

Ephesians – Week 8 – The Mystery of the Church – Bible Study Helps

Title: The Mystery of the Church

Sermon Summary:

This sermon explores the profound mystery revealed in Ephesians 3—that God has united Jews and Gentiles into one body through the cross of Jesus Christ. What was once hidden from the Old Testament prophets has now been fully revealed: Gentiles are fellow heirs with Jews, members of the same body, and partakers of the same promises in Christ. The Old Testament contained hints of Gentile blessing, but the full truth of the church as one unified body was a mystery until revealed through the Apostle Paul. This revelation should humble believers, not make them proud, as they recognize God's incredible grace in including all people in His eternal plan. The sermon emphasizes that this truth was so radical that even Jewish believers like Peter struggled to accept it, requiring divine intervention to understand that salvation through Christ alone—not conversion to Judaism—was God's plan. The message concludes with a call to humility, recognizing that angels in heaven are learning about God's manifold wisdom through the church, and that believers should live faithfully in light of the unsearchable riches found in Christ.

Key Points:

- The mystery of the church was once hidden but is now fully revealed through the Holy Spirit
- Old Testament Jews expected Gentile blessing but did not understand the concept of one unified spiritual body
- The prophets searched their own writings trying to understand what God was revealing, often not comprehending the full meaning
- A biblical mystery is something that was hidden but is now revealed by God
- Jews and Gentiles who trust Christ are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the same promise
- The early Jewish church struggled greatly with accepting Gentiles as believers
- Peter's experience with Cornelius demonstrates the radical nature of this truth
- The Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 was necessary to settle the question of whether Gentiles needed to become Jews to be saved
- The cross had to happen first before the church could be established
- Old Testament prophets saw the first and second coming of Christ as one event, not recognizing the church age in between

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- Believers should be humbled, not prideful, by understanding this mystery
- Angels in heavenly places are learning about God's wisdom through the church
- The unsearchable riches of Christ can never be exhausted or fully measured
- Doctrine should always lead to humility, not pride

Scripture Reference:

- Ephesians 2:11-22 (foundation from previous week)
- Ephesians 3:1-13 (primary passage)
- Genesis 12:3 (Abraham and blessing to all families)
- Isaiah 49:6 (light to the Gentiles)
- Zechariah 8:22-23 (nations seeking the Lord)
- Amos 9:11-12 (Gentiles called by God's name)
- Acts 10 (Peter's vision and Cornelius)
- Acts 15 (Jerusalem Council)
- Acts 22:21-22 (Paul's testimony about being sent to Gentiles)
- 1 Peter 1:10-12 (prophets searching and angels desiring to look into these things)
- Luke 4 (Jesus reading from Isaiah 61)
- Isaiah 61:1-2 (the acceptable year of the Lord)

Stories:

- The story of Peter's vision of unclean animals and his subsequent visit to Cornelius's house, illustrating his struggle with the concept of Gentile salvation
- The Jerusalem Council debate where Jewish believers argued whether Gentiles must be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses

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- Paul's testimony in Acts 22 where mentioning the word "Gentiles" caused the Jewish crowd to call for his death
- James citing Amos 9 at the Jerusalem Council to show that Gentile inclusion was prophesied
- Peter's rebuke by Paul in Galatians for separating himself from Gentile believers when Jewish leaders arrived
- The illustration of cereal dispensers as a family example of sharing and fairness
- The comparison of Old Testament prophets to someone looking at two mountain peaks that appear as one but actually have a valley (the church age) between them
- Jesus reading from Isaiah 61 in the synagogue but stopping mid-verse because the second half referred to His second coming

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Discipleship Questions

How does understanding that Old Testament prophets themselves did not fully comprehend their own prophecies change the way we approach difficult passages in Scripture today?

In what ways might modern Christians struggle with the same spiritual pride the Jewish believers faced when accepting Gentiles as equal heirs in Christ?

What does it mean practically that angels and heavenly beings are learning about God's wisdom by observing how He works in the church?

How should the truth that we possess mysteries once hidden from prophets and angels affect our daily attitude toward Bible reading and study?

Why do you think God chose to reveal the mystery of the church progressively rather than all at once, and what does this teach us about how He works in our individual lives?

Peter struggled to fellowship with Gentiles even after walking with Jesus for three years. What deeply ingrained prejudices or divisions might we be holding onto that contradict the unity Christ created?

How does recognizing that Gentile believers were once completely without hope and without God challenge us to view and reach out to those we consider far from faith?

Paul described himself as less than the least of all saints after receiving this revelation. Why does true doctrine lead to humility rather than pride, and how can we guard against becoming puffed up with knowledge?

If the prophets searched diligently to understand what we now read plainly over morning coffee, how should this reality impact our sense of responsibility and gratitude for the Scriptures?

Given that the current world events involving Israel signal the nearness of Christ's return, what specific changes should we make in how we prioritize sharing the gospel with those around us?

Small Group Guide: The Mystery of the Church

Ephesians 3:1-13

Opening Prayer

Begin by asking God to open hearts and minds to understand the incredible mystery of the church and to respond with humility and gratitude.

Icebreaker Question

- Have you ever discovered something that completely changed your perspective on a situation? How did it make you feel?
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Sermon Review (5-10 minutes)

Main Points:

1. **Old Testament Expectation** - God promised Gentile blessing but did not reveal the full truth about the church
 2. **New Testament Revelation** - The Holy Spirit revealed the mystery: Jews and Gentiles united as one body in Christ
 3. **The Humble Servant** - Paul's response to this truth was profound humility
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Key Takeaways

1. The Mystery Defined

The church was once hidden but is now revealed: Gentiles and Jews are:

- **Fellow heirs** - equal inheritance in Christ
- **Same body** - one living organism, not two separate groups
- **Partakers of His promise** - fully sharing in Christ together

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2. Historical Context

- Old Testament prophets saw glimpses but didn't understand the complete picture
- Even Peter struggled with accepting Gentiles as equals (Acts 10)
- The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) debated whether Gentiles could even be saved
- This truth was so revolutionary it got Paul imprisoned

3. Eternal Significance

- Angels and heavenly beings are learning about God's wisdom through the church
 - This was God's plan from before the foundation of the world
 - The church demonstrates the "manifold wisdom of God" to all creation
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Discussion Questions

Understanding the Text

1. **Read Ephesians 3:1-6.** What specific aspects of the "mystery" does Paul identify in verse 6? Why would this have been shocking to Jewish believers?
2. **Read Acts 10:9-28.** What does Peter's vision and reaction tell us about how difficult this truth was to accept? Have you ever had God challenge something you thought was absolute?
3. Why do you think God waited until after the cross to fully reveal the mystery of the church? What had to happen first?

Personal Application

4. Paul describes himself as "less than the least of all saints" (v. 8). How does understanding God's grace affect our view of ourselves? When have you felt unworthy of God's calling?
5. The sermon mentioned that "if doctrine ever makes us proud, we are handling it incorrectly." Have you ever caught yourself becoming prideful about your biblical knowledge or spiritual maturity? What's the antidote?
6. **Read Ephesians 3:10.** The angels are learning about God's wisdom through the church. How does it change your perspective knowing that your life as a believer is teaching lessons in the heavenly realm?

Challenging Questions

7. The sermon addressed current attitudes toward Israel and the Jewish people. How does understanding the mystery of the church help us think biblically about:
 - God's ongoing plan for Israel?
 - Our relationship with Jewish believers?
 - End-times prophecy?

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8. Peter struggled with fellowshiping with Gentile believers, and Paul had to rebuke him (Galatians 2). How do we sometimes create divisions in the body of Christ today? What "walls" do we build between:
 - Different denominations?
 - Different cultural backgrounds?
 - Different socioeconomic groups?
9. The sermon emphasized that we should view all believers as "the same body" regardless of denominational differences. How can we maintain theological convictions while still embracing unity with all true believers?

Practical Living

10. **Read Ephesians 3:8.** Paul was given grace to "preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ." Who are the "Gentiles" in your life—the people you think could never be saved or would never listen to you? How does this passage challenge you?
11. We often want God to explain before we obey. Where in your life is God calling you to trust and obey even when you don't fully understand His plan?
12. How does understanding that we have "boldness and access with confidence" (v. 12) change the way you approach:
 - Prayer?
 - Sharing your faith?
 - Facing challenges?

Reflection Exercise (10 minutes)

Individual Reflection: Take 3-5 minutes of silence to consider:

- Am I living with gratitude for being included in God's family, or have I taken it for granted?
- Where has pride crept into my spiritual life?
- Who has God placed in my life that I've written off as "unreachable" with the gospel?

Share (optional): Invite 2-3 people to share one insight from their reflection time.

Practical Applications

This Week's Challenge:

Choose one of the following to put into practice:

Option 1: Humble Gratitude

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- Each day this week, write down or speak aloud three specific reasons you're grateful God included you in His family
- Focus on what you didn't deserve but received anyway

Option 2: Breaking Down Walls

- Identify one believer or group of believers you've looked down on or separated yourself from
- Pray for them daily and look for an opportunity to express unity in Christ
- If appropriate, reach out with encouragement

Option 3: Bold Witness

- Make a list of people you think "could never be saved"
- Commit to praying for them daily
- Ask God for one opportunity this week to share Christ with someone unexpected
- Step out in faith when that door opens

Option 4: Study the Mystery

- Go through the "Seven New Testament Mysteries" study mentioned in the sermon
- Research how the early church worked through Jewish-Gentile tensions
- Trace Old Testament prophecies about Gentile inclusion

Prayer Focus

Pray together for:

1. **Humility** - That we would never become proud about our knowledge or position in Christ
2. **Unity** - For genuine unity in the body of Christ across denominational and cultural lines
3. **Boldness** - To share the gospel with those we've written off as unreachable
4. **Gratitude** - For the incredible privilege of being included in God's eternal plan
5. **Israel** - For the peace of Jerusalem and for Jewish people to recognize their Messiah
6. **Urgency** - Recognition that time is short and Christ is returning soon

Closing Thought

"The mystery of the church should not make us proud that we understand it. It should make us grateful that God included us in it."

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Final Question: How will you live differently this week knowing you are a "fellow heir" and part of the "same body" with all who trust in Christ?

For Next Week

- Read Ephesians 3:14-21
 - Consider: What does it mean to be "strengthened with might by His Spirit in the inner man"?
 - Come prepared to discuss Paul's prayer for the church
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Additional Resources

- Sermon series: "Seven New Testament Mysteries"
- Study: "How to Study the Bible" (time factor and dispensations)
- Recommended reading: Clarence Larkin's prophetic diagrams
- Access sermon audio and notes through the church app

5-Day Devotional: The Mystery of the Church

Day 1: From Outsiders to Heirs

Reading: Ephesians 2:11-13

Devotional: Take a moment to remember where you were before Christ. The Ephesians were reminded they were "without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world." Yet God's incredible plan brought those who were "far off" near by the blood of Christ. This wasn't just about proximity—it was about identity transformation. You are no longer an outsider looking in; you are a fellow heir with Christ Himself. Today, reflect on the magnitude of this change. How does understanding your former separation deepen your gratitude for your current position in Christ? Let this truth humble you and move you to share this hope with others who remain far from God.

Day 2: One Body, No Division

Reading: Ephesians 2:14-18

Devotional: Christ has "broken down the middle wall of partition" between people who were once enemies. The mystery revealed is that Jews and Gentiles—people from vastly different backgrounds—become one body through the cross. This wasn't a merger where one group absorbed the other; it was the creation of something entirely new. Consider your attitudes toward other believers who differ from you in denomination, culture, or practice. Are you embracing the unity Christ died to create, or are you building walls He tore down? The ground at the foot of the cross is level. We all stand as equals, saved by grace alone. Today, ask God to reveal any pride or division in your heart, and seek to demonstrate the reconciling power of Christ in your relationships with other believers.

Day 3: The Mystery Once Hidden, Now Revealed

Reading: Ephesians 3:1-6

Devotional: The Old Testament prophets searched diligently to understand what God was doing, yet the full picture remained hidden. Even the angels desired to look into these mysteries. Now, through the Holy Spirit, what was once concealed has been revealed: Gentiles are "fellow heirs, and of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ by the gospel." You hold in your hands truths that prophets longed to understand. This should not make you proud, but profoundly grateful and humble. What the greatest servants of God could only glimpse, you now read plainly over morning coffee. Don't treat this revelation as common knowledge. Let the wonder of

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being included in God's eternal plan transform how you approach Scripture today. Read with fresh eyes, recognizing the privilege you've been given.

Day 4: Less Than the Least

Reading: Ephesians 3:7-9; 1 Timothy 1:12-16

Devotional: Paul, the apostle who received direct revelation from Christ and wrote much of the New Testament, called himself "less than the least of all saints." He never forgot that he was once a blasphemer and persecutor of the church. The greater the revelation of God's grace, the deeper his humility became. This is the paradox of Christian maturity: the more we grow in Christ, the smaller we should see ourselves. If doctrine ever makes you proud or judgmental, you're handling it incorrectly. The unsearchable riches of Christ should lead to worship, not arrogance. Today, examine your heart. Has growing in biblical knowledge made you more loving and humble, or more critical and self-righteous? Ask God to give you Paul's perspective—to see yourself as the recipient of undeserved mercy, chosen to serve despite your unworthiness.

Day 5: Living Lessons for Heaven

Reading: Ephesians 3:10-13; 1 Peter 1:10-12

Devotional: Here's a staggering truth: the principalities and powers in heavenly places are learning about God's manifold wisdom by watching the church. Angels are discovering the depths of God's grace through how He treats redeemed sinners. Your life is a classroom for heaven. Every time God shows you mercy, every time His grace covers your failure, every time He remains faithful despite your unfaithfulness—the heavenly realm witnesses the inexhaustible kindness of God. This should both humble and motivate you. You're not just living for yourself or even just for others on earth. Your faithfulness, your surrender, your trust in suffering—all of it demonstrates God's character to the unseen realm. Today, live with the awareness that your life is a testimony to more than just those around you. Walk boldly in the access you have to God, and live in a way that displays His manifold wisdom to all creation.