

## “The Mystery of Christ” (Ephesians 3:1-13)

We’re in a new series “Living in the in-between.” We are actually living in the unique period, which is the time after Jesus’s cross and resurrection, and before his second coming.

Last time we saw three key themes of the Bible: Christ, Kingdom and Covenant.

All things have been created through Jesus Christ and for him. This whole universe has been created for Jesus Christ and for his glory. And we humans are big part of it.

The theme of Christ’s mission was the kingdom of God. And it is Christ who will complete this kingdom of God. And the completion is the fulfillment of the covenant God made with Israel. And we, gentiles are adapted into it through Christ.

Today, we will study about the mystery of Christ, what he did for us and what is our call in order for the covenant to be fulfilled.

### Ephesians 3:1-13

For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—  
2 Surely you have heard about the administration of God’s grace that was given to me for you,  
3 that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly.  
4 In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ,  
5 which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets.  
6 This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.  
7 I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God’s grace given me through the working of his power.  
8 Although I am less than the least of all God’s people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ,  
9 and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things.  
10 His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms,  
11 according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.  
12 In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and

confidence. <sup>13</sup> I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.

Here Paul is talking about the mystery plan of God which is the gift of God's grace, that is Christ actually.

There are two critical steps to make this God's mystery plan unpacked, and real.

Firstly, gentiles must hear the good news and come to Christ, and be added to the church, welcomed into God's family, joined together with Jews to become the dwelling of the Holy Spirit.

And secondly, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God must be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

Today we will look at them one by one.

## **1. Double hopeless conditions**

In the previous chapter, Ephesians 2, Paul spoke to Gentile Christians that they used be in the double hopeless conditions.

One is from verse 1. Paul said, you were dead in your sins. You lived in sin, obeyed Satan, and followed your sinful desires as you were born with evil nature. And you were actually under God's anger. This is bad enough, right? Here there is no way to find hope at all.

But this is not the end. It goes on like this.

V.11, he said, "Remember." What should they remember? They were in another kind of hopeless condition, which is, "You were living apart from Christ. You were excluded from God's people, Israel, and you did not know the promises God had made to them. You lived in this world without God and without hope. (v.12 NLT)"

The first one is bad enough, but not only that, they were in this kind of hopelessness. They were in the double hopeless conditions. Now they totally come to know that they really need grace. Only by grace they can be saved.

They were in the double hopeless conditions. So God gave them the double gifts of grace. And the key is Christ.

Firstly, God made them alive with Christ (2:4-5). Secondly, through Christ God made them members of God's family (2:19).

Then, we think “Wow, how great the grace of God is! Now, everybody can be saved, and so can I! He made peace! Hallelujah!”

Yes, that’s good news, but it’s only half of the mystery plan of God actually. Somehow many of us stop here and are confused about how we should live after we’ve got saved. We often misunderstand about living in the in-between.

We are so faithful in doing what we are doing. And often we miss the fact that what God is doing is much much bigger than the little things we are all doing respectively.

## **2. Establishing a new community**

For writing a letter to the church in Ephesus, the main point Paul actually wants to share starts from here, chapter 3.

In short Paul says, “By the grace of God I’ve been called to preach to you, Gentiles. And by the grace of God, God showed me the mystery, the total plan of his kingdom. So I know I’m doing this according to his eternal purpose. Don’t worry about me although I’m facing hardships and put into prison because of my ministry to you.”

We need to know the background, in order to understand why he is saying this.

In Paul’s time, Jews believed that they were the holy nation chosen by God, and given His covenant, and Messiah would come for their salvation. The restoration of the kingdom was about the nation of Israel. They kept distance from gentiles as they considered gentiles were unclean, out of God’s covenant.

But Paul was doing a good job and churches were established everywhere and most of them were Gentile Churches. Paul is preaching, “Gospel is the gospel of grace and nothing more than grace.” This is the gospel. It’s grace and grace alone, not grace plus works. And grace is not only for Jews but also for Gentiles. He presented it in chapter 2.

For orthodox traditional Jews, Paul’s teaching is completely against the OT. Because of that, he has been persecuted so badly.

Here, in chapter 3, Paul is saying, “I know you, Gentile Christians worry about me because what I just said is totally weird to Jews, and that’s why they’ve been making so much trouble to me. I know what I’ve been preaching and what’s been happening through my ministry is un-acceptable for Jews

because it was hidden in the past. But by the grace of God, God showed me the mystery, the total plan of his kingdom so that you can see my work fits into God's eternal purpose. Don't worry about me."

And he says, "then the mystery is the gospel of grace that the Gentiles are here together with Israel, they are one body, sharing together in the promise of Christ. (3:6)"

Paul was very conscious that the gospel was not simply converting individuals to Jesus Christ, but it was establishing a community to which all people belong.

The church is the body of Christ. It's important for us to understand that this particular body is so totally unique that you cannot understand it in terms of the rest of the world, because there is no equivalent. People bring into the church their big baggage of hatred, their opinion about others and their communities. It is important to recognize that the church is there to reflect the multi-ethnicity just as Paul is illustrating here.

### **3. God's intent through the church**

And he takes one more step in his argument.

#### Ephesians 3:10-11

His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, <sup>11</sup> according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Paul says God is working through the church to speak not just to people, but to rulers and authorities.

We must remember this. The church is a spiritual entity and addressing a spiritual problem, a spiritual issue.

The church is God's hope to speak to those who are rulers and authorities. Through the church God wants to speak to the rulers and authorities to show his manifold wisdom.

What is the manifold wisdom of God?

The simplest answer is Christ (1 Cor 2:7; Col 1:26-27). I just explained what God did through Christ. By the human logic, gentiles and Jews cannot get together. But Christ brought them into one. And all humans are sinners, who have no way to come to God. And if we look at the society, people are just fighting and killing each other because that is the very nature of human. But God gave human the way of reconciliation, that is Christ. And through Christ, the kingdom of God is established. Christ is the manifold wisdom of God.

Who are these rulers and authorities?

2:3 say, the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience (NASB). And 6:12, the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places (NASB).

Our fight is not against flesh and blood but against rulers and authorities (6:12).

We can't ignore that the rulers and authorities are those which work through structures. And all institutions have the capacity to become institutions which can be used by the rulers and authorities which the Bible would call the Prince of the air, the Prince of this world.

For example, right after when Jesus was born, king Herod tried to kill Jesus. Satan doesn't always have to work through demon-possessed people. He can work through structures.

So what is Paul talking here? The church must be aware that the spiritual forces are very real, and they may work through structures or in institutions, which can be a church.

The spiritual warfare is very real. We must remember there is more to the church than just a place to meet. There are hostile rulers and authorities that are fighting against the church.

One of the Satan's strategies is to keep the church busy for something else so that the church forgets about her call, which is to declare the Lordship of Christ to spiritual forces by demonstrating the unity in diversity in the name of Jesus.

If you look at the NT, the early Christians were so busy fighting against one another about what they can eat, what they can wear, who can take the honorable seat, whom they want to follow, what the preacher should talk, and so on.

Christians are supposed to fight against spiritual forces, but the reality is they often fight against flesh and blood. And who wins? Satan, always!

The Bible tells us that Satan and evil spirits work in individuals, of course. The Bible is very clear about it. Even as Jesus sat with his disciples, it says “Satan entered into Judas (John 13:27)”.

And Jesus was baptized, filled with the Holy Spirit, and Satan approached Jesus to attack him. Satan was very sure that Satan was the ruler of the world. And he said “If you bow down I will give you all the kingdoms.” (Luke 4:6-7) That is, the spiritual warfare is not a matter of individuals, but rather a matter of kingdoms.

When Daniel was praying and the angel said to him, “Daniel, when you started praying God gave an answer.” And he was told a very interesting thing. The angel said, “I was on my way, but I was prevented from coming because of the Prince of Persia. (Daniel 10:12-13)” Again, the spiritual warfare is not a matter of individuals, but rather a matter of kingdoms.

We must remember that wherever we go there is a prince of that place who will do everything possible to prevent us from working for the kingdom of God. Before we go into the community, the rulers and authorities are fully aware and they will do everything possible to ensure that our work will not be effective.

We as a church cannot forget that we are here in a combat with spiritual forces. We are the church through which God is declaring, expressing and demonstrating the Lordship of Christ to spiritual forces.

Through his church, God wants to proclaim his manifold wisdom, Christ, our Lord to spiritual forces and break down their ruling power by bringing together people from different places and transforming lives. This is our living in the in-between.

#### **4. The character of church**

So how does the church function?

##### Ephesians 6:10

Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.

We cannot fight against spiritual forces by human strength, nor can we protect ourselves from spiritual attacks from our enemies. But we can fight against spiritual forces by God's power, and only when we stand in the Lord, we are safe. So Paul continues:

Ephesians 6:11 (NLT)

Put on all of God's armor so that you will be able to stand firm against all strategies and tricks of the Devil.

The Bible says, put on the whole armor of God.

It talks about the character of the church that is prepared to actually move into the area where the Prince of the air is in rulership.

Looking at this passage, I used to think this in terms of individual wearing, but this is actually the team uniform because that is the set of armor for everyone in the church to wear. This scripture illustrates that a full army of God's people put on the same full uniform.

Think about this. When people come to a church, what are the characteristics of the church? What is the uniform? Let's look at them quickly.

Firstly, Paul says, stand firm with the belt of truth. What Paul is saying here is when the church comes together it should be known as a community of truth. In the church community, truth should be high value. That is very different outside of the church. It may be not important in the society. It may be against the culture. In some cultures, saving face is more important than truth. In Some societies, making money is more valuable than truth. But truth is the distinctive character of church. Jesus said, "your yes be yes and your no be no (Matt 5:37)."

A church is as strong as its commitment to the truth. If the church has to be actually making an impact in this world and to be a salt and light, it should be a community of truth.

And not just truth, but putting on the breastplate of righteousness. In the Book of Isaiah righteousness and justice go together (Isaiah 56:1).

Righteousness is "living right", it's not the knowledge of what is right. If a church does not insist on right living, the church will never be healthy, and cannot be strong.

We must live according to what we say we believe. James 1:22 says, “Don’t just listen to the word. You fool yourselves if you do that. You must do what it says. (NIRV)”

It’s one thing to listen to biblical teaching but it’s another thing to actually believe that it can be lived out.

Every day, every moment, we must check ourselves before the light of God. And how can we build trust if we are not practicing his words? Now you know where Satan is attacking you. The integrity must be the character of the church.

So Paul says here that you would wear the breastplate of righteousness.

And then he says your feet fitted with the gospel of peace. The gospel brings peace between man and God, and between man and man, and also to the society. Church should be known as a community where people are committed to peace and maintaining peace and making peace.

We must be aware that in our society the devil is always defeated when there are people who are committed to peace, because the devil loves to divide. The devil is divisive and he uses deception.

And then he says “Take up the shield of faith.” Church is a place in which there is trust in God and a deep longing to grow in our faith in God.

It is easy to say, “I want my church to look like a place in which truth is spoken and committed to live the life of the righteous, a place in which there is peace, and our desire to keep peace and to maintain peace to bring peace into the society.” But the reality is, it’s not easy to be a church like that. We must guard ourselves with the shield of faith. So that, we grow in our faith in God.

And then he talks about the helmet of salvation.

It is very sad to see different kinds of gospels are spread in churches. Like prosperity gospel. Sometimes we are very happy to bless people with different kinds of material blessings, but we forget about the most important thing! That is to actually bring them to experience God in Jesus Christ!

And in the early churches, some Jews claimed “For salvation the gospel is not enough, you had to do something else.” It happens today as well. We call it legalism, achievement-ism, and performance trap. When we are trapped in these, we look very tired. And we judge each other, label each other. And we put

a mask on to cover our reality. And these become the uniform of the church. No, it shouldn't be.

So it's very important for us to put on the helmet of salvation. Salvation by grace through our faith. It's not only onetime religious event, rather it must be our every-day experiences. And we all grow from glory to glory by the work of the Holy Spirit, and become more like Jesus day by day.

"We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. (Colossians 1:28)"

This is the will of God. So this must be our desire that everyone in this church would be presented as perfect in whom Christ has been formed.

And then he talks about the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. In church the word of God must be preached. Instead of telling what people want to hear, we must rightly open the Word of God.

The word of God must form the church culture. When people attend the Sunday service for the first time, often they don't understand what the pastor preaches. But they can read the Word of God through Christians life. Christians are the letter from Christ to the world (2 Cor 3:3).

Peter looked at Jesus and said "where can we go? because you have the words of life. (John 6:68)" People should come to our church, not because they feel good, but because the truth has been spoken here, and the God's Word has been opened. There they can see the word of God is active and alive.

And then Paul says, "pray in the spirit at all times."

It is the Holy Spirit who makes prayer possible. In the Holy Spirit, we pray at all times. In the Holy Spirit, we pray for all the saints. In the Holy Spirit, we pray with all perseverance. We pray all prayers in the Holy Spirit. That must be the color of the church.

So how does a church strong in the Lord and in his mighty power look like when it is actually confronting spiritual forces?

It's a place of truth. It's a place in which people live the right life. A place in which there is peace. There, peace is an important value. People experience peace with God and peace with one another. A place in which people grow in their faith in God. A place in which where the Word of God is very central. A place in which people have a salvation experience. A place in which prayer is very central.

And such a community is what God is looking for. Because through the church he declares Jesus is the Lord of all to spiritual forces by demonstrating the unity in diversity in the name of Jesus.

And Paul concludes with this prayer. Let's read this together.

I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, <sup>17</sup> so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, <sup>18</sup> may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, <sup>19</sup> and to know this love that surpasses knowledge-- that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. <sup>20</sup> Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, <sup>21</sup> to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

### **For Lifenet groups and personal reflection**

What were the double hopeless conditions for gentiles? And what were the double gifts of God's grace? (Eph 2:1-22)

Why was it so difficult for Jewish Christians in the NT time to accept Gentile Christians? What was the hindrance? (cf. Acts 11:1-3; Mark 7:1-8)

The rulers and authorities may work through structures or in institutions. Talk about an example in the Bible as well as in the human history.

"Put on all of God's armor." The seven armors are introduced (Eph 6:14-18). Talk about what a church would be like if it misses each one of these armors.

(eq. a church missing Truth, a church lost Faith)