11**. The church, the New Testament, salvation by grace to even the Gentiles, was not God's secondary option. It was not a consolation prize when his first plan failed. It is not a new religion that the apostles invented to make Christianity more inclusive.

It was the plan of God from day one to unite through Christ a people for his own possession. Look way back in **Isaiah 60:1-3**.

Do you understand the wonder of this sentiment? Christianity is not an accidental religion. Christianity is not a private faith. Christianity is not a blip on the history of humanity. Christianity by nature is a missionary faith rooted in the missionary desire of a good and faithful God to unite the hurting to a healer, the homeless to a home, the sinners to a savior, the people-less to a people.

God cannot be understood apart from his desire to display his glory through his redeemed church. The mystery of God which has been hidden for ages, shut up, kept behind a curtain, has now been revealed to the world in the church. Isn't that wonderful?

Paul says that the church displays to those in the heavenly realm the manifold mystery of God. Meaning that the angels themselves are completely stunned at the majesty of God which is displayed in us here today.

You see it's precisely this doctrine that keeps us from being disappointed in the church. I ran into a lady who used to go to church here a few years ago and I asked her where she had been going to church. She informed me that she was going to a Saturday night service because she likes sleeping in more than she likes going to church.

Now I don't share this story to shame this sister in Christ, but I do share it to show how miserable and monotonous church might seem if we are the center of its gathering. If the church is about catering to our wants and our needs, then we will always wrestle with its importance. But here the church isn't about us, it is about us together causing heaven itself to worship at the very mystery of the world now revealed in our salvation.

You cannot make much of the God who saved you while neglecting the church which is designed to make much of the God who made it. This is what we were made for.

When Paul says that the church makes known the "manifold wisdom of God," it carries this tone of depth and complexity like a tapestry rich with texture and color. Think of it as a symphony.

When the symphony is apart you have all these gifted musicians practicing alone. And it's still beautiful right. But let's take for instance, a percussionist. I really have no context to understand what makes percussion beautiful. So if my neighbor or my co-worker is always banging his timpani, I can appreciate his dedication, but at a point it can become white noise that I don't understand.

Now take Eric Rokohl for example, he on the other hand loves percussion and appreciates the individual beauty of it. But his neighbor is a piccolo player. But when Eric and I go to the symphony together we hear something far more nuanced don't we?

We hear the violins and the cellos, the piano and the saxophone. And for me I know hear that timpani in context with the melody of the flute and now it makes sense to me. Now I hear the depth of it.

This is how the church collectively, with all of our unique stories of salvation tuned to the same melody of the gospel displays the wisdom and wonder of God to the world.

As individuals we are all testaments to the transformative gift of the gospel. But together as the church we construct a symphony of mercy heard in the heavens itself.

Why does the imprisoned Paul sing for joy in chains? Why would you risk the hardship of sharing the gospel with others? Because God's desire is to build his church for the fame of his name.

This is the last story we are going to look at today: **The Story of You**. Look with me at Paul's words in **Ephesians 3:11-13**.

Paul is writing this letter from a prison in Rome where he is imprisoned because the Jews basically framed him because they didn't like this message of grace he preached to the Gentiles.

But Paul is saying to this church, don't lose heart because of this. Remember who it is who understands most clearly the wisdom of God displayed in the church? Those in the heavenly places. Peter says in 1 Peter that in the gospel we have something which angels and the prophets of the Old Testament longed to see.

Which means that angels and saints gathered in heaven see what is going on here on the earth and they marvel at what is unfolding. The eras of silence and hardship make sense because they know see that God was working all along.

Creation itself, the Exodus from Egypt, the covenants at Sinai, the Kings of Israel, the exile in Babylon, the construction of the temple, the birth of Christ, the cross itself, it all makes sense now in the church. This is what God was building towards, this is exactly what he wanted!

But to unredeemed and unfocused eyes, the eternal perspective is dulled right?

The world around us, and often ourselves will wrestle to see the plan of God with such clarity. We only see Paul in prison. We only see our frustrated attempts at evangelism. We see a \$2 million dollar need. But because of grace, we realize it is always about Jesus' power and not our own. It might at times be about our sacrifice, but our hope is in Jesus story.

So we have confidence even when it seems the church might be defeated by human standards. In America we the church no longer has the sway over culture that it once did. Across the globe, even secular scholars confess that Christianity is bar none, the most persecuted people group in the world.

Whether it's an unplanned building fund in Missoula, cultural oppression in London, or persecution in Sudan, we are the ones with confidence. For the church, just as Paul, might be called to give up her very life and freedom for the sake of the gospel, but at the heart of it we know the access we have before God and the worship we display to the world around us and we do not lose heart.

Do you have such eternal eyes for this church and the work of the gospel in churches around the globe?

But Paul is here reminding us, right before he prays for us, that we must learn to see the nature of the church and the work of the church through God's perspective not the perspective of the world.

We can have boldness despite the hardships we will face as the church because it's all God's work anyway.

You are part of God's story. This church, this society is what you were made for. Grace has made you and grace will sustain you as together we reflect God's glory to the world in both worship and witness.

No wonder Paul can't wait to pray for the work of this church. It is a divine wonder, a sacred masterpiece, a community of mercy on display in the cosmos. So let us see our grace, our church, and our story with the eyes of the gospel and labor to that end.