

SURPRISED BY THE GOSPEL

EPHESIANS 3:1-13

For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles - if indeed you have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which was given to me for you, how that by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I have briefly written already, by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ), which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets: that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel, of which I became a minister according to the gift of the grace of God given to me by the effective working of His power.

To me, who am less than the least of all the saints, this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make all see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ; to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places, according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through faith in Him. Therefore I ask that you do not lose heart at my tribulations for you, which is your glory.

When I was 12 years old my parents went to great efforts to plan a summer vacation at the beach...

They saved for months... Dad put in for vacation...

They invited some family friends to go along... They made travel preparations and hotel reservations...

They pre-planned dinners and activities... Every detail of the vacation was mapped out in advance.

Mom and dad even set aside a night to take my brother and I to the amusement park... *And there it was! The roller-coaster.* If I saw it today it probably wouldn't seem as fast or big as it did through the eyes of a 12 year old. But I was in awe of that roller coaster.

My mom isn't the roller coaster type, but for some reason she chose to ride. In retrospect, it was probably the only unplanned thing about the whole vacation...

And it was a wild ride! Sharp turns, steep drops. I'll never forget that roller coaster rumbling to a stop. Everyone around us was laughing and pointing at us.

I had no idea why, until I look at my mom.

At the time, female fashion included a hair-piece. A little extra volume woven into a woman's hair was attractive. But somewhere in the midst of the wildness that roller coaster had separated mom from her hair.

And there she was holding her hair in her lap.

It's been over 40 years since we took that trip, but it comes up often. *And guess why? Do we talk about the careful planning?* The hotel? Restaurants? Beach? *No!*

Even the roller coaster is now an afterthought.

When we talk about that vacation our one subject is the experience that was unplanned - *that was a surprise...* We always talk about mom losing her hair!

And this is the way it is with so much of life. It's not the experiences that went according to plan that we recall and relish - *it's the unexpected - the surprise - the serendipitous* - that makes a moment memorable.

This was Paul's experience with the Gospel.

He expected God to save the Jews - to abide by His covenants - to fulfill His promises - the heavens and all nature declare the Almighty's power and faithfulness.

But there were other aspects of the Gospel that caught Paul *by surprise... he didn't see it coming...*

And these unexpected blessings so delighted Paul it's now all he wants to write about! In chapter 3 Paul explains how he was surprised by the Gospel of grace!

The chapter begins, **"For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus..."** And we've got to stop right there. I'm always amazed Paul wrote this letter in jail.

The book of Ephesians are the thoughts of a man who was *"doing time."* Paul is incarcerated in a max-security prison. He's awaiting his arraignment before the Emperor Nero - a violent, egotistical, wicked thug.

Yet you'd never know his *grim circumstances* by the *glorious content* of his letter... Chains dangle from the man's wrists as he writes of his freedom in Christ...

He's outfitted in prison stripes as he pens about the righteousness he wears... A string of Roman numerals are stitched across his shirt, while he records the innumerable blessings that are his in Christ Jesus...

Rather than see himself *in prison*, Paul chooses to see himself *in Christ*. And this is the choice we all make: *do we get lost in our physical surroundings or do we stay caught up in our spiritual blessings?*

In your heart of hearts, where do you abide?

Are you *in pain* or *in Christ*? *In hock* or *in Christ*? *In somebody's hot seat* or *in Christ*? *In fear* or *in Christ*?

Rather than a prisoner of Rome or Nero, Paul is *“the prisoner of Christ...”* He belongs to Jesus! It's the Lord that's responsible for what happens to His servant.

Christians are never *“a victim of circumstance.”* God is sovereign. Nothing gets to me, but that it doesn't first pass through Him! This is why you can't necessarily interpret hardship as a derailment of God's purpose.

In fact, 2 Timothy 3:12 promises us, *“All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.”*

If someone convinced you to become a Christian by promising all your troubles would end, *I apologize.*

Our God doesn't promise to remove us from trials, but He insures us that He'll go with us through them.

That's why Paul calls himself a *“prisoner of Christ.”*

And why was Paul in prison? He writes, *“For you Gentiles.”* Despite Jewish prejudice and legalism Paul had stood up for pig-eating, bacon-loving Gentiles.

This was what gotten him arrested in the first place...

On a visit to Jerusalem, the Jews had claimed to see Paul in the Temple with a Gentile named Trophimus.

But Trophimus wasn't just a Gentile, he was an Ephesian. Paul had been arrested and deported to Rome because he believed an Ephesian trusting in Jesus, was more a child of God than a kosher Jew.

Paul preached *grace for every race!* God isn't just for the pure-fed, the well-bred, the religiously-reared.

It was surprising at first, but it was quick to sink in with Paul. The Gospel of grace made it possible to be right with God without becoming religious or Jewish.

The Gospel puts God's blessings within the reach of those who were outcasts. Today, whenever I eat some pulled pork, I recall I owe Paul a debt of gratitude.

Paul spent two years in Ephesus. It's funny that in verse 2, he asks if they've heard of his ministry...

“If indeed you have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which was given to me for you...” Of course they'd heard!... Perhaps, Paul is asking, **“*Did you really understand the implications of that grace?*”**

And if he were writing to us, he'd ask, **“*Do we?*”**

It wasn't just the people the Gospel had *reached* that surprised Paul, it was the message He'd *preached*.

The Gospel he was given wasn't a dispensing of *God's justice*, or *His fierce judg-*

ment, or His hot wrath against sinners... It was a dispensing of gentle grace...

When you think of a *“dispensation of grace”* think of the word *“distributorship.”* The Jews knew of God's grace, so God sent Paul to distribute it to the Gentiles.

He says, verse 2, *“it was given to me to give to you.”*

God is an entrepreneur! He's not afraid of branching out and opening up new channels of distribution for His amazing grace. He wants to move into all segments of the market - *every age, race, status, language, culture.*

I guess when it comes to marketing and distribution no business is better at it than McDonalds. Did you know that the busiest McDonalds restaurant in the world sits a few blocks from the Kremlin in Moscow?

At one time, a new McDonalds opened up somewhere in the world every four hours. Today, there are over 31,000 McDonalds stores in 119 countries.

As recipients of grace we should be as aggressive at distributing the Gospel as McDonalds is with Big Macs.

When McDonalds started in the city of Budapest 250 Hungarians stood for 2 1/2 hours waiting for the door to open - 18,000 customers were served the first day.

The news report read, *“Budapest teenagers crowded into the restaurant wearing their best denims, Adidas shoes, and broad smiles. When asked how she was enjoying her first Big Mac, one teen, mixing her corporate metaphors, responded, “It's the real thing.”*

There was much this teenager didn't understand. She didn't know the difference between a McDonalds slogan and a Coca-Cola jingle. But her innocence didn't stop her from enjoying a juicy burger and fries.

And this was Paul's approach. There's much about God and grace we don't understand. But that shouldn't stop us from faith - from receiving it and enjoying it.

At the core of our sun the temperature is 27 million degrees. The pressure is 340 billion times what it is on Earth. This creates multiple nuclear reactions.

In each explosion, four protons fuse to create one alpha particle, which is lighter than the four protons.

The difference in mass is expelled as energy - which gradually works its way to the sun's surface where it's expelled as heat and light to warm the solar system.

That's all interesting, but you don't need to know any of what I've just told you, to go outside and get a tan.

And this was true of Paul's *"dispensation of grace."*

He dispensed God's grace, not to those *smart enough* to grasp it all, but to those *humble enough* to believe and receive despite their limited knowledge.

Seeking to explain the nature of God, St. Augustine wrote a vast theological treatise titled, *"On The Trinity."* After finishing his book he went for a stroll along the beach where he saw a boy putting water into a hole.

He asked what the little boy was doing. He replied, *"I'm putting the Mediterranean Sea into this hole."*

Augustine laughed. “But Sonny that’s impossible. The sea is far too vast, and your hole is far too small.”

Later it hit him. That’s what he’d been trying to do!

God is infinitely greater than we can imagine. *God is the sea and our minds are the hole.* But thankfully our ignorance doesn’t stop us from receiving God’s grace.

It’s not knowledge God rewards, but humility and faith... And Paul was a distributor of this good news!

We too need to be dispensers of grace - always on the lookout for new channels of distribution!

Perhaps your office or job site has never had a strong witness for Jesus... The same could be said for your tennis team, or neighborhood, or hunting club.

God has given you the distribution rights in that new market. Don’t be surprised - get busy. I once heard it said, “There’s enough Bread of Life to supply the whole world, but are there enough volunteers to distribute it?”

But Paul was also surprised by the history and nature of the Gospel. Verse 3, “How that by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I have briefly written already, by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ)...”

Already in Ephesians (1:9) Paul had spoken of the Gospel as a “*mystery.*” Here he develops the idea...

When we hear the word "*mystery*" we think of an Agatha Christie novel, or a Sherlock Holmes movie... a suspense-filled, smoking gun, who-done-it... thriller.

But that's not what Paul means when he uses this term. A *biblical mystery* is a truth that was known only to God - **a sacred secret**. It's a truth that man could've never grasped had God not chosen to reveal it to us.

No matter how smart a person might be, the human mind can never search out, or unravel, or decipher a divine mystery. Some truths are known only to God.

In 2013 the World Puzzle Championship took place in Beijing. Yearly, the event draws about 150 geniuses at solving puzzles. In fact, ***we all like solving puzzles...***

Crosswords, and Sudoku, and Candy Crush...

That's because in the real world life is so ambiguous and perplexing - real solutions are hard to come by. With a puzzle I'm sure I can eventually figure it out...

But not so with God! He is beyond us! The eternal, infinite God is a puzzle we can't possibly unravel.

Today, churches build sanctuaries that maximize the sight lines. Every seat in the house needs to be a good seat, where you can see all that happens on-stage.

But realize that's not the way the devout Protestant Reformers built the great cathedrals of Europe. They took just the opposite approach. Take any seat in the church and your forward vision is obscured. A column, or an angle, or a pipe organ will block your view.

And both approaches are deliberate. Modern Christians live under the illusion that

God's actions and wisdom can always be explained. There's no *"mystery."*

Whereas, the men of God who built the cathedrals understood that none of us can grasp all there is to know about God! He has ways passed finding out.

Realize, God isn't obligated to display His whole hand. He reveals only the cards He chooses to show.

Our job is to trust God regardless of circumstances! Faith is not necessarily knowing why - it's trusting Who!

And Paul saw the Gospel as a mystery unveiled!

Verse 5, *"which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets (of which Paul was one): that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel..."* It was the Gospel of grace that saved Gentiles and made them co-heirs with the Jews!

There were OT prophecies that predicted the conversion of the Gentiles, but it remained unclear to everyone but God as to exactly how it would happen.

The privilege of explaining this mystery was finally given to Paul. God revealed to him *that through Christ* He would bring together both Jew and Gentile as one new group, the Church. When Paul first preached the Gospel of Jesus it was answering age-old questions.

The Gospel was a mystery revealed - *a surprise!*

And I'm afraid one of the reasons we often take the Gospel and God's grace for granted is that we no longer see it a mystery. When we first hear and grasp its implications it's an unexpected, delightful discovery.

We're overwhelmed by the lavishness of God's generosity... Surprised by a love we didn't deserve...

But lose the wonder, and amazement, and the serendipity of it all - and what was once an *unexpected discovery* soon becomes a *worn-out doctrine*.

Think of a 15 year marriage. By now the relationship is familiar terrain - and thus, to keep the love fresh both spouses have to create some mystique, some intrigue.

Add some mysterious to the routine. Plan a romantic dinner - *somewhere other than McDonalds...* Dress up. Take your time. Enjoy each other again... Then check into a swanky hotel - *whatever the budget allows...*

Realize your spouse is an ever-changing person. There are dimensions to their personality you've yet to discover. New wrinkles you've yet explore (*literally*).

Here's my point, **the way to beat boredom is by reintroducing into the relationship some mystery!**

And what romance does in a marriage, mystery does in our spiritual life. If the Gospel has gotten boring to you its time to pick it up again - ***for once a mystery, always a mystery***. But this time don't be afraid of the surprises - relish them, embrace them! Trust the Lord.

Einstein once said, ***"The most beautiful emotion we can experience is the mysterious. It stands at the cradle of all true art and science. He who can no longer wonder***

and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead, a snuffed-out candle.” It’s mystery that keeps love alive!

I like what Charles Swindoll writes about the Holy Spirit. “By the time I graduated from (seminary), I had many convictions and few questions... But during a lifetime of ministry I’ve found that the work of the Spirit keeps me off balance. Some church leaders seem afraid the Holy Spirit is going to do something we can't explain. That disturbs many folks... It energizes me...

There are dimensions of the Holy Spirit's ministry I’ve never tapped, and about which I know very little.

I'm on a strong learning curve. I now have questions and a strong interest in many of the things I once felt were settled. To say it plainly, I am hungry for more of Him. I long to know God more deeply, more intimately.”

I hope we all should share his holy curiosity!

It’s been said, "It's what you learn after you know it all that counts." Especially with the Bible and the things of God. There's always more there than you’ve seen.

It’s time to stop **blowing your knows... *I know this, I know that*...** Stop treating the Bible like yesterday’s news. There’s still much, much more for you to grasp...

Forget the fact that you've read the Bible all your life. Pick it up afresh and look for something new. *It’s there!*

Hunt for the mystery. Focus on the verse before you as if you've never read it before. *Ask God to surprise!*

I've even got a suggestion. Start with John 3:16. *You know it well*, but this time read into it your own name!

“For God so loved Sandy that He gave His only begotten Son, that if Sandy believes in Him he shall not perish, but have eternal life.” That stirs my soul...

Start reading the Bible expecting to the unexpected!

Speaking of surprises, here's another one. Paul marvels at the impact the Gospel has had on his own life. Who would've thunk the difference it would make?

Verse 7, “of which I became a minister according to the gift of the grace of God given to me by the effective working of His power. To me, who am less than the least of all the saints, this grace was given...” The Gospel of grace not only saved him, but made him “*a minister.*” *Paul was made a minister by the mystery!*

Paul was not so much *enlisted* as was *enchanted*.

He'd been drawn to the ministry because of the love he'd tasted and the mercy he'd been shown. He saw himself as “*less than the least of the saints...*” yet God gave to Paul “*the effective working of His power.*”

God doesn't save us by grace, then call us by ability! No one who serves God deserves the post. It's grace!

The Gospel was something Paul wanted to share, because it had captured his heart. Grace intrigued him.

I believed Paul served God for the surprises!

As a Jewish rabbi legalism had been predictable. It was rituals, rules, regiment - the same ole same ole.

But when Paul turned to Christ the living Lord took over. With Jesus at the helm, he never knew what was next. He loved the spontaneity. Every day he couldn't wait to get up to find out what God had in store for him.

I'll never forget the story I heard at a church in South Florida. A man's wife had died. He told me he'd been depressed, hopeless, struggling with suicidal thoughts.

One day a butterfly flew through the living room and landed on his departed wife's Bible. He took it as a sign. That Sunday he went to CC and gave his life to Christ. *And guess what he was given at the altar?*

A book titled "[Welcome to the Family of God.](#)" *A book I wrote!* And I remembered grumbling when I first saw the cover. "[A butterfly? Why a butterfly?](#)" *Now I knew.*

In fact, that man showed me his copy of my book. It was dog-eared and marked up. He said it got him through the darkness and taught how to trust in Christ.

It's these kinds of stories that motivate my ministry.

God is always up to something... it's beautiful... and it's wonderful... it's unexpected... it's a surprise...

I read another man's testimony, he said he became a Christian for *the mystery!* He now lives on the edge of his seat. He never knows what door God will open up, or what opportunity will arise. God is always at work.

Rather than eliminate surprises he embraces them.

Life becomes an adventure when you stop trying to get God to play by your rules, and let Him do as He pleases. If you're really following, *you'll let Him lead!*

And here's another way God *surprised* Paul, **“that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ...”** Not only did he get to preach the Gospel of God's grace, but also **“*the riches of Christ.*”**

And here's why this was so shocking, so surprising... for these are **“*the unsearchable riches of Christ.*”**

The Greek word rendered **“*unsearchable*”** is a difficult to translate. Books offer various definitions...

The **“inexplorable riches,” “untraceable riches,” “unfathomable riches,” “inexhaustible riches,” “illimitable riches,” “inscrutable riches,” “incalculable riches,” “infinite riches.”** The most literal rendering of the word would be **“riches that cannot be tracked.”**

Based on that definition let me coin a term not found in the commentaries - how about **“off-road riches.”**

The acceptance, forgiveness, adoption, redemption, inheritance, sealing, foretaste... the blessings we read about in chapter 1 could've never been found if Paul had stayed on the path of Judaism. But God took him **off-road**... He met Jesus... and found riches untold.

Perhaps you've been looking for God's blessing. And like the Jews you've tried to cash in by earning them.

Good *deeds*, the right *creeds*, rosary *beads*... You've tried to please God by being religious... *Hogwash!*

To receive the riches of Christ you've got to go **off-road** and do something radical. Humble yourself. Admit there's no good thing in you. There's nothing you can do to merit God's blessing, and trust in the Savior!

The blessings of Christ are beyond your reach, but Jesus is more than ready to give them to us if we ask.

Why would a pastor dwell on politics, or pass along pop psychology, or dole out pithy statements, or be a strict moralist and lay down the Law week after week?

A pastor has a higher call. I'm honored to preach and to dispense "*the unsearchable riches of Christ.*"

For me there's only one thing more fun than keeping a secret, *and that's sharing it with someone!* In fact, I'm the person in my family most prone to blowing a secret.

But Paul and I have the honor of traveling the world letting the cat out of the bag - telling Gentiles of God's grace. Paul had a ball doing it, and we can join the fun!

"**And** (verse 9) **to make all see what is the fellowship of the mystery...**" God gave Paul the Gospel to preach, but that's only half of the miracle that occurs in hearts.

We preach - but it's up to God to "**make**" people see!

And it *surprised* Paul to learn how God does it - how He opens blind eyes... It's through "*the fellowship of the mystery.*" In Christ God made all men, *even hostile, fighting factions, like Jew and Gentile*, "*one new man.*"

And this is how God makes people see - how he opens eyes - it's through the love and unity we share.

In the eyes of our fragmented, splintered world - our unity is convincing evidence for the Gospel of Christ.

This means that *the preaching of the Gospel* and *the life of the Church* go hand in hand. Love, and cooperation, and dedication to the Church validates the power of the Gospel of grace. *The Church is strategic.*

Verse 9 continues, "*which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ...*" Here's another surprise...

Not that *God the Son* was there from *the dawn of time* - "*the beginning of the ages*" - assisting *God the Father* in His work of creation - this was well known.

Here's the shocker... from the beginning of all things the Church also existed in the *mind and heart* of God.

We were "*hidden in God*" as Paul puts it.

You might assume the Church is *a new arrival, a johnny-come-lately* in God's program - *but not so!*

God had us in *His heart* and in *His plans* from the beginning - *not just a footnote, but as the major theme.*

Verse 10 tells us, “To the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places, according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord, in which we have boldness and access with confidence through faith in Him...” We were the trump card that God held in His hand - He kept us back - to play at the end.

And today it's the Church that rocks the universe!

“*Principalities and powers in heavenly places*” - that's a reference to angels... The angels now view us as *God's all-time pleasant surprise*. For in the Church God displays His “*manifold*” or “*multi-faceted wisdom*.”

The Church is the prism through which we see God's genius and glory. In the OT God's glory was a bright, blinding light that no man could look at for very long.

But today God angles and diffuses His light through the Church, and we see multiple details to His wisdom.

This is what *surprises* the angels. Not that God can manipulate molecules, or shift tectonic plates, or collide weather fronts, or string together planetary orbits - *but that He can bring diverse and divided people together!*

God can put an end to sin and the division it causes. He can reconcile man to Himself and to each other.

This is “*the eternal purpose accomplished in Christ!*”

The angels see us - *Dawgs and Jackets, Yuppies and Rednecks, former Junkies and Squeaky Cleans* under the same roof, worshipping God in one accord, and they

marvel. This is the piece of the puzzle angels never saw. They look at us and scratch their halos.

God's strength is seen in nature - His love is seen on the cross - but His wisdom is seen in the Church.

1 Corinthians 1 tells us that the world sees God's wisdom as foolishness. They don't understand that He's taken the weak of the world and made us strong.

Years ago I was informed by a local Christian radio station that CC had been named "Church of the week."

We all got a Bahama's vacation - *no, not really!*

I felt so proud, "*Church of the week*" - until the Lord reminded me, "*It's Church of the w-e-a-k.*" This is God's wisdom - that in the Church, through the power of Christ, the weak and foolish turn strong and wise.

And that's not all that *surprises* the angels! Verse 12 tells us they also marvel at the access we possess.

Angels tremble and shake when they appear before the Almighty. God is the Boss! He once expelled a third of their ranks. There's a formality to this relationship.

Yet it amazes the angels to see us. We've done far more to provoke God, and try His patience, yet we run to His throne, jump in His lap, and call Him, "*Daddy!*"

The angels marvel at the access we have "*in Him.*"

Notice, that's how verse 12 closes, "*in Him.*"

Never forget this is where all the answers are found - this is where all the blessings lie... *“in Him - in Christ.”*

It reminds me of a man who became a Christian as a youth. This enabled him to memorize large chunks of Scripture. But as he got older his memory faded.

At last he could quote just one verse, his favorite verse, 2 Timothy 1:12, *“I know Whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that day.”* But in his final months even that one verse began to slip from his memory.

In the end, he could quote but one word of that one verse. He quoted it over and over, *“Him, Him, Him.”*

The man who memorized so much of the Bible died only able to quote a single word. Yet ironically, in the one word he retained, he had the whole Bible, *“Him.”*

The purpose of all the ages is summed up *“in Him.”*

We close in verse 13, and Paul has a final *surprise* for his readers... *“Therefore I ask that you do not lose heart at my tribulations for you, which is your glory.”*

Paul was imprisoned not because he was a criminal, but because he'd stood up for the Gospel, and for the people it intended to save. *His imprisonment was the Ephesians' glory. His suffering was for their blessing!*

Most folks go to jail because of money, or jewels, or drugs, or jealousy - but Paul was incarcerated because of *a message* he believed! That alone is surprising - *a man willing to lose his freedom for a message...*

And what kind of message would motivate a man so mightily? It was the message of the Gospel of grace.

It had intrigued, and enchanted, and mystified Paul. He was under its spell... It was the surprise he couldn't shake - *that in Christ, God had worked it all out. Answered every problem. Satisfied every longing.*

The Gospel of grace it's beautiful, and baffling, and brilliant - all at the same time. Mostly, it's for believing... Today, will you believe and receive?