

Ephesians
God's Great Secret (Part 2)
Ephesians 3:1-13
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Turn in your Bibles again to Ephesians 3. The third chapter of this wonderful letter of Paul's to the church in Ephesus, and the churches in the surrounding area where he ministered for almost three years. And six years later, wrote back to them this magnificent letter. We're in the heart of a section that is reminding us that there is a sweeping plan to history. I've read that of modern historians, perhaps none are better respected than Germany's Oswald Spengler and England's Arnold Toynbee. While neither of these men approach historical analysis in the same way, they do agree that human history is marked by one unchanging reality. Nothing is permanent. Even the most advanced cultures are doomed to, as Trotsky called it, the dustbin of history.

There is, in history, a recurring cycle. There is birth, followed by growth, followed by decay, and eventually death. And that cycle recurs as a constant pattern throughout all of human history. Because of that, some have come to see absolutely no meaning in history. Henry Ford, the industrialist, perhaps presented the view of many, best when he said, "History is the succession of one expletive thing after another." History, he says, is bunk. Because they saw no meaning. He saw it as an unconnected string of human confusion and missteps.

But for us, when we look at history, we come with the understanding that there is, in fact, purpose. There is a plan. God has a plan for human history that He is working out. And in Ephesians 3, God lets us in on that plan through the pen of the apostle Paul.

And in Ephesians 3:1 Paul begins a prayer. He begins a prayer in response to what he's just taught at the end of chapter 2, what we've studied together. But at the end of verse 1, as he barely gets going in his prayer, he interrupts himself. And he doesn't get back to his prayer until verse 14. And so, in reality, verses 2 - 13 comprise a long, one-sentence interruption or digression on the part of the apostle Paul. In verse 1 he mentions to the Ephesians that he is the prisoner of Christ for their sakes. And that immediately reminds him that his entire life and mission is about the Gentiles. And with that, he interrupts himself. So, the theme of Paul's

digression here is clear. In these twelve verses, Paul repeats a word more frequently in this section than anywhere else in all of his letters. The theme of these twelve verses, this interruption to his prayer, is God's mystery.

Now, if you weren't with us last week, let me tell you now, when you hear the word mystery in this context, you have got to erase from your mind all remembrances of the English word. The Greek word, and the word we find in our Bibles means nothing of what our English word means. In biblical terms, a mystery is not something impossible to know. Nor is it something that you come to know by careful detective work and investigation. Instead, biblically speaking, a mystery is a divine secret. A secret that was at one time unknown and undiscoverable by human beings, but a secret that God, for His own purposes, has now chosen to make known by revelation. That's a mystery. So, whenever you encounter the word mystery in the New Testament, understand that you are talking about a secret that God once held, but has now chosen to reveal, for us all to understand. That's the theme of this passage—verses 1 - 13 of Ephesians 3.

Now, we're working our way through this passage by allowing Paul to answer a series of questions about this secret, God's great secret. You see, understand this. What Paul is saying is that, for much of human history, God held to Himself a great secret, but He has now chosen, as of the first century, as Paul is writing, He has chosen to reveal it. He's chosen to let it be known. So, we're working our way through this passage by looking at a series of questions and answers about that secret, God's great secret.

The first question, and the first one that we looked at last time, is this. To whom did God reveal His secret? To whom did God reveal His secret? In verses 2 and 3 Paul says He revealed it to me. In other words, Paul says, God specifically revealed His secret to me. But in verse 4 he tells us that it wasn't just for his sake, but it was for the sake of every Christian. God revealed His secret for our sakes. God wanted us to know His secret. Now, right away, folks, that should move your heart. God didn't have to tell us. But He thought it was important to tell us, and He revealed it to Paul so Paul could reveal it to us, because in the mind of God, it was important for us, sitting in Dallas in 2008 to understand the secret. He revealed it.

Verse 5 answers the second question, when did God reveal His secret, and the short answer is that for thousands of years from the creation until the coming of Christ, God held the secret mostly to Himself. There were hints of it in the Old Testament. But in the coming of Christ and in the revelation given to Jesus' apostles and the New Testament prophets, the secret was revealed. When? We could say in the first century, through Jesus and His apostles and prophets.

The third question, and the last question that we answered last time is found partially in verse 6. And that is, what is God's secret? What is the secret? Why is it so important? What is the secret? Well, there are two related but distinct answers in this passage. In verse 4 Paul says, the mystery is the mystery of Christ, the secret of Christ. The secret is the Messiah. That's what the word Christ means. In other words, listen carefully, verse 4 tells us Christ Himself is the secret. God's great secret is a person.

But there's a second answer to the question in this passage, what is God's secret? You see, from time to time, Paul refers to one aspect or element of his message about Christ, the great secret, as the mystery. In other words, sometimes he uses the word mystery to describe the whole mystery, the big mystery, which is Christ, and sometimes he uses the word mystery to describe a part of the mystery.

This is a figure of speech we use often. For example, if we were having a gathering, and we needed to know how many people were around for lunch, I might say to you, listen, go count heads. Well, I'm not just interested in heads. I'm interested in the people attached to those heads, but we use the part for the whole. There are times when you find the word mystery in the New Testament he's talking about the big mystery, which is Christ. Other times he'll use the word mystery to speak of one part or element of the mystery, something Christ did, something Christ accomplished, some specific aspect of His work. And he does that here.

Notice verse 6. In verse 6 Paul calls the particular element of the work of Christ that pertains to the Gentiles the mystery. Here's the mystery, it's Christ. But part of the mystery that is Christ is Christ bringing together Jews and Gentiles into one body, the church. So, Paul wants us to know

that Jesus is the secret. He's God's great secret. And one part of the secret that is Christ is that by His death, verse 6, Jesus destroyed the spiritual separation that kept Jews and Gentiles apart, and now, verse 6 says, Gentiles are fellow-heirs, fellow members of the body, fellow partakers of the promise. That's where we left off last week. Generally speaking, the secret of God is a person, Jesus Christ. But he can also talk about specific parts of the secret that is Christ, and what He accomplished, and call that the mystery as well. And in verse 6 it's what He did in bringing Jews and Gentiles together in the church. Now, that's where we left off last week.

The fourth question Paul answers about the secret is how did God broadcast His secret to the world? How did God broadcast His secret to the world? It's one thing to have a secret and to reveal it, but it's another thing to make sure that the word gets out. Which is what God wanted to happen. How did He do this? Look at verse 7. Paul says "of which [or of the gospel] I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace which was given to me according to the working of His power, To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things." Now if you go back up to verse 3, Paul says God told me His secret. And in verse 5, he says, God didn't just tell me His secret, He also told the New Testament apostles and prophets. So, He told, God told the leadership of the early church the secret.

But how did God get the word out? Listen, it was God's plan to make known His secret to the Gentiles, to broadcast it primarily through one man, the apostle Paul. Look at verse 7. "of which [that is, of this gospel I've just been talking about] I was made a minister." Here Paul returns to the theme of the stewardship that was given to him that he mentioned back up in verse 2. He has discussed the revelation of God's great secret to him. Now he turns to the proclamation of God's great secret to others. The Greek word for minister is the word from which we get our word deacon. Here it's used, not of the office of deacon. Paul isn't saying I'm a deacon. He's saying I am, in a general sense, one who serves God. That's what the word deacon means, to serve. Paul says I have been given the responsibility to serve God. And he's going to define what that service is in just a moment, but notice, before he says that in verse 7, he says I can only serve, or

I can only minister because God has enabled me in two extraordinary ways. Verse 7, “according to the gift of God’s grace which was given to me”.

In other words, I am only able to minister or to serve God by the gift of God’s enabling grace. God’s grace not only saved me, but God’s grace enables me to fulfill this responsibility. What a powerful lesson that is to us in the use of our gifts in the church. The apostle Paul said, I can only minister because God’s grace enables me to do so; placed me in this role and enables me to fulfill it. But notice he also says I am also enabled to serve according to the working of His power, that is, by the energy of God’s power. Paul says I can only serve God and minister for God in the role He’s given me by the energy of His power.

And as Paul rehearses his need for grace, his need for God’s power, it reminds him of just how unworthy he really feels for this responsibility. And so, in verse 8, he has kind of an outburst. It’s like, he says, to me, can you imagine that? To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given. Now, Paul, interestingly, here, makes up his own construction as he goes. He makes what is a word in Greek that is a superlative, a comparative. It’s not great grammar, but it makes a powerful point. Let me roughly translate it for you in English. If we were saying in English what he’s saying in Greek, we would say something like this. “I am the leaster of the saints. It’s possible that Paul was playing off of his Latin name here, Paulus, which means little or small.

As Kent Hughes writes, Paul was saying I am little by name. I am little in stature, and morally and spiritually littler than the least of all Christians. I am small Paul. And for Paul, understand, this isn’t false humility. He’s not just saying this so everybody will say, wow, no, you’re a wonderful guy. We do that sometimes, don’t we? This isn’t Paul. This is genuine humility. Paul never got over the grace of God that saved a self-righteous, angry, murderous, religious bigot. In 1 Corinthians 15:9 he says, “I am the least of the apostles, and not fit to be called an apostle because I persecuted the church of God.” First Timothy 1:15, “It is a trustworthy statement deserving full acceptance that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am the foremost of all.” Paul really believed that. He believed that he was the absolutely worst sinner God had ever saved. And Paul was a bad sinner. He was an awful sinner. I mean,

after all, he arrested followers of Israel's Messiah. He tortured them to try to convince them to renounce Jesus Christ, and he even had some killed.

But I don't think Paul's response here is because he was such a worse sinner than you and I are. I think his response is the common response of all Christians. If you have been genuinely saved by grace, you feel the same way. In fact, can I put it this way? Here is a test of the genuineness of your faith. You claim to be a Christian? Ask yourself this. Do you feel utterly and completely unworthy of everything God has done for you in Christ? If you think for a moment that you deserve anything any little bit, of what God has given you in Christ, even the smallest amount, then let me tell you definitively, you don't know God. Because when a sinner comes to really know God, he cries out with Paul, I am the least, the leaster of all the saints.

Paul says I was made a minister. And in the rest of verses 8 and 9 Paul explains how he was given this responsibility, exactly what the heart of his unique God-given, God-empowered ministry, a ministry for which he had been hand-picked by Christ. And he tells us his ministry in two infinitives. Notice verse 8, to preach, and verse 9, to bring to light. Those two infinitives explain the focus of Paul's ministry.

First, he says in verse 8, I was made a minister, "... to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ." Now, there are a number of Greek words for "preaching", each with its own nuance. The word for "preaching" used here is simply the verb form of the noun gospel. So, we could translate it like this. I made--I was made a minister to preach the good news to the Gentiles of the unfathomable riches of Christ. Paul really was a man on a mission from God. And it was a mission to the nations.

You remember, even when Jesus, as a little baby, was dedicated at the temple. A righteous man named Simeon was there, and Simeon takes the baby Jesus into his arms. Jesus at this point only eight days old. And he cries out, and he says, this child will be a light of revelation to the Gentiles, as he holds Him there on the temple court. He understood that Jesus wasn't just a Messiah for Israel. He was the rescuer, the Savior of the world, and when Jesus is raised from the dead, and is ready to get that message to the world, to the nations, he chooses Paul.

In Acts 9, this is what Jesus told Ananias. Acts 9:15, about Paul. He says, "... he is a chosen instrument of mine to bear my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel...."

Paul got that message, because later, when he writes to Romans, Romans 16:25, listen to how he explains his mission. He says, "Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past...." He says God told me the secret, and I preach Christ. And he says, now, he's making that known to all the nations, leading to the obedience of faith. Paul understood his mission was to the nations.

I want you to turn with me though back to Acts 26. Because in Acts 26 you really get a glimpse of Paul's heart and his mission. Because in Acts 26 he's before Agrippa, and he's explaining what happened to him on the Damascus Road. And notice verse 15. Paul says, during that encounter,

... I said, "Who are You Lord?" And the Lord said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting." [And here's what Jesus said to Paul on the Damascus Road.] "... get up and stand on your feet; for this purpose I have appeared to you, to appoint you a minister [Paul got it] and a witness not only to the things which you have seen, but also to the things in which I will appear to you; rescuing you from the *Jewish* people and from the Gentiles, [now watch this] to whom [that is, to the Gentiles] I am sending you, to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified [or set apart] by ... [believing] in Me."

That's your mission, Paul. And Paul never forgot it. Years later he stands before Agrippa and he says, this is the ministry I've been given.

Now, go back to Ephesians 3. He's ministering to the Gentiles. He's preaching the gospel to them. But notice, he calls "preaching the gospel" preaching the unfathomable riches of Christ. I

love that word “unfathomable.” It’s not an easy word to say, but it’s a great word with a profound picture behind it. In Greek, the word translated unfathomable here describes that which can’t be tracked or traced. But the translators, in English, chose an English word that I think really does get to the heart of the Greek word. They chose an English word that pictures the measuring of the oceans.

In the past, before electronic equipment, if you wanted to know how deep the water was where you were sailing, then you measured that water in fathoms. A fathom is simply the average distance between your hands extended, the tips of your fingers on one hand and the tips of your fingers on the other hand. So, on average, roughly six feet was a fathom. To measure the depth of the water in fathoms, sailors used a sounding line, that is, a length of thin rope with a weight, usually lead, attached to the bottom of it. And they would let down that rope over the side of the ship until that weight hit the bottom. When it hit the bottom, they knew that that was the depth of the water. As they pulled that rope up (sometimes the rope would be marked with fathoms) but often, the sailor would actually take that rope and as he pulled it up, he would measure fathom one. He would pull the rope more and measure fathom two. With each pull across his body’s length, he was measuring a fathom. So, the word “fathom” came to be used as a verb to describe that process of measuring, and eventually it came to be used as an adjective as well.

So that when we’re saying (listen carefully), when we’re saying that can’t be fathomed, that it is unfathomable, we’re saying that it is so deep that it cannot be measured. The rope isn’t long enough. Nobody has a rope long enough to measure this, is what Paul is saying. You can’t fathom it. Your mind can’t measure the depth of this. Paul says the gospel he preached was the good news about the treasure, the riches, the treasure which is Christ. That’s what he’s saying. The treasure which is Christ. And the treasure that is Christ cannot be fathomed. It cannot be measured. You don’t have an instrument that will allow you to measure the treasure that is Jesus Christ. And Paul says that’s what I preach. We read Mark 10 this morning. That’s really what was happening in that account. Jesus was saying, are you willing to give up everything that’s valuable to you to get the treasure that is Me.

In fact, I want you to turn back to our Lord's parables, kingdom parables in Matthew 13. Two of my favorite parables are buried here in Matthew 13. They're not familiar to most people, but they are profound in the truth they teach. Just a couple of verses, Matthew 13:44 is one of the parables, and verses 45 and 46 is the other. Both parables teach the same point. Let me read them to you, and then I'll make a point. Verse 44 of Matthew 13.

“The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and hid *again*. And from joy over it, he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.” [Why? So, he can have the treasure that is buried in it.] Verse 45, “Again” (so Jesus was making a similar point here) “the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking fine pearls, and upon finding one pearl of great [surpassing] value, he went and sold all that he had and bought ... [that pearl].”

Now, both of these are making the same two points.

Point number one is that most people never discover the treasure. They walk across the same field day after day. They walk by the same shop day after day, and they never see the treasure in the field. They never see the pearl that's offered for sale in the shop. They miss it. That really comes back to grace doesn't it. To God's sovereign grace as we saw in Mark 10. With man it's impossible to really see the treasure that is Christ, but with God all things are possible. He can open our eyes to see the treasure.

The second point is that once your eyes are open to see the treasure, whether it's the treasure hidden in the field or whether it's the one pearl of huge price, you are willing to give up everything else, to sell everything else, to get the treasure. That's the point. When you see Christ, when you really see Him with your soul. When you understand His true value, you're willing to give us everything else to get Christ. Paul understood this. In fact, it was his own biography.

Turn with me to Philippians 3. Philippians 3. In verses 4 - 6 Paul recounts what all of his assets used to be. He used to have a whole list of spiritual assets. Verse 7,

But whatever things were ... [my assets—whatever things I used to think were my assets], were gain to me, those things I have counted as [liabilities] as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I ... [consider everything] to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For whom [don't miss this] for whom I have suffered the loss of all things.

Listen, Christ may ask you to suffer the loss of all things. For many of us that wasn't true. It was for Paul. He lost everything. Or He may ask you to be willing to give up everything, as He was really confronting that rich young ruler with, in Mark 10. But notice what Paul says. Verse 8, I have suffered the loss of all things, and I consider everything I lost [all of the rest of that stuff that used to be valuable to me as] and the Greek uses a very strong word here, as dung, so that I may gain Christ. It is excrement to me. Everything I used to value is worthless. All I want is Christ. Paul understood those parables, didn't he? He understood that once you find the treasure, nothing else matters. Nothing else is important.

Listen, is that how you think of Christ? Do you think of Him as a treasure on Whom it is impossible to assign a worth? That His value is without fathom, without measure? And are you willing to give up everything else to get Christ? Are you willing to say, Lord if You were to ask me, if I could be sure that I had Christ, if I could be sure that I belonged to Him, I would give up everything else I ever have had or hope to have to get Him? That's what it means to follow Christ. That's what it means to see the treasure and to want it so badly that you're willing to give up everything else to have it. Paul said that his mission was to preach the good news about the riches that are Christ's, that can't be fathomed, to the Gentiles, to us, many of us! Most of us here are Gentiles.

And listen folks, today we still benefit from Paul's ministry on our behalf. It was his voice at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 that helped insure that you and I didn't have to become Jewish in order to be a part of the church. It was Paul's preaching on his three great missionary journeys that made the early church a force among the Gentiles. It was Paul's letters to the Gentile churches that formed the bulk of the New Testament. And isn't it true that we tend to turn most

to those books that Paul wrote to the Gentile believers when we turn to the Scriptures? Although you and I don't live in the first century, we still owe our faith, in large part, to this special man whom Christ specially prepared and selected to be His apostle to us. If you've never thanked God for Paul, or you haven't in a long time, let this text drive you to gratitude, drive you to your knees in gratitude to God for this special man.

But to preach to the Gentiles the good news was only half of Paul's mission. Notice verse 9 as the other half. "... to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things." Notice that this half of Paul's mission is broader. He doesn't say "to the Gentiles" here. In fact, several early Greek manuscripts add the words "to all men". "To bring to light to all men." Whether we add the words or not, the point, I think, is a valid point that there was a part of Paul's ministry that was to both Jews and Gentiles. What was it? Look at verse 9 again. It was to bring to light, to illuminate, to publicly disclose the administration or the outworking of God's great secret. The secret that from the time God created had been known only to God but that He had in the first century chosen to reveal.

Now what mystery is Paul talking about here? Remember, Paul uses the word "mystery" of the entire mystery, which is Christ, and of parts of the mystery that is Christ. And here, he's probably meaning the second. He's referring back to verse 6, the truth, that mystery that in Christ, Jewish believers and Gentile believers are formed together into one new organism, the church. Paul says my mission is not only to preach the gospel to the Gentiles, but to tell both Jews and Gentiles that God had, as part of his secret in Christ, this secret, that the Jews and Gentiles would be one together in a new community, in a new organism called "the church". Paul says that's my mission. How did God broadcast his secret to the world? How did He get the word out? When God chose to communicate His secret, He did so through the ministry, both the teaching ministry and the writing ministry of one carefully chosen man, the apostle Paul.

Now that brings us to the fifth question about God's great secret. And really, a bedrock issue. Why? Why did God reveal His secret? Why did God reveal His secret? Why should it matter? Obviously, God held the secret. God revealed the secret, and He thought it was important for us to know, as well as the believers of the first century. He had Paul write it down for us. Why?

Well, look at verses 10 and 11. So that! Here's God purpose in revealing His secret through Paul and his ministry.

“... so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places. *This was* in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Now I know that sentence is a little hard to follow, but folks that is one of the most comprehensive statements in all the Bible. It is sweeping in its scope and ramifications. The key that will unlock our understanding of it is found in verse 11 in the words “the eternal purpose”. Literally translated, that expression in Greek is this: the plan of the ages. The plan of the ages. Now you often hear people talking about the world being out of control, usually as they talk about politics. While it is true that the world is out of our control, it's not out of God's control. He has a plan. And it's a plan that He conceived in eternity past among the councils of the Trinity. It's a plan for the ages. And everything that's happening today, and ever will happen is in according to God's great plan of the ages.

One commentator writes “behind all the events of this world's history there is an eternal purpose being worked out. God's is no ad hoc plan, but one conceived from eternity and eternal in its scope.” And folks, at the heart of God's plan of the ages is Jesus Christ. Look at verse 11. The eternal purpose, or the plan of the ages, “... which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord....” At the epicenter of God's plan of the ages is the exaltation of His Son, Jesus Christ.

Look back at Ephesians 1. Paul made this point there, you remember? Verse 9, Here's the secret of God's will. Verse 10, “... the summing up of all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on the earth.” You see it in the other prison epistles—the other letters Paul wrote around the same time from the same prison cell.

Look at Philippians 2:10 and 11. It says,

God has highly exalted ... [Christ], and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Look at Colossians 1. Notice how he puts it here in the parallel passage. In verse 18 he says, "He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that [for this purpose] that He Himself will come to have first place in everything." Jesus Christ, and His exaltation, is the epicenter of God's plan of the ages.

And if you go back to Ephesians 3, not only was Jesus the center of the plan, but notice in verse 10 that the church was part of this plan of the ages. Because he says, "through the church", and then he says in verse 11 "in accordance with the plan of the ages." So, what He's doing in the church is part of His plan of the ages. To say it another way, the church was always part of God's eternal plan.

By the way, let me just stop here for a moment and make a theological point. As an aside, let me say that I am, and we are as a church, dispensational. You hear that word. We're dispensational in two senses. I refer to myself as my mentor often does as a leaky dispensationalist. I don't embrace everything that dispensationalism does, but we're dispensational in two senses.

Number one. There is a distinction, we believe, between Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church. They're not the same entity. It wasn't the church in the Old Testament--the church in the New Testament was Israel in the Old. That's number one.

The second reason we would call ourselves dispensational is that we believe there are literal promises yet to be fulfilled to Jewish people, to ethnic Israel. That's it. That's where our dispensationalism stops. But listen, we absolutely reject what some dispensationalists teach. It's called classic dispensationalism, Scofield and those who came after him embraced, including some of our friends here at Dallas Theological Seminary, and that is (we reject this) that the church is a parenthesis. You may have heard this taught. That the church is a kind of

parenthesis, an accident in God's plan. That if when Christ was here and entered the city of Jerusalem, that if Israel had accepted Him as their king, the whistle would have blown, everything would have stopped, and God would have set up the kingdom of Jesus on earth at that time. I disagree with that for a number of reasons, but one of them is right here. Paul here makes it crystal clear that the church has always been part of God's plan of the ages. It wasn't an afterthought. It wasn't an accident. It wasn't a parenthesis. This was part of God's plan.

So, why did God choose, then, in the first century to make this secret known, this secret about the church. Well look at verse 10. According to verse 10 it has something to do with the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. These are angelic beings that we met back in 1: 21. Rulers speaks of those who have primacy or first place in rank. These are angelic rulers. Authorities describe someone with the freedom to act, the freedom to make decisions. These are angelic beings in positions of authority with the right to act and make decisions. Almost certainly here, Paul is speaking of holy angels, and he may be including the demonic powers as well. We can't be certain.

So, what is he saying? He's saying that God has revealed His secret so that (or for this purpose), that powerful intelligent angelic beings will see. Now that surprises me. I don't know if it surprises you or not. That isn't the answer I expected as to why God made His secret known. Let's look a little further here. He's essentially saying this. God is engaged in a grand demonstration, a grand exhibition on a cosmic eternal universal scale. Francis Foulkes writes,

The purpose of God for His church as Paul came to understand it reaches beyond itself; beyond the salvation, the enlightenment, and recreation of individuals; beyond its unity and fellowship; beyond even its witness to the world. The church is to be the exhibition to the whole creation of the wisdom and love and grace of God in Christ.

William Hendricksen writes, "God's purpose in saving His people reaches beyond man. His glory is His chief aim." God is putting Himself on display.

And what is God putting on display? Look at verse 10, “so that [for this purpose] the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known...” The manifold wisdom of God. The word “manifold” is not a word we use very often. It was used in ancient Greek of the beauty of an embroidered pattern of cloth that was woven of a lot of different colors. In fact, in the Septuagint, this word is used of Joseph’s coat of many colors. It was also used to describe the variety of hues and colors in a garland of flowers. Think of a lei in our time. And the variety of hues and colors that make up those flowers. We could say it like this. God is making the multi-colored splendor of His wisdom known.

Here’s the key question. How? How is God putting His multi-colored wisdom on display? Look at verse 10. It says, “... through the church ...” Folks, this is incredible. Look around you. The church, the church universal as well as local churches like Countryside Bible Church are the theater in which the eternal God is putting His wisdom on display, not just for you to see, not just for other humans to see, but for powerful majestic awe-inspiring angelic beings. Jay Adams writes, “God’s grand demonstration has been taking place and still continues to take place before hundreds of thousands of intelligent beings throughout the universe.” And folks, nowhere is God’s wisdom more clearly seen than in the redeemed community called the church. I love the way John Stott puts it. He says the church is the graduate school for angels.

Now, if you look at what we’ve just gone through together, and you don’t immediately make any practical connection, or you don’t understand the importance of it, let me see if I can make a connection for you. Three great ramifications, or as John Stott, from whom I’m adapting these points, calls them, three grand facts that flow out of what we’ve just learned together.

Fact number one. The church is central to the gospel. The church is central to the gospel. When Paul describes his ministry, he not only preached the gospel of Christ (the unfathomable riches that are Christ), he also was about bringing to light this secret to the Gentiles. God thought it was that important for us to understand that this was His plan of the ages. The church is central to the gospel. You know what that does? It underscores the importance of the church. If God thought all this was so important, and if God is putting His wisdom on display in the church, then that makes the church important. Is the church that important to you? Are these people sitting

around you, are they that important to you? Is that where you spend your time and your off hours and your energies, is in the church? I'm not talking about the buildings. I'm talking about the people. Church is central in God's plan, even of the gospel.

Number two. (And we don't think like this.) But the church is the focal point of world history. The church is the focal point of world history. You see, from an entirely human perspective, history is the story of great men and women, world leaders, the builders of empires. That's how we study history. Open any textbook of history, and that's what you'll find. But do you understand this? Paul is saying that if God were writing a history book, it would not focus on the men and women that we find in our history textbooks. In fact, according to God, they're almost incidental to the story. They're two-bit characters. If God were to write a history of the world (and to some extent, while that wasn't His primary intention, He has for us in the Scriptures), God would write not about the great world leaders. He would write about Moses and Abraham, David and Solomon, the great prophets. He would tell of John the Baptist, of Peter, James, and John, of Paul and Barnabus, of Timothy and Titus. And not just the famous Christians either. Read the last chapter of Romans. There are people listed in the last chapter of Romans who nobody that mattered in Rome knew. But they mattered to God. They were essential to the story, —to the plot, to what was going on in Rome. That's the story God would write.

Listen to how John Stott puts it.

Secular history concentrates its attentions on kings, queens, and presidents, on politicians and generals, in fact on VIPs. The Bible concentrates rather on a group it calls the saints, often little people, insignificant people, unimportant people, who are however at the same time God's people (and for that reason are both unknown to the world) and yet well-known to God. [Stott goes on], Secular history concentrates on wars, battles, peace treaties, followed by yet more wars, battles and peace treaties. The Bible concentrates rather on the war between good and evil, on the decisive victory won by Jesus Christ over the powers of darkness, on the peace treaty ratified by His blood, and on the sovereign proclamation of an amnesty for all rebels who will repent and believe. Secular history concentrates

on the changing map of the world, as one nation defeats another and annexes its territory, and on the rise and fall of empires. The Bible concentrates rather on a multi-national community called the church, which has no territorial frontiers, which claims nothing less than the whole world for Christ, and whose empire will never come to an end. [That's God's view of history.]

Do you understand that to God and to the thousands of angelic beings who hover over this world, the people of God are the heroes of the story? Of history? In the first century, they watched excitedly over the shoulders of Paul and Peter, Priscilla, and Aquilla, along with thousands of other nameless Christians whose names we will never know until we get to heaven. But now, folks, the stage is ours. You and I, as members of the church, we are the focus of their attention. They're straining to watch. As you fill your role in this church, as you serve in the body of Christ, let me just ask you. Do they see in your life and in your service the manifold wisdom of God played out through His church?

Next week we'll see the third grand fact in the next section that we come to, but I want you to end with this thought. Stay with me just for a moment. Christian, your life is not about you. It's not about your personal comfort. It's not about your personal pleasure. It's not about just surviving. Your life is not just about working and eating and sleeping and watching television. You are part of God's plan of the ages. As you love and serve the people that make up this church, here in Southlake, Texas, you are putting the multi-colored wisdom of God on display, not just for the people on this planet, but for the powerful intelligent beings of the angelic and demonic order. You are, in a word, bringing glory to God by how you interact with the people that make up this church. This is where history is really taking place, from God's plan of the ages. And when He retells history in eternity, it will not be of the great rulers and the great empires. They are incidental to the story. The real story is the people of God in the church of God displaying the glory of God for all the intelligent world to see.

Let's pray together.

Our Father, that is truly something worth living for. Forgive us, O God, for being so easily distracted with the temporal and unimportant, for giving our lives to things that don't matter to You. O, God, help us to realize that You intend us to be part of Your plan of the ages. That through our love and care for each other, through our humble gracious service to one another in this place, we put your manifold wisdom on display to the angels, to all created intelligent beings. They look and see Your glory, not ours. Oh God, help us to order our lives with Your priorities and not our own.

We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.