Message for THE LORD'S DAY MORNING, September 4, 2016 (Labor Day Weekend)
Christian Hope Church of Christ, Plymouth, North Carolina
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(Acknowledgments to John MacArthur for the outline of this sermon)

Message 5 in Ephesians Sermon Series (“Rags to Riches”)

The Greatest Mystery of All
Ephesians 3:1-13 (NKJV)

ILLUSTRATION

One of the big tourist attractions in southwestern Missouri is a place called Meramec Caverns located in the Ozark Mountains.

Back in the 1800’s two of the most famous outlaws of the old wild west used to hide out inside this cave. Their names were Jesse James and his brother Frank.

Any time Jesse and Frank were pursued by a posse they would simply run to this cave and seemingly disappear into thin air. This was a mystery that remained hidden for over fifty years.

Finally, in the 1930’s it was discovered that the cave Jesse and Frank James hid in was much more than a cave. It was actually a network of underground caverns that ran over 4 1/2 miles long. The caverns had remained undisturbed for years because they were filled with water. But one year during a drought the water level dropped dramatically and the mystery of how the James Brothers disappeared was solved.

When the brothers entered the cave, they would hide their horses and then swim twenty feet underwater into a hidden room inside the cave. After hiding their loot they would wade through water and emerge at the exit of the caverns 4 1/2 miles away always eluding the Sheriff and his posse.

Mysteries can sometimes remain hidden for years, sometimes even hundreds or thousands of years.
Today as we continue with our series of message from the Book of Ephesians we are going to be looking at The Greatest Mystery of All.

This mystery doesn’t involve any unsolved murders....or unidentified flying objects....or unexplained creatures such as “Big Foot” or “The Loch Ness Monster.”

Actually, The Greatest Mystery of All involves you and me.

Please turn with me to our scripture text in Ephesians chapter three. And follow along with me as I read verses 1-13.

**EPHESIANS 3:1-13 (NKJV)**

1. For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles—
2. if indeed you have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which was given to me for you,
3. how that by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I have briefly written already,
4. by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ),
5. which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets:
6. that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel,
7. of which I became a minister according to the gift of the grace of God given to me by the effective working of His power.
8. To me, who am less than the least of all the saints, this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ,
9. and to make all see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ;
10. to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places,
11. according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord,
12. in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through faith in Him.
13. Therefore I ask that you do not lose heart at my tribulations for you, which is your glory.

**PRAYER**
In these verses Paul makes **five key points** about this “**Greatest Mystery of All.**”

First I would have you to notice.....

**I. The PRISONER of The Mystery (vs. 1-4)**

1. **For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles—**
2. **If indeed you have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which was given to me for you,**
3. **how that by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I have briefly written already,**
4. **by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ),**

1. It has been said, **“All people are a prisoner of something.”** Some are **prisoners of alcohol.** Some are **prisoners of drugs.** Some are **prisoners of pornography.** Some are **prisoners of money.....or material things......or gambling.....** or even

2. In **verse 1,** Paul says, **“For this reason, I, Paul the prisoner of Christ Jesus........”**

It is well-documented that Paul wrote this **Letter to The Ephesians** during his two year imprisonment in Rome. In fact, at the time Paul wrote this letter, he had been a “prisoner” for almost five years.

Five years earlier Paul had been arrested in Jerusalem on “false charges” that he had taken a Gentile by the name of Trophimus into the forbidden area of the Temple in Jerusalem. When the Jews secretly plotted to kill Paul while he was in jail in Jerusalem, Paul was transferred to the prison in Caesarea Philippi under the protective escort of a Roman military garrison. He remained in prison in Caesarea Philippi for the next two years while awaiting the opportunity to have his case heard by Caesar in Rome.
While Paul was being transported on a prison ship from Caesarea to Rome, the ship ran into a hurricane and wrecked off the Island of Malta. After a delay of several months, Paul was finally transferred to Rome, where he has been imprisoned for the past two years.

3. So think about that! Paul has been a prisoner for the past five years, first under the custody of the Jews, then of the Romans. But pay close attention to how Paul identifies himself in verse 1........

Notice Paul doesn't say, “I, Paul, the prisoner of the Jews” or “I, Paul, the prisoner of the Romans.” He says, “I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles.”

4. Although he is in the custody of the Romans, Paul does not consider himself “Rome's prisoner.” He considers himself the “prisoner of Christ Jesus.”

Paul had been called to be an apostle by Jesus Christ. Paul had been called to preach the gospel to the Gentiles by Jesus Christ. So Paul's attitude was: “Nothing that happens to me happens without the consent of Christ. I am under the control of Christ. Wherever I go......whatever I do.... whatever happens to me is because I am a prisoner of Christ Jesus.

5. There is a vitally important truth for you and me to learn here so listen up! Perspective is absolutely critical! How we VIEW our circumstances and how we RESPOND to our circumstances is even more important than our circumstances themselves.
6. Had Paul's attitude have been, “Woe is me. I'm in prison. My life is in the hands of these prison guards and the Roman government,” he would have been over-whelmed with despair and discouragement.

   But because **Paul believed his life was completely in the hands of the Lord Jesus Christ, he knew there was a divine PURPOSE in every circumstance he found himself in, including sitting in a Roman prison.**

7. You see, Paul wasn't in prison for committing any crime. He hadn't killed anybody or robbed anybody. Paul was in prison for **preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles! He was in prison for doing what Christ had called him to do!**

8. Remember, this is **the same man who once persecuted Christians.** This is the same man **who hunted down Christians like wild animals to have them thrown into prison and even killed.**

   He was guilty of horrible sins and crimes against God's people. **He was deserving of death.** But then Saul, who later became Paul, experienced **God's great mystery in his own life.** Instead of striking him dead, God chose instead to save Saul by His amazing grace and then to use him as His instrument to preach the great mystery of the gospel to the Gentiles.

   **HE BECAME “THE PRISONER OF THE MYSTERY.”**
Secondly, I would have you to notice....

II. The **PLAN** of The Mystery (vs.5,6)

5 which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets:

6 that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel,

1. Here is “The Great Mystery” so listen closely!

God knew before He even laid the foundations of the earth that man would sin against Him, and that sin would separate man from Him. **God already knew man would need a Savior**, and even before the fall of man, **God had already chosen His Son, Jesus Christ** to be the One who would save man by His death on the cross.

2. Before the Church age, no one......NOT the Jews “God's chosen people” nor even the greatest of God's prophets understood the “mystery of God's plan.”

No one fully understood God's promise to Abraham that “in him all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

3. For thousands of years the Jews believed as “God's chosen people” they were the only ones God planned to save. **But the mystery of God's plan of salvation was that God would SAVE THE GENTILES AS WELL AS THE JEWS.**

4. Look at the three terms Paul uses in verse 6 to describe our relationship with Christ and with the Jewish people.

a. We are FELLOW HEIRS. (of the riches of Christ)
b. We are FELLOW MEMBERS of the BODY. (the body of Christ)
c. We are FELLOW PARTAKERS of the PROMISES. (eternal life)
5. I love the way Eugene Peterson paraphrases verse 6 in “The Message.” Listen closely!

“The mystery is that the people who have never heard of God and those who have heard of Him all their lives, stand on the same ground before God. They get the same offer, same help, same promises in Christ Jesus. The Message is accessible and welcoming to everyone, across the board.”

6. You see, you and I are part of “The Greatest Mystery of All!” God planned to save you and me all along! But it was not until after the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ the mystery of God’s plan of salvation was made known to the Gentiles.

III. The PREACHING of The Mystery (vs. 7-9)

7 of which I became a minister according to the gift of the grace of God given to me by the effective working of His power.

8 To me, who am less than the least of all the saints, this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ,

9 and to make all see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ;

1. Paul was called by God to be the very first minister to preach the mystery of God's salvation to the Gentiles.

2. God's grace is EVERYTHING to those who deserve NOTHING. Paul himself, was a recipient of the very grace God called him to preach to the Gentiles.
3. Paul knew he did not deserve to be \textit{SAVED}, nor did he deserve to be \textit{CALLED} to \textit{PREACH} the gospel to the Gentiles. In fact, Paul calls himself \textit{the least of all the saints}.

What Paul is saying is, \textit{“I'm the last person on earth who should be given the privilege of preaching the gospel.”} But it was that honest assessment of his standing before God that helped him to see the desperate need of the Gentiles.

4. You see, here is \textit{another aspect of “The Great Mystery of God.”} God chose to spread the \textit{GOSPEL} to the \textit{GENTILES} through the \textit{FOOLISHNESS} of \textit{PREACHING}.

To the unbelieving world, the whole idea of an all-loving \textit{GOD} sending His only begotten \textit{Son} into the world to be born of a virgin and to die on a cross to save man from his sins sounds like the most foolish.... the most ridiculous story man has ever heard.

But to those who believe, \textit{“the mystery of the gospel” isn’t some foolish story concocted by man, it is the greatest truth ever revealed to man!}

5. Paul says in Romans 10:14,15 (NKJV) “How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: \textit{“How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, who bring glad tidings of good things?”}
6. I never fully understood or appreciated this verse until I went to India back in 2007. When I, and my fellow American preachers would enter into the Indian villages the people would come out and bow down and kiss our feet or reach out and try to touch our feet.

   It wasn't because they worshiped us or revered us; it was because the Indian preachers had told them we were coming to bring them the good news that God had sent His only begotten Son to die for them so that they might have eternal life.

   And as we preached the good news of the gospel all over southeast India for nineteen days we saw over five-thousand souls baptized into the Lord Jesus Christ.

7. You see, the soul-saving message of the gospel is just as TRUE, just as POWERFUL, and just as NECESSARY today as it was when the apostle Paul first preached it to the Gentiles of his day some two thousand years ago.

   Well we have considered: The PRISONER of The Mystery......The PLAN of the Mystery......and The PREACHING of The Mystery.

   Fourthly, let's consider.......
IV. **The PURPOSE of The Mystery (vs. 10,11)**

10 to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places,

11 according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord,

1. God never intended for us to hear the good news of the gospel and keep it to ourselves.

2. The whole purpose of the Church always was and still is that we would share the good news of the gospel with our loved ones, our friends, our neighbors, our co-workers, and even with total strangers, so that others might hear the good news and be saved also.

3. God's purpose for that Church is that we might “spiritually **REPRODUCE** by making more **DISCIPLES**.”

And this is the responsibility of each and every one of us as Christians; to tell others about the One who gave His life to save us, so that they too might be saved.
Finally, let's consider......

V. The PRIVILEGE of The Mystery (vs. 12,13)

12 In whom we have boldness and access with confidence through faith in Him.

13 Therefore I ask that you do not lose heart at my tribulations for you, which is your glory.

1. Under the old covenant, the only one who could pass through the veil that separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies was the HIGH PRIEST; and even he was only permitted to do this one time a year.

2. But now, each and every one who comes to know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior has the PRIVILEGE of coming into God's PRESENCE because of Jesus Christ.

3. Through the BLOOD of CHRIST we have been cleansed and made whole, so that we might boldly come before the throne of God in PRAYER any time of day or night.

4. This is just another wonderful aspect of this Great Mystery of God's Salvation.

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ILLUSTRATION

Charles Haddon Spurgeon once said........

“Christianity made people who were things into real men and women, more, into sons and daughters of God; it gave those who had no respect, their self-respect. It gave those who had no life, eternal life. It told men that even if they did not matter to other men, they still mattered intensely to God. It told men who, in the eyes of the world were worthless, that, in the eyes of God they were worth the death of His only begotten Son.

And that is The Great Mystery of The Gospel......THE GREATEST MYSTERY OF ALL!