

Ephesians 3:1-21

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 20 November 2016

Preacher: William Taylor

[0 : 00] What are you taken up with? What consumes your time, your energy, your passions? What is the thing that you think about the first thing when you wake in the morning? The last thing when you lay your head on the pillow at night? What fills your mind as you sit here today?

Now we are challenged in this letter to the Ephesians by a man who is taken up with Christ. Or more specifically, by Christ who is the mystery of God's will revealed.

Chapter 1, verse 9. In chapter 1, Paul is taken up with the wealth of blessings of God revealed in Christ.

And that leads naturally to prayer at the end of chapter 1. In chapter 2, he continues to unfold the purposes of God revealed in Christ.

He speaks about his work of bringing Jew and Gentile together to form one person, one people of God.

[1 : 25] And this naturally leads him to prayer again. So he begins chapter 3 for this reason. And he's about to add verse 14.

I bow my knees before the Father. He's about to pray. But common courtesy gets the better of him. Or he hears the clink of his chains. And he's reminded that he's already a good way into his letter. And he's not yet said anything about himself.

We'll come back to the prayer in a moment. Verse 1. For this reason. I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ, Jesus, on behalf of you Gentiles.

Hi, it's Paul who's writing. I'm in prison. And I'm there because I've been preaching to the Gentiles. And that's a matter of fact.

[2 : 32] It's what led to his arrest in Jerusalem. Imprisonment in Caesarea. And subsequent appeal to Rome. To Caesar. So that he ended up in Rome. And it's not that he wants his readers to be discouraged.

To lose heart because of his sufferings. Verse 13. Rather, he counts it a privilege to suffer for his master. He's taken up with Christ.

He's not the prisoner of Emperor Nero. See there. But the prisoner of Christ. Verse 1. He is there at Christ's good pleasure.

Now, speaking like this about himself. Leads him to dwell for a moment in his role. In all of the things that he's been writing about so far. And this is what we're going to think about together this morning.

And we see first. The mystery revealed to Paul. Verse 2. Assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you.

[3 : 45] Something precious for Paul to steward has been given to him for the Gentiles. And what exactly is this? Verse 3.

The mystery was made known to me by revelation. As I have written about briefly. It's what he's been writing about until now.

In the first couple of chapters. It's the gospel revealed in Jesus Christ. It's the promised Old Testament Messiah revealed in Jesus Christ. It's the reconciliation of mankind to God.

That Jews will be restored in their relationship to God. But specifically. It's about the fact that Gentiles would be too.

We cannot underestimate how difficult it was for Paul to grasp this. The bits about the Jews being restored in their relationship with God would have been fine.

[4 : 46] But this radical idea that Gentiles would be included in God's plan of salvation required explanation by direct intervention. Now we know how Paul was a fundamentalist Jew.

And he had absolutely no time whatsoever for Gentiles. It required a dramatic intervention on the road to Damascus. For him to grasp how wide and long and deep and high is the love of God for all people.

Paul is there for praying that his readers will come to understand what he now sees to be true.

Verse 4. When you read this, I pray, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ.

This work of revealing is the work of the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit did his work in Paul on the road to Damascus. And he did his work in the other apostles and prophets. And through them, we are told in Colossians chapter 1 verse 26, The Holy Spirit speaks to all people.

[6 : 13] It's God's plan that we should all understand this mystery revealed. The work of the third person of the Trinity should give us all confidence.

As we go about our witness, work, school, among people of different nationalities, We should have confidence that we don't do this in our own strength.

It means that our evangelism does not rely on us alone. Now we know from Romans chapter 10 verse 14 that, How will our friends hear about the gospel unless we preach it to them? But these verses remind us that only the Holy Spirit can bring new life.

That work of new life, of regeneration, is a spiritual work. We must do our part, but only God can save. It doesn't matter how persuasive our words are, how ingenious our arguments are.

Ultimately, only God can bring new life. And that is a burden lifted. But at the same time, it's not an excuse for us to neglect our responsibility to share the gospel.

[7 : 31] Well, just in case his readers have forgotten about this mystery that he's been talking about, Paul speaks and gives us a summary of it in verse 6.

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.

I'm assuming this morning that the vast majority of us, if not all of us, are Gentiles. So, listen up.

God didn't leave you and me out of his great plan of fixing this broken world.

In his grace, we are heirs or co-heirs of the wonderful inheritance planned for God's people.

Chapter 1, verse 14.

And the greatest gift of which is life after death. My grandma passed away just over a week ago.

And it was a shock to receive the news that she wasn't well.

[8 : 37] And her family, from all different parts of the country, we made our way to Barnsley Hospital. And there we saw Graham. And it was deeply distressing, I'll be honest with you.

My first impressions, this lady, who had been a hero for me, she'd been the matriarch of our family, was laid up in this bed, and she was evidently ill. Her family arrived within a few hours.

And she seemed to come back to life. And there was a sort of hope. This 97-year-old was not going to give up yet. And yet it became apparent that really, palliative care was really the only option.

So over the next five days, we were, watched grandma pass from this life into the next. It was a remarkable experience. She talked about the fact that she was looking forward to seeing Jack, her husband, after all these years.

She's an amazing lady. Her four daughters are all believers. Her 11 grandchildren are all believers.

Her 32 great-grandchildren will be in church this morning.

[9 : 45] She's a testimony to God's goodness and to God's grace. But as she failed her way, she died in a manner and a way which was incredibly peaceful.

The night before, she whispered in my wife's ear, Amen. I'm ready to go to sleep. And my mother called me the following morning to say, Your gran died in her sleep.

What confidence we have in the gospel. The sixth, not only are we heirs, but we are members of the same body.

United with each other and united with Christ. In a world that is full of angst and disharmony, of ill-feeling, of gossip, of nastiness, of double-crossing, of sheer ungodliness.

As believers, we enjoy unity in the gospel because of our unity in Christ. We are part of a common purpose.

[10 : 52] Tied into this eternal plan of salvation. So we know where we came from. We know where we're going. And so we know who we are.

So let us be different. Let us not take our standards from this world. But live by a different standard. Let us not just talk unity.

But let us practice unity. Surely, this church should be, for every single one of us, the safest place in London.

Because of the unity that we share in Christ. And then, the end of verse 6, we are partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus.

God is true to his word. He's a man of his word, if you like. He's made promises to humanity. And through our union with Christ, we will all enjoy all of them to the full.

[11:56] Now, some of you may be intrigued by conspiracy theories. I lived in the States for five years. And I love my American friends.

Most of them are PCA pastors. But what I did find in America is that the level of suspicion is higher than here in the UK. So I came across many people, actually, who believe that secret societies are really running this world.

Societies that are rooted in places like Harvard and Yale. Other Ivy League universities. And a brother-in-law of a very good friend of mine.

That was actually part of the Skull and Bones at Yale. It's a secret society with members, many of whom are former, past presidents.

People who are in the highest echelons of power in the US government. And essentially around this time of year, the seniors have been eyeing up the potential freshmen who could be part of this secret society.

[13:06] And this time of year, they are tapped on the shoulder and invited to come and join. Now, this guy, he wouldn't share with me the initiation ceremonies, which I'm certainly intrigued about.

But he did say this. He said that when I was tapped on the shoulder, my life changed forever. He was welcomed into a secret society. Mysteries revealed.

Privileges. Access to the highest places of power. Connected. Networked. Future guaranteed. Now, the gospel is not a mystery limited to a tap on the shoulder.

It's a mystery revealed to all. Not a select few. You're not here by special invitation only. We're not meeting in some sort of secret location.

Do you know Jesus? You may have been part of this community now for a while. And you've realised that there is something different about these people.

[14:18] Have you fully understood yet what it is? It's not that they come to church. It's not even that they believe in God. The devil believes in God.

It's that they have understood that their relationship as human beings is broken with the creator God.

It's that they have grasped God's big plan to restore humans' relationship with God. It's that they understand that they have done things wrong.

That they are inherently sinful. That Jesus died on the cross because of their sin. And through his resurrection, which we will celebrate in a few moments.

They will one day join Jesus in heaven. It means that my grandma, this morning, is catching up with her husband, Jack.

[15:22] And they've got a lot of talking to do after 25 years of being apart. Have you put your faith in Christ? Come this morning and make your peace with God.

Put your trust and your faith in him. There is no better place to do that than as we gather around the Lord's table. The mystery revealed to Paul is second.

The mystery revealed to preach. Verse 7. 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. Now did you notice what the mystery is now equated with here?

The gospel. You could read verse 7 as Of this mystery I was made a minister. The mystery is the gospel.

[16:24] The good news of salvation. Now this equating of mystery and gospel is significant. Because the mystery was essentially truth revealed to Paul.

While the gospel was essentially truth proclaimed by Paul. And Paul himself made the connection because he was convinced. The good news. He was convinced.

That the good news had been revealed to him only in order to be communicated. To be preached. So the first gift of God's grace. Verse 2. Was the gospel revealed to him.

The second gift of God's grace. Verse 7. Was the gospel entrusted to him to preach. To communicate. To minister.

To Paul understands. His commission to be a minister of the gospel was an enormous privilege. For it has been given to him.

[17:22] Although. Verse 8. I am the very least of all the saints. Now despite being guilty. Of persecuting the followers of Jesus. Laughing and mocking at the gospel.

Verse 8. This grace was given to me. Writes Paul. To preach to the Gentiles. And it's a privilege. As Christians we share in. It's a privilege to share good news.

I was listening to a recent radio program. And it was looking at people who have jobs. Where it is. Their joys it were to share good news.

So it was looking at the life of the person who makes the call to the lottery winner. Or the person whose job is a courier. To deliver flowers.

It was looking at the lives of people who essentially. Have the privilege of making others happy. Now we are these people. And when you share the gospel.

[18:17] We share good news. But it's not good news that will last a few hours. Or a few years. It's good news that will last an eternity. Paul's humble reaction here is not pretend.

He's not being modest. He's aware of his past record of persecuting believers. He's aware that he wasn't present with the Lord Jesus Christ at his side during his three years of ministry.

But his reference to being the very least of all the saints. Is as much to do with the normal reaction of any believer who has encountered the grace of God in Christ. If we've encountered God's grace.

We know that there is nothing to make us deserving of God's mercy. Nothing that makes us deserving of forgiveness. We know that we have no personal worthiness.

No claim. No natural position or gifts. No claim. No claim. And surely our instinctive reaction.

[19:24] Is to think of ourselves. As less than the least. It's such a helpful mindset. The word translated in verse 7.

Minister. Is just as often translated servants. You see that in the NIV. Of this gospel I was made a servant. Paul saw himself as a servant of the gospel.

Do we? It's such a helpful way for us to think. It means that when we deal with one another. We're ready to love and to serve instinctively.

It is the demeanour of someone who has encountered God. Who understands what Christ has done for them on the cross. They are then ready to take up their cross. And to follow Jesus.

It is the posture of a person. Who gets the gospel. And then is well positioned. To spread the message. Of the gospel. Paul elaborates.

[20:28] This message in three expanding stages. To the Gentiles. To all peoples. And to the spiritual realm. Or heavenly places.

And since. This mystery. Revealed to Paul. Concerned God's plan to incorporate. The Gentiles into Christ. It was only logical that Paul.

Preached to them first. Verse 8. To preach to the Gentiles. The unsearchable riches of Christ. Let us see. The amazement here.

In Paul's description. The sense here is of someone who is walking the boundaries of a lake. And when the circuit is almost complete. They discover it was no lake at all.

But an arm of an ocean. And that they are confronted. By the immeasurable sea. It's the person who looks up. And the London night sky.

[21:25] And is just about able to count the number of stars. And then they drive out into the countryside. And they are overwhelmed. By the number of stars. And there's no way they can count them. And then.

They go home. And they pick up. An edition. Of the National Geographer. As I did. And read this. There are less grains of sand.

On all the beaches in the world. Than stars in the universe. Paul wants the Gentiles to know. How wonderful the good news of the gospel is. It is beyond measure. It is unsearchable. In verse 8. Paul's message is to the Gentiles. In verse 9. He expands the same message to everyone. To the Gentile and the Jew. Who are reading this letter.

[22:25] And to bring to light for everyone. What is the plan of the mystery. Hidden for ages past in God. Who created all things. God as creator.

Is introduced here. As God created all things. He's now begun. A new creation. Bringing people together. From all nations. Into unity.

In Christ. Forming the church. And it is through the church. Verse 10. That this mystery. The gospel. The manifold wisdom of God.

Should 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. Paul's message.

Broadens further. He tells us that. Although the gospel is addressed. Primarily to Gentiles. And to people in general. It also speaks. To the spiritual realm.

[23 : 22] To the rulers. And authorities. In the heavenly places. And it does so. Through the church. To the unity. Of the church.

Is not only. A powerful. Message to the world. But also to Satan. And his minions. Martin Luther. Said that we needed to undergo. Three conversions. Conversion to Christ. Conversion. Conversion. Of our wallets. So we realize that our money. Is on our own.

And thirdly. Conversion to the church. The church. It shouldn't work. It is made up of.

Such a. A diverse group. Of people. But the. Multicultural. Christian community. Doing life together. In humility.

[24 : 15] Is the greatest testimony. To the world. And. To the supernatural. World. It's counterintuitive. It's testimony. To the power.

Of the gospel. That breaks down. Division. And disunity. And brings. Harmony. People. Who should be enemies. Are found to be friends.

People. Who. Humanly speaking. Have little. In common. Are united. Because they have.

Everything. In common. Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ. Now when the church.

Works. It is beautiful. It is the. Public face. Of God. Which displays. To the world.

His great plan. Of salvation. To bring redemption. To all nations. But when it doesn't work. There is nothing more ugly.

[25 : 14] Nothing more destructive. In our witness. Nothing more damaging. In our evangelism.

It is why. We must work so hard. At our unity. The message. Of the gospel. We see. Verse 11.

Was worked out. Before time itself. According to the eternal purpose. That he realized. In Christ Jesus. Our Lord. And because. Of what Jesus accomplished. It means. Verse 12.

That in him. We have boldness. And access. To God. With confidence. Through our faith. In him. It is with this. Background. And this. Confidence.

In the gospel. That now. Prompts Paul. To go down. On his knees. In prayer for the Ephesians. To pray. That they might know. For themselves.

[26 : 10] This mystery. The mystery. Revealed to Paul. Was the mystery. Revealed to preach. But also.

And finally. It was the mystery. Revealed to experience. Paul. In verse. Paul now. Takes up the words. That he began. In verse. One.

For this reason. And this time. He utters. His prayer. Verse 14. I bow my knees. Before the father. From whom. Every family. In heaven. And on earth. Is named. It's a reminder. That God is. First and foremost. Our father. Father. And that's how we go to him.

In prayer. It's also a reminder. That family. And community. And church. Are derived. From the Trinitarian God.

[27 : 07] Before time and space. Were created. God. Dwelt. In perfect tranquility. As father. Son. And Holy Spirit. In relationship. This prayer.

Has an added force. Now. In the light. Of what Paul. Has just said. Not only. Is he led to prayer. Because of the thought. Of Jews and Gentiles. Being reconciled. And because of the wonderful. Plans of salvation. That are now being revealed. But he brings. His own personal. Story. To this prayer. He. Has experienced.

Christ. In all the fullness. Himself. And he now longs. That his readers. Would do so too. The prayer.

Is like a staircase. In which Paul climbs. Higher. And higher. In his aspirations. For his readers. And the first step.

[28 : 03] Of this. Prayer staircase. Is found in verse 16. I pray. That according. To the riches. Of his glory. He may grant you. To be strengthened.

With power. Through his spirit. In your inner being. So that Christ. May dwell. In your hearts. Through faith. What it says here.

Is that Christ. Is not just. An occasional visitor. But that he. It takes up residence. In your heart. You know. He's not just. The guest.

Who comes for the weekend. Or for a couple of weeks. But. He's a permanent. Resident. He takes up. Root. In your heart. That he is constantly there.

And that from. His presence. You will derive. Strength. And might. To face the challenges. That this life. Presents. It's so important. That we understand.

[28 : 58] And we remember. It doesn't matter. How old we are. In the faith. That we cannot do life. On our own. So often. Our default. Is to go back to ourselves. Particularly under times. Of pressure. And difficulty.

We simply cannot manage. On our own. And the reality is. Through the Holy Spirit. Is that Christ. Is always with us. The most natural thing. When you wake. In the morning.

Is to say. Lord. Be with me today. Guide me. Go with me. As you clamber. Into the car. With the kids. Screaming in the back. Lord. Give me grace today.

As you are heading into work. To face that difficult meeting. Give me an insight. A word. A wisdom. As you are walking down. The corridor. At school. And you have your friends. All around you. Oh God.

Help me to just. Be a good witness. Truth is. He is always with us. Always. At our side. Now the next step.

[29 : 52] In our experience. Of the mystery revealed. That Paul prays for. Is found at the end. Of verse 17. That you. Being rooted. And grounded. In love. May have strength. To comprehend.

With all the saints. What is the breadth. And length. And height. And depth. Of the love of Christ. Now we are given here. The reason. Why Paul prayed. That God would dwell.

In his readers hearts. And for that matter. Dwell. In the heart. Of all the saints. To comprehend. With all the saints. See the church.

Is only going to blossom. If we. All the saints. Learn to get on. Across racial. Cultural. And personality.

Divides. And this is only possible. If we are rooted. And grounded. In the love of God. It's only when we know. How much. We are loved.

[30 : 46] And how unconditional. That love is. The love of a good father. That we will be able. To love with generosity. Now. How can we hold a grudge?

How can we fail. To forgive? How much. Does your father. Love you? Enough. To send his son. To the cross. Do we grasp. How wide. And long. And deep. And high. The love. Of God is. Is this. Sacrificial love. Of the father. And of Christ. That should motivate us. To work. Tirelessly. For unity. So if the second.

Step. Is that we are rooted. And grounded in love. So that we might love. Others. And the third step. Is verse 19. That we know.

[31 : 44] The love of Christ. That surpasses knowledge. That you may be filled. With all the fullness. Of God. Now here.

Paul is praying. For each one of us. That we would have. A greater encounter. With God. That we would not be satisfied. With our relation.

With him at the moment. But that we would long. And desire. To know him. In a deeper. And a more profound way. That we would grow.

In our holiness. It's that maturity. That Paul will speak about. In the next chapter. That we will no longer be infants. Tossed here and forth. By every wind of teaching.

Rather. That you are rooted. And grounded. Filled to the measure of God. That God is Lord. Of all your life. That may be.

[32 : 44] This morning. That God seems. Distant to you. His visit with you. Seems. Up. And he's gone.

Maybe that you are in. Fractured relationships. Possibly with one another. Or that you.

Compromised in your holiness. Maybe even last night.

And it's almost certainly. What some of the Ephesian Christians. Feel like. That's why Paul ends. The prayer with these words. Verse 20. Now to him.

Who is able. To do far more abundantly. Than all that we ask. Or think. Or imagine. We have a reconciling.

Saviour. Who restores. Broken relationships. According to the power. At work within us. To him be glory. In the church. And in Christ Jesus.

[33 : 46] Throughout all generations. Forever. And ever. Amen. The challenge. For us. This morning. The challenge. That Paul. Gives us. Do we aspire.

To be like Paul. To know. The mystery. Revealed. To preach. To experience. To experience. That mystery. To experience.

That mystery. The person. Who knows you best. Would they say. Christ dwells. In your heart. That you strive. To live. In harmony. With one another. And you pursue. Holiness. With vigour. Are you somebody.

Whose time. Energy. And passions. Are taken up. With Christ. God is able. To do far more. Than we dare. To ask. Or even imagine.

[34 : 42] Is that what you would. Ask for today. Let us pray. That we would be. Taken up. With Christ. Anew.

And let Paul. Be our inspiration. He got the gospel. He lived. The gospel. He loved. The gospel. He preached. The gospel.

Because he loved. And was taken up. With Christ. Amen.