

Congregational handout; outline sermon text on following pages

**Ephesians 3:1-7**

**Searching God's Mystery**

**A. Introduction**

**B. The Mystery as Paul's Particular Ministry to Gentiles**

1. A Stewardship of Grace ..... 3:2b

2. Known by Revelation ..... 3:3

3. Having Special Insight ..... 3:4

4. Hidden in the Old Testament, Revealed in the New ..... 3:5a

5. Totally Consistent with Apostles and Prophets ..... 3:5b

**C. The Mystery as Paul's Particular Message to Gentiles**

1. Together heirs ..... 3:6a

2. Together a body ..... 3:6b

3. Together sharing ..... 3:6c

**D. Conclusion**

A. Introduction

1. most people are problem solvers – even those who hated math problems when they were in school
  - a. go to any meeting and you will find this is true
    - (A) for when one person raises a difficulty
    - (B) then all sorts of side conversations begin in a buzz
    - (C) with people proposing various solutions to the problem
  - b. I am not sure that this is something to be proud about
    - (A) squirrels are excellent problems solvers too!
    - (B) we have a bird feeder outside of our bedroom window
    - (C) the birds love coming to it in the winter
    - (D) but so do the squirrels
      - (1) you probably have shared my experience
      - (2) over the winter I tried many different stratagems to preserve the food from the squirrels for the birds
      - (3) with each attempt, the result was the same
      - (4) the first squirrel encountering the change reacted in the same fashion
      - (5) he circled the feeder, made various attempts, measured distances and heights with his eye, and usually in less than an hour solved the problem
    - (E) so don’t be too proud of being a problem solver!
  - c. parents and pastors have to learn that there are times when they are NOT called upon to be problem solvers
    - (A) when a child or person comes with a problem
    - (B) it is all too easy to put on your problem solving hat
    - (C) when what is really needed is to reach out with your heart and care for the one in distress
  - d. maybe its better to channel our problem solving elsewhere
    - (A) to where it may really be needed
    - (B) or to some pastime as crosswords or Soduko

(C) or reading a whodunit mystery, trying to determine the guilty party based on the given clues

2. well in today's text, Ephesians 3:1-7, our Scripture reading

a. Paul is talking about a mystery

b. but it is not one that calls for our problem solving skills

c. here is a definition of a Christian mystery: a purpose of God once hidden from human knowledge and understanding, beyond human discovery, now belonging openly to the whole church, disclosed by the revelation of God and understood through the illumination of the Holy Spirit <sup>-{2}</sup>.

d. this agrees with the teaching in 1 Corinthians 2: <sup>6</sup> Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away; <sup>7</sup> but we speak God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden *wisdom* which God predestined before the ages to our glory; <sup>8</sup> *the wisdom* which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it they would not have crucified the Lord of glory; ... <sup>10a</sup> For to us God revealed *them* through the Spirit — (2:6-8, 10a)

e. there are two aspects to this mystery described in our text

(A) Paul's role and authority, or, the Mystery as Paul's Particular Ministry to Gentiles

(B) Paul's teaching, or, the Mystery as Paul's Particular Message to Gentiles

B. The Mystery as Paul's Particular Ministry to Gentiles

1. A Stewardship of Grace . . . . . 3:2b

a. ... the stewardship of God's grace which was given to me for you ... 'stewardship,' also translated 'dispensation' or 'administration' is literally, 'house rule' (οἰκονομία)

(A) this rule covered the authority and responsibilities of those in charge of managing a house, their staffing, scheduling, financing and empowerment

(B) at first it applied to the running of a household, but later it was used in the running of a house of business

(C) the New Testament spiritual application concerns the appointments of God for the carrying out His plan and purpose in His household on earth, the church

b. Paul's special appointment was to serve on behalf of those addressed in this letter; that is, the Gentiles

- (A) this was made known in his conversion and calling as we saw in last week's message
- (B) it was confirmed to the believers: *While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.'* (Acts 13:2 NAS)
- (C) and it was demonstrated in the churches founded throughout Asia and Europe by his ministry
- c. and, again as we noted last Sunday, Paul never forgot what a privilege of grace it was to be given this ministry
- d. so Paul was specifically appointed to be responsible for making known this mystery

2. Known by Revelation . . . . . 3:3

- a. *that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief. ... or, 'in few words or, if I may express it more colloquially: "as I have just sketched out"*
- (A) this is the subject that Paul has been writing about
- (B) for example, in Ephesians 1:9-10, *He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth. In Him...*
- (C) the how of the mystery, in 2:11-22, where we found that Jesus Christ Himself is our peace
- b. but you see, it is important that we realize, as did Paul, that this mystery – this purpose of the wisdom of God hidden from before time – was only, and can only, be known by revelation
- c. if we are to understand Christianity – in contrast to the religions of the world – this is of prime necessity that we see that as opposed to being the based on man's ideas – even his very best ideas – Christianity is based on the self-disclosure of God in His incarnation as Jesus of Nazareth, and His self-revelation through the Holy Spirit
- d. this mystery is true because God Himself has told us so

3. Having Special Insight . . . . . 3:4

- a. *By referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, ... or, (... Whereby, when ye read, ye may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ) — (AV)*
- (A) Paul now says

- (1) when you read the words I am now writing
- (2) when you look back at what I have just written
- (3) then you will realize that I have been prepared in a special fashion to explain this mystery of God

(B) Paul was uniquely gifted for his ministry

b. He was never in any doubt as to this fact

(A) to the Galatian church he defended His apostleship

(B) as we have just seen, his teaching was by revelation: "For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but *I received it* through a revelation of Jesus Christ." (Galatians 1:11-12 NAS)

(C) but he could see God had prepared him for this, "But when God, who had set me apart *even* from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, was pleased to reveal His Son in me so that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, ..." (Galatians 1:15-16 NAS)

4. Hidden in the Old Testament, Revealed in the New . . . . . 3:5a

a. which in other generations {or, ages} was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed ...

b. There is an old canon of Biblical interpretation

(A) one that is extremely important

(B) and, when ignored has led to false teaching and heresy

(1) has been expressed in this little couplet "**what is in the Old concealed, is in the New revealed**"

(2) the canon is this: you must interpret the Old Testament by using the New Testament, the only inspired commentary on the Old Testament

c. now, that all the nations of the world were to be blessed through Israel, was known from the Old Testament

d. Paul quotes the OT to show this in Romans 9:23-30

e. Isaiah 56 also promises this, but the Jews expected that this would take place in the Messianic kingdom when Gentiles would become Jews through circumcision

f. but how God's purpose, the '**mystery in Christ**', was to take place was not known in the Old Testament

5. Totally Consistent with Apostles and Prophets . . . . . 3:5b
- a. ... as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in {or, by} the Spirit;
  - b. first, let us note that the prophets here spoken of
    - (A) are the same as those in Ephesians 2:20: *having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone,*
    - (B) are not the Old Testament prophets, but the Christian prophets of the New Testament as is shown by
    - (C) the order of words: 'apostles and prophets'
    - (D) the word 'now' ... 'is now revealed'
    - (E) for the mystery was not revealed to the prophets of the Old Testament, even though they searched for it: "*As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that would come to you made careful searches and inquiries, seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow.*" (1 Peter 1:10-11)
  - c. second, Paul's gospel message does not conflict with Jesus' teaching nor with the message of the other apostles
    - (A) this was an accusation of Paul's enemies
    - (B) it is also a claim of preachers and teachers who do not believe in the infallible, inspired word of God
    - (C) it is the position of some so-called Messianic Christian missions who reject all of Paul's writings out of hand
    - (D) Paul's message was consistent with the apostles'
      - (1) Peter said at the Jerusalem council, in rejecting the need for circumcision, "*But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are.*" (Acts 15:11 NAS)
      - (2) in 2 Peter 3:15b-16 he confirms Paul's teaching, "... just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, as also in all *his* letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as *they do* also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction."
6. so the message of the 'mystery of Christ'
- a. was especially appointed to Paul

- b. was made known by revelation
- c. was taught by Paul's especial insight or knowledge
- d. was hidden in the OT, revealed in the NT
- e. and was consistent with all the apostles' gospel message

C. The Mystery as Paul's Particular Message to Gentiles

1. this brings us to verse 6

- a. there are three words in this verse that each start with the same Greek prefix, a prefix that means with or together
  - (A) it is carried over into the English word sympathy which means to feel together with someone
  - (B) and symphony meaning make a sound together
- b. it is difficult to bring this sense accurately over into English
- c. the NASB attempts this by using the word 'fellow'
  - (A) fellow heirs
  - (B) fellow members of the same body
  - (C) fellow partakers
  - (D) let me use the alternative word 'together'

2. Together heirs . . . . . 3:6a

- a. *to be specific, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs ... or, That the Gentiles should be fellowheirs, ...* — (AV)
  - Greek infinitive expresses in both translations as God's desired result
- b. Romans 8:16-17 tell us: *The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him.* — on this truth, J. Wilbur Chapman recounts this incident: <sup>{3}</sup>.
  - (A) A dying judge, the day before his departure to be with Christ, said to his pastor, "Do you know enough about law to understand what is meant by joint-tenancy?"
  - (B) "No," was the reply. "I know nothing about law, I know a little about grace, and that satisfies me."
  - (C) "Well," he said, "if you and I were joint-tenants on a farm, I could not say to you: That is your hill of corn, and this is mine; that is your stalk of wheat, and this is mine that is your blade of grass, and this is mine; but we should share and share alike in everything on the place. I have just been

lying here, and thinking with unspeakable joy, that Jesus Christ has nothing apart from me, that everything he has is mine, and we will share and share alike through all eternity.”

- c. in Christ, every promise of inheritance which was given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, is fulfilled in full
- d. so then, those who are in Christ, whether they be Jew or Gentile, are heirs of those promises

3. Together a body . . . . . 3:6b

- a. *to be specific, that the Gentiles are ... fellow members of the body, ... or, ... of the same body ... (AV) or, ... members together of one body ... (NIV)* – these various translations are each used to translate one single Greek word
- b. This seems to be the only time that this word is used in all previous known Greek literature – it seems to have been coined by Paul to express something entirely new
  - (A) that Jews and Gentiles
  - (B) those disparate and antagonistic peoples
  - (C) should form the closest of all possible unions: a body
  - (D) that of being one in Christ Jesus
  - (E) not simply at the mystical, universal level, but in every assembly of believers, one body, as a practical reality
- c. to the Jews this was a tremendously radical idea
  - (A) no wonder it took the power of God on the road to Damascus to shake this well-trained Pharisee to his very roots so he could be the apostle to the Gentiles
  - (B) no wonder he fought so vehemently against Judaizers who supplanted God’s grace demanding Gentiles first to become Jews, before becoming Christians

4. Together sharing . . . . . 3:6c

- a. *to be specific, that the Gentiles are ... fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel*
- b. the word translated ‘fellow partakers’
  - (A) is built up from three root words
  - (B) ‘with’ + another word for ‘with’ + ‘have’
  - (C) it is emphatic: it is ‘*those who together with one another have the promise in Christ Jesus*’
  - (D) God’s plan is that His promises could not be fully realized by either group in isolation from the



other – this is one reason that evangelization of both Jew and Gentile should be so important to every Christian

- c. now we come back again to the key of this Ephesian letter
  - (A) this promise can only take place in Christ
  - (B) union with Christ – the message of the gospel – is key

5. Let me quote John R.W. Stott in summary: **to sum up, we may say that 'the mystery of Christ' is the complete union of Jews and Gentiles with each other through the union of both with Christ. It is this double union, with Christ and with each other, which was the substance of the 'mystery' ...** <sup>-(4)}</sup>.

#### D. Conclusion

- 1. people think the OT is strictly for the Jews and ignore it
  - a. they read that the promise was to Abraham and his children
  - b. they feel excluded, for example, Psalm 135:4 **'For the LORD has chosen Jacob for Himself, Israel for His own possession.'**
  - c. yet the OT as the message of hope for the nations
  - d. Israel was to be a witness to the nations (Isaiah 43:9-12)
  - e. the prophets searched intently for the solution to this mystery
- 2. but the NT reveals the answer to the mystery: it is found in **'the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel'**
  - a. in Christ all the promises of God are yea and amen
  - b. we participate in those promises by being in Christ
    - (A) when Christ died for my sin, then I died
    - (B) when Christ rose from the dead, then I arose to newness of life in him
    - (C) the life I now live, I live in Christ
  - c. if you have not already done so, then in simple faith, accepting Jesus' death for your sin, you too can become a fellow-heir, fellow-part of the body, fellow partaker and recipient of the promises, a beneficiary of God's great plan

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ASV	American Standard Version of 1901
AV	Authorized (King James) Version
ERV	The Revised Version of 1885
NAS	New American Standard version © 1960, 1995 The Lockman Foundation
NIV	New International Version © 1984 by the International Bible Society
NKJV	New King James Version © 1979 Thomas Nelson Inc., Publishers
NLT	1996 New Living Translation © 1996 by Tyndale Charitable Trust
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U. S. A.
PHIL	New Testament Translation © 1972 by J. B. Phillips
RSV	Revised Standard Version © 1946, 1952 by the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U. S. A.
WEY	The New Testament in Modern Speech © 1902, 1912 R. F. Weymouth

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2. Adapted from ‘God’s New Society’ by John R. W. Stott, page 116; InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois 60515
3. Fredericksburg Bible Illustrator Supplements, Kerux Illustrations #10609
4. John R. W. Stott, *Op cit.*, page 117