The Unraveled Mystery

A Great Mystery

The Word "Mystery"
What do you think of when you hear the word "mystery"?

Maybe you think of a game... or a particular movie or show... or a character like Sherlock Holmes. You might think of a particular book. When I think of a mystery I picture a smoky office and a hard-boiled detective—a Humphrey Bogart-type—sitting behind his desk; he's leaning back in his chair with his feet up on the desk, he's wearing a white shirt and suspenders, and his tie is loosened. The shades are drawn and there's a fan running. And just as evening sets in a woman walks in, a young widow, and she asks the detective to find out who killed her husband. And for that encounter sets up the rest of the story as the detective goes about his job of interviewing suspects, inspecting crime scenes, finding clues, chasing criminals down... until finally he solves the crime... he has unraveled the mystery.

You can probably name some of your favorite mysteries stories. If they're not the same they are similar: there is a question, a problem to which the answer is not known; and the main character or characters go on a journey to search for that answer.

God's Mystery

God has a mystery. Well, actually he has a lot of mysteries, things we will probably never know until we leave this earth. But there is one mystery in particular that is greater than all the other mysteries; in fact it's so great that Ephesians 3 mentions this mystery four times: "the mystery which is made known by revelation." It is the mystery which was hidden for ages.

But God's mystery isn't really like the mystery in one of those stories, where the detective has to look and look, has to work and to strive to find the answer. The answer to God's mystery has already been given to us. The Bible says the mystery has been made known. There's no work left to be done. We don't have to be like detectives, searching for leads and clues.

Instead, we're more like the reader of a mystery book. Think about it for a moment: you're reading the book (or watching the movie, if you're not a reader—that's ok. We don't discriminate), and you're engaged. You're following the story, you're wondering what the answer is, you're thinking about it even when you're not reading. But even though you are as engaged as you could be, you are at the mercy of the author (or writer). Nothing is revealed to you unless the author reveals it. In other words, you can't jump into that story and search for clues yourself. You
won't know the answer until the author tells you the answer. Sure, you'll have ideas. You might have a theory. But you cannot know the truth until the author says it's OK.

And then, once the mystery is finally revealed, everything makes sense. The answers to the questions which once raised an eyebrow have now been disclosed. The bloody sock in the mansion; the doctor's testimony; the missing vehicle—they now make complete sense in light of the truth. The dots have been connected. We look back and the whole picture makes sense. The mystery is solved.

That's how God's mystery works. God, of course, is the author. The author of the storyline of life, the one who creates the tale; the one who thought up the twist in the story. And the mysteries of God get revealed when God reveals them.

Listen, we can't know anything about God unless he chooses to reveal it to us. We know God because he made himself known. He's made himself known in a number of ways.

One obvious way is through the Bible. We know that God is loving and just and merciful because the Bible says he's loving and just and merciful. God's Word reveals himself to us and that's why we read it and teach it and preach it and memorize it.

And one of the things the Bible tells us about God is that he's also made himself known through creation. The creation tells us something about the creator, and God's handiwork gives us a glimpse into his personality. My parents just got back from a trip to the Grand Canyon. I was so jealous. I've never been there. But my guess is that you cannot stand at the edge of the Grand Canyon—1 mile deep, 18 miles wide and 275 miles long—and not be in total awe of God's power. Every time I see one of those purplish-pink sunsets in the summer I'm reminded of God's beauty, and of his glory. God shows himself in that which he has created.

The Mystery in Ephesians 3

But here's the thing about the mystery of God: God has already revealed it. He has already told us what the mystery is. We have already gotten to the end of the book. We know the answer; and now everything else makes total and complete sense. The dots have been connected. And that mystery was revealed when Jesus Christ came to this earth. What once was a great mystery has now been made public by the coming of Christ.

The particular mystery that is mentioned in Ephesians was revealed when Jesus Christ came and died. The revelation and Christ's coming go hand-in-hand.

For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—

Surely you have heard about the administration of God’s grace that was given to me for you, 3 that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. 4 In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, 5 which was not made known to people in other
generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets. 6 This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.

Paul is writing his letter, and he gets personal. He mentions here that he is a "prisoner of Christ Jesus." Paul, as he's writing his letter—as he wrote many of his letters—is writing from prison. He has been imprisoned because of his teaching and because of the message which he is spreading from city to city. He has been writing about the Church—that they are fellow citizens, family members in God's household and building blocks in the temple of God (remember last week), and then he says, "For the sake of you—that Church—I am imprisoned." Paul was being persecuted for his message.

And that message is a message of the mystery of God. In verse 3 he mentions "the mystery made known to me by revelation." So God revealed the mystery to Paul, so that he could reveal it to others. And he mentions this again in the next verse, where he refers to "the mystery of Christ." So the mystery, then, is about Christ. And it's not just about Christ, but it comes with him.

Another letter Paul wrote from prison is the book of Colossians, and he probably wrote it around the same time because the letter has a lot of similarities to the book of Ephesians. And in chapter 2 of that book, Paul writes this about some fellow Christians, "My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God... namely, Christ." He says the mystery of God is Christ. And he's talking about this same mystery.

So if we were hardboiled detectives, then, and we were trying to figure out what this mystery of God was, this gives us an important clue. The mystery... and Christ... are inseparable. When Christ was revealed to the world, so was God's mystery.

The Mystery is the Gospel
So what is the mystery? Yes, it has to do with Jesus—but if someone asked this question, "What is the mystery of God?", what would we answer? Very simply, the mystery is the Gospel. The mystery of the ages is the good news of Jesus Christ. Yes, Ephesians 3 says more than that, and in this context Paul is more concerned with the implications of that gospel; but on its most basic level, the mystery is the Gospel.

The Gospel is specifically mentioned in verse 6, alongside the mystery. And then again in verse 7, after explaining the implications of the mystery, Paul says, "I became the servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace." We see here that the words "mystery" and "gospel" are being used almost interchangeably; Paul uses them both to describe his message. The mystery is the gospel.
The gospel is the message of what Jesus did for us. The word "gospel" literally means "good news." And the gospel is good news. But the gospel actually begins with bad news. Have you ever had good news that began with bad news? Like you find out that somebody wrecked your car, and it's totaled, and you're devastated; but then you find out that the insurance money is enough to buy you a way nicer car. Something bad turns into something good. And the gospel is like that—except the bad news is way worse, and the good news is way better than all of it.

The gospel begins with sin. Adam and Eve disobeyed in the garden and sin and death were introduced to a world that had none of it. And since that moment all of us where destined to be sinners—even before we were born—and we were destined to die from it. Our sin puts a wall in between us and God. We do not deserve to be in His holy presence.

And for thousands of years, that was the mystery: how can humans be reconciled to God? Are they doomed forever? Is this really God's plan. What is God going to do about it?

And the answer was Christ. God's own Son, who—even though he was God himself—came to earth in the form of a man and suffered brutally, and then died. But he didn't stay dead—he rose from the dead. And in doing so he took the punishment for our sins—the perfect sacrifice—and he defeated death. And now, anyone who puts their faith in Jesus Christ will be saved. And because death is no more, they will have eternal life, living in God's holy presence. That's the Gospel. That's the good news. And that's the mystery.

And that's what Paul is talking about in verse 3 when he mentions the mystery which he has already written about briefly. That's what he has been talking about in Ephesians—the richness of a relationship with Jesus Christ, and the great inheritance that comes along with it.

What the Mystery Contains

So the mystery is the Gospel—the good news of Jesus Christ. But that good news—that mystery—contains a few other implications which have been revealed to us. And I want to point two of them out as they are mentioned in this passage.

It Contains An Identity

First, the mystery contains a new identity.

Last week we saw that believers, through their relationship in Jesus, are given a new identity. It is a community, not just an individual identity, and it changes the way we relate to each other. And this is where that passage transitions into this one. Take a look at verse six: [read verse 6].

Because of the Gospel, the mystery of Christ that has been revealed, we as a community have been changed. And three different metaphors, again, are used.
**Fellow Heirs**
The first is that we are fellow heirs. Both Jews and Gentiles are now one: we are the Church. It doesn't matter if you're Jew or Gentile, black or white, tall or short, German or Chinese, red-haired or blond—all of us are God's people. And we are fellow heirs, meaning we all have the same inheritance waiting for us after this life, available because of what Christ has done for us.

When we remember that all Christians are fellow heirs, I think it takes away all reason for fighting. We don't have to fight over an inheritance; we don't have to try and be better or more loyal than the next person. We are all heirs. We all have glory awaiting us.

**Fellow Body Members**
And then the second way believers are described in verse six is as fellow body members. Members of one body. This is a metaphor that is used often in the New Testament, but for the first time here. Christians are members of the same body. More specifically, they are members of the body of Christ. They are all in the body together.

The fact that the Church is described a body has a number of implications. The first is that this picture of a body shows *action*. That's what a body does, it *does stuff*. It moves, it works. And if the people of God together make up a body, we know that we as the church as supposed to be *doing things*. I know for some of you that seems like a "duh," but I assure you, it's not. God's people are designed to do God's work here on earth. And Christ, as it says elsewhere, is the *head*, meaning we follow him. We follow he's lead.

And as body *members*, or *parts* of the body, that means that each one of us has a role. There is a neck, and an arm, and a hand, and some feet. They might not all do the same thing, but they are all *working*. That means you, as a follower of Christ, have a role. A role that is *crucial*, and *needed*. Yes, it might not look like somebody else's role. It might not involve music, or standing in front of groups of people. But it's important, and the church can't survive without all the parts working together.

Some Christians are like, "If the church is a body, can I be the appendix? I'm not going to do anything, and then once in a while when you do something I don't like I'm going to get *inflamed*." No! *There is no appendix in the body of Christ!* Every person has a place and a purpose and a role.

And a second implication of being a body, before we move on, is that if we are a body, it necessarily follows then that we *work together*. We aren't many different bodies, we are *one body*.

One of the funny things about a newborn baby is watching her get control of her body movement. When she's first born, a baby can't control her body at all. She's slapping herself, scratching herself in the face. Or my favorite: she will be sucking on her pacifier but not realizing it, she will grab a hold of it with her hands and start pulling it out. So she'll be enjoying
her pacifier, and at the same time pulling it out of her mouth, and simultaneously screaming because it's exiting her mouth. She has no control of her body! But eventually, we grow older and we are able to control our bodies. That's part of what a body does, it works to do what we want it; all the parts move and work together.

As Christians, then, it is imperative that we work together. We move in the same direction. We help each other, not hurt each other. Sometimes the church looks more like a person who has lost all body function, and is lying on the floor, convulsing. That's because too often all we want is our own thing, and we will do anything to get it. But, first, we all need to be following Christ. And when we follow his lead, we walk together. And secondly, that's why it's so important as a local church body that leadership has a vision and a plan forward, so we are working together and our energy is going to the same place, and not splitting off into different directions.

**Fellow Sharers in the Promise**

And thirdly, and lastly, believers are fellow sharers in the promise. It says at the end of verse six that we are sharers together in the promise. Just like we are fellow heirs and will share an inheritance, so we share in the promise. The promise of eternal life. The promise of the Holy Spirit. We all share in that same promise.

**It Contains a Fortune**

So the mystery contains a new identity. But it also contains something else that the Bible mentions: **the mystery contains a countless fortune.**

7 I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God’s grace given me through the working of his power. 8 Although I am less than the least of all the Lord’s people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ, 9 and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. 10 His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, 11 according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. 12 In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. 13 I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.

Paul sums his message up in a different way. He says he is "preaching the unsearchable riches of Christ." Another way of saying this is the "incomprehensible riches of Christ." Or the "innumerable." The riches that are given through Christ are so full that we cannot even understand them. We cannot count them. They are immeasurable.

Picture you are walking through a palace. The palace of a king. And you pass by a room and the room is just filled to the top with treasures. Gold, and jewels, and coins, and artwork. And the hallway is the same way. And you go from room to room and it's all the same—filled to the top with treasures. And the palace goes on and on and on—and eventually you just give up. There's
no way you could put a name or a price on it all. It is *countless*. That's what the Bible says we have in Christ. A *king's treasure*.

In Revelation we have the letters to the seven churches, which were written to various congregations, and in the letter to the church in Smyrna the author says this: "I know your tribulation and your poverty, though you are rich..." (Rev 2:9). "I know of your tribulation and poverty... *though you are rich!*" Even if you are poor from an earthly point of view, if you have Jesus, you are still rich. You are *overwhelming rich*.

If I were to ask you the question, what are the riches of Christ, many of you would probably say "eternal life." And that is certainly true—God has promised us life after this one, that we may live forever with him in *glory*. What a promise that truly is. But he also promises us life *now*. He also promises us riches *now*—riches which many of us can attest to. He promises us love... and peace... and protection. He promises us his Spirit to guide us and teach us and convict us and grow us. And on, and on, and on. Christ's riches are *countless*. We are *immeasurably wealthy* because of what Christ has done.

And that's the question we need to be asking ourselves as Christians: Are we basking in the *innumerable riches* of Christ Jesus? Are we taking note of the *countless fortune* he has given us? Or are we only focusing on the ways we are poor from an earthly point of view? You cannot ignore the riches of Christ.

And that is the message we get to share, the mystery we get to unveil for others: through a relationship with Jesus Christ, you can have a *countless fortune*. God can guide you and grow you; he can help you overcome addictions and shortcomings; he can free you from depression and lift you out of the dumps. And he will do so much more for you that you will even know.

**Being Mystery Revealers**

And Paul calls himself in verse 7 a "servant of this gospel." He says that the mystery has been revealed to him so that he can reveal it to others. And he mentions God's grace twice. He says, "Even though I am *the least of the least,*" God chose me to reveal this mystery. Sometimes we feel this way, don't we? The *least of the least*. Disqualified. No way God could use us. That's the way Paul felt. But God, in his grace, equipped him and sustained him. And so now Paul, saw, as his life's work, to be a person *who reveals the mystery wherever he goes*. God, though his Son Jesus Christ, has revealed the mystery, and Paul wanted to tell people about it. That's why he was writing the letter in the first place.

During the height of Billy Graham's popularity, which lasted decades, he would often speak on TV and radio programs. And before each one, they would do a soundcheck, like they often do. And usually when somebody has a soundcheck they say something like "testing one-two-three," or they just keep going with their normal conversation. But every time Billy Graham did a
soundcheck, he would present the Gospel. Or he would recite John 3:16. He never missed an opportunity to preach the Gospel—to *unveil the mystery*.

You might not be called by God to preach the Gospel to multitudes on the same scale as the apostle Paul and Billy Graham. That's probably not the case. But you still have the privilege of being a mystery revealer. We all do. The church as a community does. We have had the mystery revealed to us, through Jesus Christ. But there are many others on this planet to whom it is still a mystery that has never been solved.

There are *millions* of people asking the question, everyday, "What is this life about?" "How do I get right with God?" "Isn't there more to life than this?!" "What is my purpose, my identity?" The mystery still stands. And who is going to tell them that the mystery *has already been revealed*? And the answer is found in Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

**Conclusion**

When you share the good news with someone, you are unveiling a mystery. A mystery *greater than any other*. A mystery that promises eternal riches. That mystery is the Gospel of Jesus Christ, who died for our sins, and made us members of one body, fellow partakers of a promise, and fellow heirs, with *countless riches* available to us, both in this life and the next one.