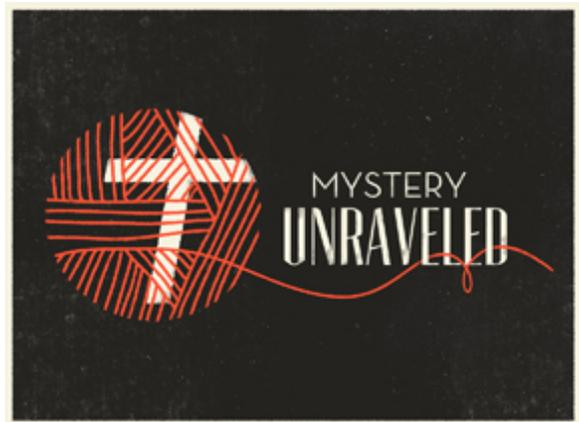


MYSTERY UNRAVELED

20th September 2020

Readings: Ephesians 3:1-14

Most of us enjoy a good mystery, a puzzling whodunit. Whether it be a classic like Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Oriental Express* or the recently released movie *Knives Out*. Then there's TV shows that Judy and I enjoy like *Midsummer Murders* and then there's the New Zealand version *The Brokenwood Mysteries*. Now, there's also deeper mysteries like filling in tax forms and how can a woman fit all those things in her purse! Then of course their UFOs, the Lochness Monster and whether Moas still roam remote parts of Fiordland.



And the only thing more compelling than an unsolved mystery is one that's solved. The "ah-ha" moment when all the clues fit together, and we see whodunit. And this is what this morning's about. In today's passage Paul unravels a perplexing mystery that had troubled God's people for centuries. And, today we'll see this greatest of all mysteries, is a mystery no longer.

Let's pray.

Now, as we open up today's passage, we'll see three things: we'll see life is hard, grace abounds - and this is where the mystery is unraveled. Then thirdly we'll see that this mystery is displayed in the church

- I. Life is Hard
- II. Grace Abounds
- III. Displayed in the church

I. Life is Hard

Life is hard! Now, you might say this obvious, but notice that the Bible does not shy away from nor gloss over this difficult reality. The Bible is no "pie in the sky", positive thinking and she'll be write, sort of disconnect with reality. Listen to Ephesians 3:1

For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles—
Ephesians 3:1

Here, for the first time Paul updates his personal status. He's not a free man, he's in prison. There's no denying it. Life's hard for Paul. However, notice his unusual

take on his chains. The Romans may have him locked up but Paul is first and foremost a prisoner of Christ. Ephesians 4:1 puts it like this...

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord... Ephesians 4:1

He's captivated by Christ and incarcerated for his Lord. For, it's his loyalty to Christ that sees Paul in jail and no breach of the law or moral failing.

However, this reference seems to trigger a response in Paul. You know how you're taking away and as you do you realise what you're saying is way more significant than what you thought. You see, in all likelihood Paul's dictating, and as he does he suddenly realises that his suffering in prison will be causing distress and worry for the Ephesians.

Now, we all know what's it's like when someone we care for suffers, especially if we can't be there to make a difference. It's a particular kind of helplessness and heartbreak. Imagine a serious health diagnosis for a wee grand daughter, a son's marriage that's collapsed or a dear friend's bankruptcy. These take a toll on us who care as well as those who suffer.

So, Paul changes track, mid-stream, for a whole 12 verses, only to return again in verse 14. Yes, with a pastoral heart Paul turns aside and uses this digression, to assure us that even in really hard places God has a purpose and his glory will be served.

And the Bible does this again and again, not shying away life's hard reality. Why? Because suffering shapes our faith. Take John the Baptist who at one time boldly declared, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world", but when later in prison had doubts. His faith was challenged. In Matthew 11 we see John sending messengers to Jesus to ask... Matthew 11:3

"Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" Matthew 11:3

You see, suffering confronts our faith, rocks our faith, smashes against our faith and even the heroes of the faith are not exempt. And Jesus' answer to John is helpful to us.

And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me." Matthew 11:4-6

Yes, even in our tough places Jesus is at work and blessed is the one who trusts in Christ even when life is hard.

And so, Paul's digression is not to have a moan and a groan, or a rant and a rave but to encourage the Ephesians that though they feel his pain, they should not be disheartened for God is with him and has a plan. Which is why Paul finishes his pastoral digression with these words in verse 13

So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering... Ephesians 3:13

So, how does Paul encourage the Ephesians not to lose heart? Well, by looking to the mystery unraveled, to God's grace that abounds.

II. Grace Abounds

Paul uses the word mystery four times in this digression. But he uses it differently to us. Here, and most of the time Paul uses the word "mystery", there's two things: it's a mystery already solved, and its focus is the gospel. You see the gospel of grace is the great mystery; one the prophets puzzled over and the angels longed for. And it's a mystery revealed.

Now, let's contrast this with the way of works. There's no mystery here. Take the 10 commandments. Straight forward, clear - don't steal, don't lie, don't kill. Follow them and you'll please God. Everyone understands that. Or the golden rule, "do unto others as you would have them do unto you". Clear as day from the time it was written.

Ah - but God's grace... His underserved favour to sinners who least deserve it. Now that's a puzzle! In fact, it's such a puzzle that it can only be understood if God explains it - by revelation. It's only when God opens the eyes of our heart that we can understand this mystery. Which is why Paul writes...

"... how the mystery was made known to me by revelation." Ephesians 3:3

Paul did not join the dots and say, "It was Mrs Peacock in the library with the wrench". Not at all. From the greatest of apostles, to the least slave girl who had a demon cast from her - none of them figured it out. The gospel of grace is the grandest of all mysteries, too difficult to puzzle out, too unexpected to predict and too intricate and tangled to unravel - unless God reveals it.

And we see this in Isaiah 53. God, through the prophet, laid out all the clues in one place - but no one could solve it. In fact, God makes it clear that this mystery he's about to describe is completely unsolvable...

Who has believed what he has heard from us? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? Isaiah 53:1

God's saying, "The mystery I'm about to lay out is not only unbelievable but cannot be solved unless I give you the answer. Then in the rest of Isaiah 53 God lays out all the clues for who the righteous servant is and what's he doing. For, verse 3...

He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. Isaiah 53:3

But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the *punishment* that brought us peace. Isaiah 53:5

Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter. Isaiah 53:7

And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death. Isaiah 53:9

He poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many. Isaiah 53:12

For six hundred years this mystery remained unsolved. The Quran community, the super-keen Jews who wrote the Dead Sea scrolls, they looked these and other clues and thought there must be two righteous servants, two Messiahs - a King and a Priest. And they had no idea what to do with this suffering servant. Most other Jews thought there'd be one Messiah, with the office of Priest and King. But likewise, they had no idea what to do with the suffering servant passages. It was a mystery too hard in the solving.

Even when Jesus arrived and started fulfilling Isaiah 53 nobody got it. Nobody could piece together the clues, not even his disciples. But then everything changed. On resurrection Sunday Jesus appeared to his disciples breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit" (John 20:22). And the Holy Spirit opened the eyes of their heart to see the mystery, which is the good news of Jesus, the gospel of grace. And on Pentecost, the mystery of was revealed to 3,000. "Ah yes, Jesus is the righteous servant of Isaiah 53." Then later, on the road to Damascus we have Paul, who so didn't "get" the mystery that he was persecuting Christ. You see, it wasn't until Jesus revealed himself as "the great the mystery" that Paul got. Paul then dedicated his life to making this mystery plain to everyone he could.

This is why he could write in Ephesians 3:8-9

To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given... to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery, hidden for ages in God, who created all things. Ephesians 3:8-9

So, this was Paul's ministry. And this was why he was in jail. And this is why the Ephesians need not be anxious. He was following God's plan to make plain the mystery and if that meant prison – so be it.

III. Displayed in the church

And this mystery “now revealed” is displayed by the church. Now this needs a lot of unpacking. How do we the church display this mystery, now solved? Let's start where we see this in verse 10.

So that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. Ephesians 3:10

What's Paul on about here? The local church is where this great mystery is worked out. The undeserved love offered to sinners through what Christ did on the cross only becomes real in a sinner's life until they repent, are born again and commit to a local church. No matter where conversion happens the next step is for a new Christian to seek out a Bible believing, Christ honouring, local church to worship, serve, grow in faith alongside other sinners now adopted. For this is where the manifold, the great and wonderful wisdom of God is most powerfully displayed. And not just to the world as we see in Philippians 2:15 where

... in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world. Philippians 2:15

This is our witness to the world and worthy of another sermon. But Paul is saying here in Ephesians 3 that we are a shining light, not just to the world, but to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. Who are they? It's angels and demons and the like. As we are church this morning, worshipping, fellowship, serving and honouring our Heavenly Father - the mystery of God is on display and the wisdom of God is proclaimed in the heavenly places.

And, you're probably thinking... - this way over my head (pun intended)! What on earth am I to do with this? A great question. Best explored with an example.

A number of you will have heard of Joni Eareckson Tada whose ministry has had such a great impact over the years. If you know her story you will know that as a teenager, she broke her neck in a diving accident. Now, becoming a quadriplegic at such a young age was tough and her recovery was long and hard, and though a Christian she was often discouraged.

It so happened that in the hospital bed opposite her was another young lady of similar age in a similar plight. However, apart from her mother she had no visitors. Her mother would come every day and read from the Bible, pray and sit with her daughter. Sadly, this young lady passed away. And how Joni struggled. Why did

the Lord let this person suffer so much and alone? What was the point? Where was the purpose? Where was God?

Anyway, some friends were visiting, and were this puzzling this out. Then one of them pointed out Ephesians 3:10

That... the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. Ephesians 3:10

You see, though no one else saw God's grace abound in this young lady's tragedy the heavenly rulers and authorities marveled and gave God the glory. Another friend mentioned Luke 15:10 - Jesus speaking says

I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.
Luke 15:10

When the angels in heaven see the mystery at work, grace abounding, they rejoice and God's manifold wisdom is wonderfully displayed.

And they could have also gone to Job, where God uses Job to display his manifold wisdom. The devil sees and his plans thwarted as, through Job, God is greatly glorified.

And it's similar with us. No hard time is wasted as we hang in there with Christ. But notice in verse 9 that it's through the church that this happens most effectively. It's as the church lives out the great mystery of grace abounding that God's manifold wisdom is on display in the heavenlies. As we live out the great mystery together, God's wisdom is magnified, and Satan's failure displayed all in the heavenlies.

And so, what's our take homes for today. Just a couple.

First, because of the mystery of God, the mystery now solved, no pain, no hardship, no suffering need be wasted. For in the heavenlies, God's glory is applauded by the angels and resented by the demons when we cling to Christ no matter how black, no matter how tough, no matter how desperate our plight. This is why Paul wrote, "do not lose heart" for his suffering was causing God's great wisdom to be displayed in the grandest of arenas.

Secondly there's the encouragement to work this out in the church. From the end of chapter 1 through all chapter three the focus has been on the church. And in our day and age we too easily forget this. In a culture that hates to commit but wants to keep all options open, in a culture that distrusts any institution especially the historic ones, in a culture that is consumer and me focused we are pressured to treat the local church casually and occasionally. Against all this Ephesians hammers home

that the local church is God's plan A for the world, the bride of Christ whom he dearly cherishes.

Practically there are a number of areas where you can step up. My biggest prayers are for people to help Phoebe with the Youth Ministry and also for folk to help with Messy Church. But there are plenty of areas to serve and learn and grow depending on your gifting. Shoulder to shoulder, worshipping and serving. Living out God's great mystery together.

And let me finish with a couple of verses, which pulls this all together, Hebrews 12:1-2

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.
Hebrews 12:1–2 (NIV)