

## Introduction

Good morning. It's great to see you today. If you have a Bible with you, and I hope that you do, I want to invite you at this time to take it out with me, turn to the Book of Ephesians, chapter 3. If you don't have a Bible with you, it's alright. You can just use that Bible that's right there in front of you, in the seat tray. You can join along in understanding what this great mystery is. Now, if you're new to the Bible, let me explain to you real quickly how this works. The Bible is divided into two parts, the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament is a record of God's people Israel, and it tells their story of rebellion and struggle against God and then brings along their need for a rescue. Then the New Testament tells us the story of that Rescuer. His name is Jesus. We read about His birth, His life, His death, and His resurrection. We also read then about those people who choose to follow after Him; they are called the Church. So today, we are reading in the Book of Ephesians. Ephesians was written by a man by the name of Paul. Paul started a lot of different churches all throughout the ancient world, and he wrote letters back to those churches. This book, the Book of Ephesians, was a letter written to the church that's there in Ephesus. So we are going to read that here together. So let me pray over us, and then we'll jump into Scripture.

"Lord, we need to hear from You today. God, there are people that are here that they're feeling pretty beaten down by life and who don't understand why things have happened to them that have happened to them. God, we pray for them today. We lift them up to You. Lord, but there are also individuals that are confused: 'What good is the Church? Why does it even matter anymore?' Father, there are also people that are here that are wondering if You even have a word for them. Today, some people are here that are giving You the last chance. Lord, I pray that today You would speak to them, that You would show them what it is that You want them to see. God, I pray all of these things would happen through the power of Your Holy Spirit, through the preaching of Your Word. Lord, we ask this in the Name of Jesus Christ. Amen."

Ephesians chapter 3, starting in verse 1: *"For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles—assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly."* (So Paul is talking about his conversion experience there.) Verse 4: *"When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel."*

*"Of this Gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of His power. To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, so that through the Church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was according to the eternal purpose that He has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in Him. So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory."* Paul talks about the "mystery" that has now been made known.

This week I was sitting at home watching baseball. One of my sons was sitting there talking to me. He looked over at me and he said, "Dad... what do you think the greatest mystery in the world is?" Wow... I thought we were just watching baseball... I don't know. He went deep really, really quickly. I don't know about you, but do you ever get caught up in those philosophical discussions and you start wondering about

the great secrets of the universe... what exactly the great mystery of life is? But Paul uses this word "mystery" over and over. In fact, if you read the New Testament, you see that he uses it a great deal. We saw it several times here in Ephesians chapter 3, but if you could go back and look in other places where Paul writes, you would see that he uses this same term over and over.

Romans 16:25... *"Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my Gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages..."*

*Colossians 1:26... "...the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to His saints."*

Even the apostle John gets in on the act in Revelation 10:7... *"...but that in the days of the trumpet call to be sounded by the seventh angel, the mystery of God would be fulfilled, just as He announced to His servants the prophets."*

## **1. All People (v. 6)**

What exactly is this idea of the mystery? In the ancient world, there were mystery religions, and these mystery religions were religions that required some sort of initiation, typically involving animal sacrifice, to be brought into one of these religions. Then it would reveal this picture where you would then get secret information in these mystery religions about whatever god it was that was worshipped. So in those days it was sort of this idea that you were initiated into some kind of a secret society or a fraternity, and then you would get some sort of secret philosophy or special revelation about who the god is. That was the way that they functioned... the way that they worked. Paul is tying into that sentiment by using the same word, but he is saying, "Actually, you don't have to be initiated into some kind of secret society to get this. God has a great mystery that has been revealed, and it is now for all people." That's actually the first piece of the mystery... that God has now made Himself available unto all people. If you go back and you look at verse 6, he starts right here and he says, *"This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel."*

What's the point? Well, if you back to Genesis 12:1-3, God makes a promise to Abram, and this promise indicates that God is going to select a people. This is what it says: *"Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'" So Abram's descendants, the Jewish people, become God's chosen people. He says, "I'm going to bless you, and I'm going to make you into a great nation." But now, in Ephesians chapter 3, in verse 6, Paul declares, "There is actually a mystery that I am revealing to you and this is it: 'No longer does God simply have chosen for Himself one group of people, but He has now broadened that circle to include all peoples of the earth.'" So if you are alive... no matter what background you have, no matter your race, no matter your educational status... no matter who you are, you have now been invited to be a member of God's people. Now this was a mystery because the Jewish people had assumed for so long that they were the only people that would ever have God's favor. But Paul explodes that precept position by now saying that everyone is welcome into God's grace.*

Whenever I was a student pastor years ago... I was about 25 years old. We lived in a small town in east Texas. We didn't have anything that was really fancy in our lives or in our house. We were just trying to make it. There was a man in our church, he was an attorney... his name was John... he came to Joy and I and he said, "Our family would like to invite you to come and join us for dinner at our club this weekend."

We were like, "Wow... that sounds great." We had no idea what a club was, but it sounded neat and we wanted to be part of that. We gathered a little bit of intel and realized that this would require putting on nicer clothes. I put on a tie and a jacket... this sort of thing. So we load up in the car with their family, and we drive to downtown Fort Worth. We go into this building and suddenly I realized I was in a place that I had never been before. Everything was marble or gold. We go into an elevator... it was a private elevator. You have to have permission to get into it. They take us up to the top floor of this skyscraper. We walk in; they sit us down at this round table covered in a white linen tablecloth. We were looking out over the city skyline. Joy and I are immediately both beginning to sweat simultaneously because we have never been in any sort of situation like this, and we have no idea what it is that we are doing. We were starting to get nervous. Suddenly a man appeared to Joy's right in a tuxedo holding a bowl of shrimp. And he said, "How many shrimp would you like?" Now this was a pretty big quandary for us. I mean, we were eating basically rice and beans every night. (Laughter) We're thinking there's probably an appropriate and acceptable amount, but instinctively we were like, "About eighty... would that be okay?" (Laughter) That was kind of what we were thinking in this moment. Later on in the evening I went to the restroom, and I came back and I sat down next to Joy... literally I leaned over and whispered to her, "They have mouthwash in the bathroom..." (Laughter) We were living in an area that we had no business being in. We ended up in this club because we had been invited into it. We didn't belong there, we didn't have nice enough clothes, and we certainly didn't have any sort of pedigree or financial wherewithal to end up in this room. Nevertheless, there we were... because someone who had access had invited us to come and to be part of that club... there on that day.

What Paul is declaring here is that at one time there was a very limited, special club... a very select group who had access to God: the Jewish people, through Abram; they were chosen. They were the nation... they were to be the people that were alone to be God's people. But now the great mystery... Ephesians 3:6... now declares that God has opened wide the gates and has declared, "All people are now My people." Now why does that matter for you or for me? ...Because you have now been brought up into the private elevator to the very top floor and seated at the banquet table. There the Lord is saying, "Eat all the shrimp that you want; you have been welcomed." You don't belong here; you're not good enough to be here... you don't have any qualifications that bring you any right to be seated at this table. Nevertheless, He has, through Jesus Christ, made you possible to sit at His table. You're dirty. You're a sinner, but Jesus died for you. You were bound for death, yet Jesus conquered the grave for you. You have been given access to sit at this great table. In fact, in that same verse... verse 6... if you go back and look, it says that we are all partakers. He uses the eating metaphor to say that we are all sitting together, supping with Jesus. We have been invited to sit at the table... all people.

Now, what we do is we tend to create barriers in our own minds. Sometimes we create barriers for other people. We'll say things like, "I would like to go and to sit at the table, but I'm not good enough." "I would like to go and to sit at the table, but I don't have my life straightened out just yet." "I would like to go and to sit at the table, but... (for whatever reason.) You see, for whatever reason, we have it in our heart and in our mind that the Church is only for those people who have kind of gotten their lives together. Listen... the Church is not for people who have gotten their lives together. It is for the most messed up people who desperately say, "I want to go sit at that table, so I am going to grab hold of Jesus because He has invited me to do so. You have been invited to sit at the table, not because of anything that you have ever done to make you worthy to do so, but because simply He wants to give it to you.

## 2. Display For All Eternity. (v. 11)

So why would He do this? Great question... verse 11. *"This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and access..."* Eternal purpose... God has an eternal purpose in allowing all people to be here. It's not just because He is gracious... it's not just for His glory, although those are incredible reasons that He could do those things. But He has an eternal purpose. What is that? Go back and look at verse 10... one above that: *"...so that through the Church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places."* Look at that last phrase again: *"...to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places."* Who are the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places? Well, whoever those people are, God wants to show His wisdom to them. Rulers and authorities in the heavenly places... it ain't us and it's not Him. So somewhere between humanity and the throne of God there is a group of people that God wants to demonstrate His manifold wisdom to. Who is that? Angels? Demons? Some other sort of spiritual realm of which we are not aware? I don't know... but I do know this: that God has declared through the Church... verse 10... that whenever we live as His people, we display His wisdom unto those beings.

Anytime you get together with a group of people, watching a football game, inevitably you hear some young man say, "One day, I want to play football; I want to be in the NFL" or "I am going to play college ball." They see that thing and they get excited about it. God stirs it within their heart, maybe, to have some kind of desire there. Maybe you go to a Broadway play and you're with a group of people, and little kids who have ever seen people perform at that level... something happens in their heart and they say, "One day I want to be on a platform like that, singing... performing." Something happens in them. There's something that happens in us whenever we gather around something and we see it on display. We have a desire in us. We say, "I want that. I want to participate in that. I want to be like that. I want to enjoy that." That happens in our heart. What the Scripture is saying in Ephesians chapter 3 is that God has chosen to open up His promise to all people so that He can display His wisdom to people who we perhaps can't even see. In other words, God makes the Church "the Church" so that people who look at it say, "I want that." Angels who look at the Church say, "I want that..." Demons who look at the Church say, "Wow... I wish I could have that." I know that it sounds bizarre, but this is what Scripture tells us. It's that whenever the Church lives as the Church is supposed to live, it ought to create a holy discontent in people on the outside of the church to say, "I want that sort of feeling." Whenever the Church lives in the way that they're supposed to live, welcoming people from every background... it doesn't matter what color your skin is. It doesn't matter what kind of sin you have in your past. It doesn't matter how much money you have. It doesn't matter what your struggles are... Whenever the Church lives with an open-door policy saying, "We welcome all people from all backgrounds to come into this place and to worship." Whenever our Life Groups minister together, and in those small groups of people... it's not just one type of people, but it's people of all ages, all stripes, all backgrounds that are sitting around, sitting together, studying God's Word, praying together, bearing one another's burdens, serving one another, doing those things... when those things happen, for whatever reason, it is as if God takes that and He lifts it up high, and He is then able to display it to the rulers in the heavenly realms and say... "Look at this... This is My people. Do you see this?" And He holds it up high and somehow it stirs in their heart an affection. The same thing happens, I think, very regularly here on earth. People come into a church... Just today I heard a story about a woman who visited us from Germany. She spent several weeks here around this church, and she said, "There is nothing like this in my country. I have never seen anything like this." But as she was around us and she sensed the Holy Spirit's presence in our time of worship... As she went into smaller gatherings and she experienced the love there, she said that she had thought that her sister who was part of this was

part of a cult. Until she came and she saw it firsthand, and then she said, "I want that." ...Because whenever they see the way that people love one another in the way that they're supposed to love one another, they put God on display. The thing that's interesting is that, for whatever reason, we choose over and over and over to not display that sort of love.

This week we were honored as a church to host HCPN (the Houston Church Planter's Network) here on our campus. We had about 150 pastors and planters that were here strategizing ways to reach our city through church planting. We prayed for our city; we prayed for one another. There were pastors and planters of every different nationality... different languages were being spoken and translated in the room... and God was at work. As I sat at the back of the room, watching those people pray for one another... I just looked over and I said, "God, this is You displaying Your Kingdom here in our city. You are just taking those people and lifting them up and showing, 'This is the way that it's supposed to look.'"

I know that some of us in this room... it's a big deal for us just to show up on a Sunday morning and sing and listen to a sermon. But I need you to hear me on this. You need to be further in. You need to be in a smaller group, and I know whenever I say that you're like, "I don't want to do that. They're going to get in my business." Yes... they are; you're right. They're going to know you. It happens... when people know you, they know your business. They're not doing it because they're trying to be mean. They're not doing it because they are trying to be nosy. They are just doing it because they love you. And guess what? You're going to know their business. I know some of you are like, "Oh great... I'm going to know their business, and they're going to want me to help them..." and stuff like that. (Laughter) Yeah... they are. You see, that's the Church. Whenever we know one another in the way that Jesus knows us and we share our lives with one another, then guess what happens? When we interact and we love in that way, we take the manifold wisdom of God and we lift it high and we display it. That's what God wants. He wants to be able to show that we love one another in such a unique fashion that others might see it.

You see, God wants to use that to display His wisdom into an unbelieving world and even into the heavenly realms so that every aspect of creation can see today how great our God is. I want you to see how great this truly is. Most of the world is filled with strife and disagreement and bickering and argumentation. What happens when groups of people that are so entirely different, perhaps coming from different political persuasions... different economic backgrounds... different racial backgrounds... whenever they gather together and they can actually love one another, what happens? People say, "How did that happen? I don't see it anywhere else." Only through Jesus.

### **3. All By His Grace**

You see, it's God doing His thing, welcoming in all people, and then He does it so that He can display all of His wisdom. And then He does that only by His Gospel... all through the Gospel... all for the Gospel... all by His grace. In fact, that's what this verse says, actually, isn't it? Verse 6 says, "*This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel.*" Through the Gospel... Why does that matter? Why does it matter that we can only have church by the Gospel and through the Gospel? ...Because here's the thing: Whenever we get together, this is the thing that all churches struggle with. Eventually, over time, churches struggle and tend to, if they are not guarded in this approach, to make the Gospel the thing that takes the backseat in their relationships. So we love to serve one another, we love to help one another, we love to pray for one another, but we forget that the reason that we are connected to one another is because God has made a way for us to do that through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. In other words, why would I love someone? ...Because God loved

me in Jesus Christ. Why would I forgive someone? ...Because God forgave me, in Jesus Christ. Why would I be gracious to someone? ...Because God was gracious to me in Jesus Christ. In other words, we cannot experience these sorts of relationships until we do so with the Gospel at the center.

Plenty of people have plenty of organizations that they are part of. Maybe you do. Maybe you've got a group of buddies that you ride motorcycles with. Maybe you've got a group of people that you fish with or hunt with... or... whatever you ladies do together... whenever you get together. (Laughter) But whatever that is, and whenever you get together and you do those things... maybe you've got something that you do... Those are great things... great gifts given to us by God's common grace, and those are beautiful expressions of His love, etcetera, etcetera. I'm not saying there's anything wrong with any of that. However... if you are part of a motorcycle group or a fishing group or a hunting group and Jesus is not at the center, you will only get to a certain level in your relationship, even if you are bearing your soul... even if you're bearing your soul... because until Jesus enters the picture and you are able to say, "I can now speak to you from God's Word and give you counsel from God's Word." Or until you can say, "I can forgive you because God forgave me through Jesus Christ..." Or until you can say, "I can now exhort you because of this..." Or... "I can support you in this," or "I can pray for you..." Until Jesus and His Spirit become the centerpiece of your relationship, you cannot, for whatever reason, take your relationship to the depth that it needs to go. This is why Paul says that the Gentiles are partakers of this mystery... in the Gospel... because we can only get to the level of relationship that we need to get to when we make Jesus the center of our lives. I want you to hear me on this. Some of us have very dear friendships, but Jesus is not at the center of them. Some of us have great people, great neighbors, but Jesus is not at the center of those relationships. Those relationships are great; there's nothing wrong with them, per se. It's not bad to have those relationships, but you are not going to move to the place of spiritual transformation until the Gospel becomes the centerpiece.

So you're like, "Well, what does that mean? Why are you telling me this?" I'm telling you this for a couple of reasons. Number one: If you're in the church group, a Life Group, and you are not always going back to the Gospel, driving the actions in that group... then you are creating a group that is essentially spiritually bankrupt. If you have relationships that are the most important relationships in your life... family, friends, neighbors... whatever, and you are not ever approaching the Gospel in those relationships... guess what? They can only hit a certain level, and as a believer, we are not doing the things that God has called us to do. He has called us to share that Good News, that God has welcomed them in. You see, the thing is that God wants to make our city change, but the only way that the city can be changed is through the power of Jesus.

Jon Tyson who is pastor of Trinity Grace Church in New York, in Manhattan... whenever they started the church they had a catch-phrase that they used. And whenever they would pray, they would say, "In New York as it is in heaven..." I was listening to some of his podcasts the other day... I was just driving down the road, taking Ben to a cross country meet. He had fallen asleep because, you know, it was 5:30 or 6:00 in the morning... driving down the highway in the dark. I'm listening to this podcast, and God just began to stir in my heart. As I'm listening to it... Jon Tyson is talking and he says "We began to realize that in New York, as it is in heaven... " that's what God wants for our church to pray for... to seek. It was like the Holy Spirit started speaking to me, and He said to me, "Steve, that's what I want your church to pray for. I want your church to pray, 'In Houston, as it is in heaven.' I want your church to pursue that, to create pockets of heaven all over this city by sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ with people who are far from Him... by loving one another in the way that Jesus loved you... by worshipping freely, welcoming all people to be in this place. I want you to create a space where we are freely declaring, 'In Houston, as it is in heaven.'

When we pray for healing, when we pray for addiction to be broken, where we cry out to God and we say, 'God, deliver people from bondage of sin.' ...where we say, 'We want all of these things to happen because Jesus is indeed King, and His Church must indeed reflect the rules and the relationships of the Kingdom of God... not of the rest of the world.' God began to stir that in my heart... I'm not going to lie to you. I started to get emotional... kind of dangerous, getting emotional and driving in the dark at 5:30 in the morning... but it was happening. So as I was trying to hold it together there, and as I was doing that, I just started to cry out to God. "I started to pray, 'Lord, could we see something this big and this beautiful happen in our lifetimes? God, could we see our church become so consumed with loving one another in the way that Jesus loved? God, could we see our people boldly declaring, wherever they go, that they have been changed because of Jesus... that people would freely have spiritual conversations, that they would freely talk about Jesus in their workplace or in their neighborhood? Could we see those sorts of things begin to happen?' And as I began to pray for that... I don't want to lie to you and tell you that the Holy Spirit said, 'Yeah... that's going to happen.'" But if you've ever experienced an awakening of the Holy Spirit, I want you to know that I was sensing that in my heart, you know, how you start to get almost a warm feeling in our chest. "This is what God has made our church for. This is what we are to do. In Houston as it is in heaven. This is what we are about."

I stand before you today, then, and I ask this, church: "Will we be a people who will reflect the mystery of God? Would we welcome anyone, no matter how bad?" Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that oftentimes many churches would be surprised to look up and see a real sinner in their midst. God, would we welcome sinners into this place? I want you to know... you've got one preaching for you. Would we welcome all people? Would we be the group of people that would display all of God's wisdom by loving one another freely... by just saying, "I'm going to commit to be part of this church, to truly love at the level that God has called me to love Him?" Would we be the group of people that would say that always we're going to just go back to the grace of God and the Gospel, and we're going to just run back to it over and over and over? And as we run back to it, people are going to say, "Is that all you talk about?" "Yes, it is." And as you start to hear that and you start to understand it, you will see that it is the engine that drives everything that we do, because the Gospel moves this church forward, and we are obsessed with it. We want God's grace to be the centerpiece of everything that we believe and everything that we ever preach and everything that we ever live. I believe that if we can answer "Yes" to those things, God will rip back the ceiling on this place, and His Holy Spirit can move with a power that we have yet to see. "In Houston, as it is in heaven." This is the mystery. Would you pray with me?

"Lord, to be in Your presence... God, to be with You... We don't really understand it, but God it's the thing that You are stirring in our heart. All people... Lord, today, I pray for the people that are in this room who think they have no business being here. They think that they are not good enough, they're not holy enough, they don't have their life together.... Lord, I pray that today You let them hear this truth: that You have picked them... that You want them. You call them 'Yours' today. You love them freely with a ruthless, reckless love, and Lord You want them to know You. Lord, I pray today for the people that are here... that are afraid to love. They like being in the big group, but Lord, getting into a small group scares them to death. They say, 'Wow... I don't know if I'm ready to reveal myself at that kind of a level yet.' Lord, I pray that You would encourage them through Your Word that You cannot display Your glory, Your wisdom to everyone that You want to display it until they're part of that loving relationship. Lord, there are people in their circle that are watching them, and Lord as they begin to love others that that would happen. God, I pray that You would always drive us back to Your Gospel, and that we would never turn away from it..."

**God Welcomes** | Ephesians 3:1-13 | October 2, 2016  
By Dr. Steve Bezner. Week 4 in the series "Life Together."

God, that we would always run to it. God, we love You and we praise You. In the Name of Your Son Jesus... Amen."