

It's a Mystery

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[0 : 01] Thanks guys, good afternoon everyone. Hasn't it been a tremendous service, real joy to be here. And I think nothing I can say in the next few minutes will be nearly as powerful as what Sean said and what he did. If you go in and forget everything I said and remember what Sean said, I'll be delighted.

But I was thinking, if Paul, who wrote the words we're going to be looking at today, had been here, he might well have said that was exactly what I was thinking about when I wrote Ephesians 3.

Here's someone thousands of miles away from me, thousands of years later, wasn't born into the Jewish religion, but he's come to know God and God's grace and he's come to love Jesus and know everything that comes through him.

So I think the passage we're looking at today is very relevant to what's happened this morning. What's happened this morning is very much Paul's vision being realised. Now we're looking at Ephesians chapter 3, so for those who haven't been around for the last few weeks, just a quick reminder of what Ephesians is all about.

Ephesus is a city in the south-west of Turkey these days. Paul was there for quite a while when he was one of his missionary journeys. He preached to them about Jesus and he helped them to grow as a church.

[1 : 12] And a while later, when he was probably in prison in Rome, he wrote them this letter. It has two parts to it. Chapters 1 to 3 are all about what God has done. All the great things that God has done and that God gives to us through Jesus.

And then chapters 4 to 6 are how we should respond to that. What our lives should be like in church, in our families, where we work, in the battles of life.

Chapter 3 is the kind of bit in the middle. Paul starts chapter 3, looking back in chapter 2 and saying, because of this, and then he kind of thinks, well, hold on, I've got something I need to say here before I go on to my prayer, which comes up later in the chapter.

It's almost as if Paul thinks, I've been so positive about my Christian faith, about all that God has done for us. I'm going to be so positive about what God can do through people in the church.

But maybe they're sitting there thinking, as they listen to this letter, well, how can he be so positive when he's in prison? How can he think everything's wonderful when he's been arrested for being a Christian and he's languishing in Rome?

[2 : 19] And the first few verses of chapter 3 are effectively Paul saying, this is what I'm about. This is why it's so important to me that I'm able to go and tell people about Jesus.

And actually the fact that I'm in prison really doesn't matter to me. Don't worry about me. What's important is what God is doing. So we looked last week with Peter Graindra at the first few verses of the chapter.

We're going to break in at verse 7 and go through to verse 13. So Ephesians chapter 3 verse 7, and Paul writes, I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power.

Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things.

His intent was that now through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should remain known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose, which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.

[3 : 36] In him and through faith in him, we may approach God with freedom and confidence. I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.

I pray God will help us to understand what he wants us to learn from him this morning. I think most people like a good detective story. I don't know what your favourite is of the ones up there, if any of them, but we quite like to watch the telly or some of us read books and to solve a detective puzzle through them.

Our preference, I suppose, depends on how gritty we like it to be, how intellectual we like it to be, how difficult to solve the mystery, and maybe for some of us how Scottish it is as well. But I think there are four things that you get in just about every murder mystery.

First thing, obviously, is you get a death. Someone dies and they don't deserve to. So the first thing is a death, and then attached to that death, there's a mystery. Who did it?

Who was it who did the murder? And there are usually lots and lots of suspects, and people are running around saying, well, who was it? What's happened? Then, towards the end, you get the revelation.

[4 : 48] So, Fado or Rebus or whoever, they come up with the explanation. They say, this is what's happened. I've worked it out, and the criminal is caught. And, of course, after that, they end up in prison, if not something worse.

I think when we're looking at the verses we're doing today, having these four things in our mind will help us. Now, it's a bit of a kind of topsy-turvy mystery that we're looking at.

There is a death that we're going to think about, but there's no corpse. At least after the third day, there was no corpse. There is a mystery, but it's not a whodunit. Everyone knew who had done the deed, but there's a mystery about why, what was really behind it.

There's a revelation, but it's a revelation that some people find really difficult to accept, although it's clear enough the way Paul writes it. Some people can't accept it. Oh, no, in the prison at the end, it's not the person who killed that goes to prison, it's the person who revealed what has happened is Paul, who's in prison.

But I think the four things, death, mystery, revelation, prison, if we can remember these, will have the gist of what's in what we're looking at. We're going to do them kind of in reverse order. Peter Granger last week did things in reverse.

[5 : 57] I'm going to repeat that as well. So we're going to start with the prison. Now, probably Paul wasn't actually in a dungeon in Rome. Most likely he was under house arrest, so he wasn't able to go out.

He was restricted to his movements, but he was a prisoner of the Roman government. And he could imagine the Ephesians thinking, poor Paul, he's been put in prison, isn't that terrible after all he's done for the gospel?

And Paul says, don't worry about me. And he says in the chapter four things about himself. Back in verse 1, which you didn't read just now, he says he's a prisoner.

But he doesn't say I'm a prisoner of the Jews or I'm a prisoner of the Romans. He says, I'm the prisoner of Christ Jesus. In other words, he had been put in prison because of his faith in the Lord Jesus.

And he saw that as part of living for Jesus. Sean talked a little bit about how difficult it can be to be a Christian sometimes. And for Paul, it was difficult. And it meant ultimately as part of living for and serving Jesus that he was in prison.

[7 : 07] Second thing Paul says, and this is the start of what we read today, he says, I'm a servant. I became a servant of this gospel. You could never accuse Paul of wanting to build himself up.

He would talk about himself as being a slave or as being a servant. And he saw his job as not being to be seen as the great leader that people really looked up to and respected.

What he saw was his duty to serve others and to serve Jesus by going and telling them all that God had done. And that becomes even more striking in verse 8.

Because Paul says, I'm undeserving. He says, I'm less than the least of all the Lord's people. So in other words, Paul is saying, think about a Christian.

Think about the Christian who you think least deserves to be a Christian. Someone who's done some really terrible things. Sort of a mass murderer, a really immoral person, something like that. Think about that person and you might think, well, how could they become a Christian?

[8 : 13] And when you've thought of that, think of me. And I'm less deserving than they are. I don't deserve anything from God. Now we look at Paul and we think, Paul's great.

Paul was the first real leader of the church, certainly among the Gentiles. He was the one who took the church from Israel and through God's help, he took it throughout the known world.

He's one of the great leaders of church history. Paul says, don't think about me like that. Think about me as being less than the least of all God's people.

Now maybe when he said that, he was thinking about his history. Because Paul started out persecuting Christians. He held the coats when Stephen was stoned to death. He got letters to go and to arrest other Christians and put them to death.

And maybe he was thinking, well, that was a dreadful thing to do and most people wouldn't have done that. That makes me the worst of the worst before I became a Christian. But maybe also it's just Paul thinking like all of us should.

[9 : 16] That I don't really deserve anything that God has done for me. I don't know if you've thought, I know I certainly have. I don't deserve to be a Christian.

Even though I might sometimes do my best. Some of the things I do, I think, how can I do that and be part of a Christian church? And if you think that, then you've got absolutely the right idea of what Christian faith is all about.

Christian faith isn't about me saying, I'm good, I can do things that will please God. Christian faith is recognizing that there's nothing I can do that would deserve anything from God.

Anything that God gives me is only through his goodness and his grace. Like Paul, I'm undeserving. Like Paul, perhaps I could say it myself, that I'm less than the least of all God's people.

And then finally, Paul says he's suffering. That's right at the end of the passage. I'm suffering for you, my suffering's for you, which are your glory. Interesting thing he said, my suffering's for you, which are your glory.

[10 : 20] I think he's saying that because he's suffering in the way he is, that shows how important it is that people hear the gospel and that the Ephesians and others who come to trust the gospel, their glory is revealed from the fact that they have come to know Jesus and that Paul is the one who has done it and so Christ is glorified through him.

So Paul's position. Paul says, I don't matter. You may feel sorry for me because I'm suffering. I'm not feeling sorry for myself because what happens to me isn't that important.

I want just to have God's plan in my life and to follow that out and to allow him to make sure things work out for me. That's a tremendous attitude to have.

In our society today, people want to be important. They want to be liked. They want other people to think that they're people of some significance. General election coming out.

That's what all the politicians want to think, how great they are and how important they are. For Christians, we shouldn't be thinking that way. For Christians, the important thing is that Jesus is glorified and we really don't, in that sense, matter.

[11 : 40] But if Paul says, I'm not important, he also says, what I'm doing is really, really important. So I've called it Paul's passion.

And Paul says, although I'm insignificant, God is doing the most amazing thing through me. And a number of things he says about how God's doing that.

He talks about God's grace, talks about God's grace twice. Grace means God giving us something that we don't deserve. So we deserve one thing and God gives us something else.

And Paul's saying, I really didn't deserve to be the person to do the gospel throughout the world and to preach about Jesus to others. But because God loved me so much and because God called me and gave me a purpose in life, by God's grace, I'm going to go out and fulfill that purpose.

He then talks about God's power, the working of his power. The power of God that changes people's lives, that takes us from people who really don't know God and have nothing to do with God and would want to do things that were wrong before God and transforms us into people who can live for Jesus and be his servants and disciples.

[12 : 57] That's the power of the gospel, that God changes lives and makes us different from what we'd otherwise be. And then two tremendous things that Paul talks about.

He talks about the boundless riches of Christ. The fact that if we know Jesus, if we are trusting in him, as he said earlier, we are heirs of all the good things that God has given us.

And in this life, we can never stop finding out more about the greatness of Jesus and all that he has done for us. And better translation than boundless might have been the infinite riches of Christ.

So much that we can never understand everything that Jesus is and has done at least not until we get to heaven and we understand a bit more. And then finally, he talks about God's wisdom and God's purpose, the manifold wisdom of God.

The word manifold is kind of slightly old-fashioned words, but maybe think of it as multicolored. The word that's used here is more or less the same word that's used in the Greek Bible for Joseph's coat of many colors, a multicolored coat.

[14 : 06] Or it's the word that you'd use if you had a diamond. And you looked at a diamond, you saw all the colors of the rainbow coming out and sparkling, and you think, wow, that's fantastic. That looks brilliant.

And Paul's saying the more and more you look at what God says and at his wisdom, the more and more you realize just how wonderful it is.

That he could take people like us, that he could send his son to take our place and to change our lives and he could make us into something potentially beautiful for him.

So Paul says, I don't matter, but I'm really passionate about what God has given me to do. Again, it would challenge us, do we have that kind of attitude?

The attitude that says, me, I'm not important, but God has given me something to do. He's called me by his grace. He's allowed me to serve him. And I really, really want to do that in the best way I can.

[15 : 08] A lot of Christians are kind of Sunday morning Christians. We come along to church and we may do one or two things in our Christian life and in the church, but really it's just a small part of what we do.

We couldn't be called really passionate about it. Some of us perhaps are a lot more involved. We do lots of things in the church, but in a sense we do things because they're there to be done rather than we have a real sense of God having called us to do them.

Paul's real sense was that God had called him to reveal to the world what he had done through Jesus to the Gentiles, the non-Jews, as well as the Jews. And I would challenge all of us, if we're Christians, if we know and love the Lord Jesus, what is our real passion?

What is the thing that God has called us to do and said, Ian, this is what I want you to do for me and I will really bless you if you do it. And if we really seek for what God wants us to do, he will direct us and will enable us to do great things for him.

I spent quite a long time on that first point. It won't be so long on the others, but I felt it was really important to think about Paul doesn't matter, but Paul's calling really matters to him. Let's move on and we're going to think about the revelation.

[16 : 26] Now, a lot of what Paul's writing here is to explain to the Ephesian church that his job is to reveal the mystery that God has brought. And he has two main groups that he's going to reveal it to.

So the first thing he says, it is being revealed to the whole world. So in verse 6, he says, the mystery is through the gospel.

The Gentiles are ears together with Israel, members together in one body and so on. That is the mystery. And then in verse 8, he says, the grace was given me to preach to the Gentiles, the boundless riches of Christ, to say to people who weren't born as Jews, God is still interested in you through Jesus.

And then in verse 9, to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery. Whether you're born as a Jew in the Jewish faith or whether you're born outside the Jewish faith, Paul says, what I have to say is relevant to everyone.

That's why I put a multicultural picture up there. The church isn't just a select group of people. Originally, most of them were Jews because it started in Israel.

[17 : 34] But it's gone throughout the world. And you can look around the church today and you can see people of lots of different ages. You can see people of different races. You can see people of different social standing and wealth and so on.

And we all come together because we know that God welcomes all of us in Jesus. Whatever we are, whatever we've done, whatever our background, God wants us to know Jesus and to love him.

God's revelation is to the whole world. But it actually goes beyond that. It goes also to spiritual beings. So in verse 10, Paul says, in 10th was now through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms.

Now let's not get into too much detail about who these rulers and authorities are. Let's just recognize that there are spectators outside our world, those spiritual beings who are looking on and observing what's happening in our church.

Maybe good, they may be bad, but they can see what's happening. And Paul says for them, what's being revealed to them is not through what I say. It's not through the explanation that I give.

[18 : 49] What is being revealed to them is through God's people. It is through the church. And they can look on and say, isn't this an amazing thing that God has done?

It's a kind of show and tell that people can look, or these beings can look, and they can marvel at all that God has done in bringing so many different people from different walks of life and different backgrounds together and revealing to all of them his love for them.

So Paul's revelation to the whole world beyond that as well. What about the mystery? Now we looked at the mystery in quite a lot of detail last week, those of us who are here, so I'm not going to go into a great deal of detail about that.

But just a reminder, the key I think is verse 6. The mystery is that the Gentiles, the non-Jews, are heirs together with Israel, so they inherit the same things the Israelites did if they trust in Jesus.

Mystery, second part, is that we're all members of one body if we know Jesus. And the third part is we share together in his promises. And then Paul brings it a bit together again in verse 12.

[20 : 01] And he says, In him, through faith in him, we may approach God with freedom and confidence. That is the root of what Paul is saying.

Now if you go back to the Old Testament, the Jews were God's special people, but they really couldn't approach him with freedom and confidence in the way that we can. Only once a year is anyone able to go into the most holy place in the Jewish religion, in the temple, in the tabernacle, the high priest, with a great deal of ceremony to go into the presence of God once a year.

If we know Jesus, if we love Jesus, we can go any time into God's presence. He is there listening for us, waiting for us, interested in us, and we can do it with freedom and confidence.

There is no barrier if we know Jesus, if we love Jesus, to going into God's presence. And it doesn't matter, let's repeat, it doesn't matter what our background is, doesn't matter where our home is, doesn't matter race, creed, whatever, if we know Jesus, if we love Jesus, we can come into God's presence.

So that's the mystery. So we're going to end with the death. Now Paul doesn't really talk about the death here, but it's kind of overall and it's assumed that his people who are listening to him or reading this will understand what the death is about.

[21 : 26] It's the death of Jesus, of course. It's the death of Jesus on the cross at Calvary. And that is the thing that brought Jews and Gentiles together and gave everyone the opportunity to know God and to have a relationship with him.

Just two things I want to point to about the cross. Two key things I think we need to know about what happened through the cross of the Lord Jesus. The first thing is when Jesus died on the cross, he was taking my place.

I've talked a bit about the sin, the bad things that we all have in us and that because God is just and because God is holy, we should be punished for all the wrong things we've done.

When Jesus went to the cross, when he died on the cross, he took all these wrong things on himself. So my sins, all the wrong things in my life that I've done, Jesus took the punishment for them.

People may have thought that he was being cruelly executed by the Romans, that he'd been betrayed by the Jews, both of them true, but the real purpose of Jesus going to the cross was so that he could take my place, so that he could take my sins, so that I wouldn't have to be punished for all the wrong things I've done.

[22 : 42] Jesus took my place on the cross. Then the second thing that the cross tells us is that Jesus is the only way to God. There is nothing that I could do myself that would cancel out all the wrong things I've done.

I could try to live as good a life as I possibly could, I could try to be good to other people and be a real humanitarian type person and really concerned about everyone else and I wouldn't begin to scratch the surface of all the wrong things that I've done.

There is no way I myself can find my way to God. The only way to get to God, the only way to enjoy all the things that Paul's talking about in these verses is through the Lord Jesus and through his death.

Recognize that if I am inadequate, that Jesus died on the cross to take my place, that my sins were laid on him and that he was buried and he's risen again, that he's alive today and that he is able to bring me to God.

So two things about the death of the Lord Jesus. Remember he took our place and he is the only way to God. So let's just finish by reminding ourselves what we've talked about.

[24 : 02] We thought first of all about the prison, Paul the prisoner and the fact that for him he wasn't important but the gospel was. The task that God had given him to do was vitally important.

And the challenge there for those of us who know Jesus is have we got a real passion for serving the Lord or are we just doing our bit and are we perhaps trying to be seen to be important when actually we're not as committed as perhaps we should be.

We thought about the revelation about the fact that all around the world people have come to know Jesus on the same basis of putting their trust in him and even those who are outside this world can look on and can marvel at what God has done.

We thought about that great mystery of God bringing the Jews and the Gentiles together and giving them something that was much more wonderful than the Jews ever had in the Old Testament and we thought of the cross of the Lord Jesus of how he took our place and of how only through him can we find a way to God.

If you know Christ this morning if you know the Lord Jesus be challenged by what Sean has done and by what he said by someone who has said I am fully committed to Jesus and want to show everyone that and consider your commitment and your passion for serving Jesus.

[25 : 24] If you don't yet know Jesus if you're not a Christian again think of what Sean has done and the differences made in his life. Think about the cross of the Lord Jesus' death for us that he took your place that he's the way to God and come and put your trust in him.

I invite you as John did if you want to look further to take the book the 3 to 1 Gospel or talk to one of us who have been involved in the service today. If God's been speaking to you make sure that you respond and that you go away knowing and loving the Lord Jesus.

let's just pray together. Our Father we thank you for your word to us. We thank you for this tremendous truth that Paul brings to us that everyone without exception can know the grace of the Lord Jesus if they simply put their trust in him and accept what he has done for them.

We thank you for the church which is the visible evidence of that that spiritual being can look on and can marvel at the wisdom and the riches of God.

Help us to understand what you have to say to us help us to respond appropriately. We again thank you for Sean we thank you for his very clear testimony about the Lord Jesus and we pray that you will continue to be with him as he would seek to live for Christ and to serve him.

[26 : 46] We thank you for your presence and our time together we commit ourselves to you now in Jesus name. Amen.