

The Mystery of the Kingdom

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[0:00] Well, I have an apology to make from the get-go, and that's that I'm doing something today that I really don't like doing, that I've received so much when I was a kid and always said, if I ever do what that preacher is doing, I will never do that.

And that's structure a sermon according to points that all start with the same letter, alliteration. So I'm going to be a bit cheesy, but these three M words unfolded before me like a mystery in the text, so this is what we're going to do.

This text is dense. If you stuck with me while I was reading it, you realize that. It's dense, it's heavy, it's conceptually robust.

And so I think the best way we can see what's going on here is to look at it, they're looking at the man, the manifold in the mystery, the man, the manifold in the mystery.

So let's first take a look at the man. If you look down at verse one, this passage begins as a prayer. For this reason, I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles.

[1:12] Now, as soon as I say that, you should be saying, this passage is not a prayer. What are you talking about? There was a prayer in Ephesians chapter one that I preached on some weeks ago about hope, and now we come back to this text and we have Paul entering into a prayer, but he stops himself.

You see the dash, the M dash there after the word Gentiles in verse one, he ceases. And if you pick back up at verse 14, which is not printed there, but I'll read it to you, he says this, for this reason, you see he's repeating exactly what he had said in verse one, for this reason, he's entering back into his original thought, I bow my knee before the father.

So verse 14 picks back up with the prayer that he stopped in verse one. He has a parenthetical thought, you see. Our whole passage today is a parentheses.

It's a, I'm about to prayer, but wait, there's something I have to tell you. We see something of Paul's humanity here as he's writing this letter. Wait, there's something I need to tell you.

Dash. So our passage about a parenthetical thought and it's also about Paul. This is one of the few places that Paul, the man, that's what I mean by the man.

[2:33] This is one of the few places that Paul is very self referential throughout the entire text. So you see in the first verse, for these reasons, I, Paul, verse 13.

So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering. Verse 14, for this reason, I bow my knees before the father. He's literally talking about himself the entire time, about his ministry, about his suffering, about his, his office as being for the Gentiles.

And the, the self referential aspect of it is to highlight this thing. He is a prisoner for you.

Gentiles, which I think most of you are. He's a prisoner for you. That's what he wants you to see about him, about the man, Paul.

Now there are big ideas in this text. I mean, it almost reads more like a philosophical reflection on theology. The mystery of revelation, the unfolding of the unsearchable riches of Christ, the hiddenness of God.

[3:42] This sounds like something you would read in Calvin or somebody, right? But look, shut all that out for a moment.

What in the world does mystery mean? What in the world does manifold mean? Shut all that out for just a second and realize the purpose of this parenthetical thought. And it's found in one word, two words.

Verse 13, he says, so. So therefore, you see, for this reason I, I, Paul, I'm about to say a prayer. Wait, there's something I need to tell you. And then he tells it to us. And then in verse 13, he says, therefore, the reason I just told you all of what I just told you is this, you see it in verse 13.

So therefore I ask you, do not lose heart. That's the point. That's the point of the whole passage. The hugeness of the concepts, the mystery of Christ, the unfolding of the unsearchable riches of Christ hidden in the past, unveiled before our faces now.

[4:52] Don't lose heart. That's why I'm telling you this stuff. Don't lose heart. What is that? To lose heart.

What is, what is this? All of you know, it's the drooping of the shoulders. It's the hanging of the head.

It's the falling back into the chair, right? It's the hands over the face. Closing the eyes and somebody asks you, what's wrong?

And you say, I'm done. I'm done. I'm, I'm finished. I've had enough. I need freedom. I need movement. I need space.

I need a way from this. It's the, I'm done this that we get to in life. Paul suspects that the Ephesians, the people in Ephesus might be at the point of saying, I'm done.

[5:53] I'm, I'm losing heart about this thing called Christianity. You told me about resurrection, Paul. You told me about this God man, Jesus Christ, dead and now alive.

And you're in prison. You're in a Roman jail cell on death row. And I'm here awaiting the trials of Nero.

Burning's at the stake. I'm done. I'm losing heart. That's what he's worried about. Things aren't going the way they're supposed to go in the Christian life.

It's not bells and whistles. Why are the Ephesians discouraged? Well, for the same reason you and I get discouraged, God is invisible and life is hard.

Right? God's invisible and life is hard. You just want to see Him in the midst of suffering.

[7:00] Now what does Paul do to help you, to help me, to help the Ephesians? He doesn't put his hand on our shoulders and say, hey, look, you're not getting enough quiet time in.

He doesn't say you need to have five minutes in the morning. He doesn't treat lack of joy in suffering in Christ as a mathematical formula, where if you put in the time, you get the results, right? Joy in Christ doesn't simply come by thinking. He comes to stir your affections.

He does come to point you back to the Bible, but to point you back to the Bible in a different way that you came to it the first time. To see something you haven't seen before, he brings you up into the huge, the God's eye view of what's happening from the beginning of time.

You're discouraged, you're thinking about letting this whole thing go. He wants to change your affections by seeing something enormous. So let's have a look at what that enormous thing is that he wants you to see.

[8:21] In the first four verses, Paul, starting in verse two, is introducing himself as the steward of God's grace. Now the term that's used there for stewardship is the same term that we derive the word economy, or *oconomia*, stewardship.

He's literally saying here that God has made me a manager of goods, right? If you think of the word economy, the way we use it today, he's a manager of goods, of a particular good.

Something's been revealed to him in a special way as the apostles of the Gentiles in the book of Acts. We read about that. And what is it that's been revealed?

He tells us in verse four, when you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ. The mystery of Christ, whatever that is, that's the thing he's bringing you into so that you don't lose heart.

The mystery of Christ. And I think we can understand what the mystery of Christ is best by first considering the backside of the passage, the manifold of wisdom.

[9:26] So we're first going to look at the manifold of wisdom and then ask what that teaches us about what this mystery of Christ is.

Let me just say there's work to be done today in this passage. It's not just straight sledding. We got to get into it. We got to dig into it a bit. So have the text out in front of you.

Stick with me as we look at the text. And it'll help, I think. What's this manifold of wisdom? Come down with me to verse eight. He starts a long sentence in verse eight.

To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to preach to the Gentiles, the unsearchable riches of Christ. And to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages and God who created all things so that through the church, the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

So if you see in the middle of that long sentence, there's a so that, so that. In the first part of the sentence, he says, I'm giving you the mystery of Christ so that you might see the manifold wisdom of God.

[10:40] The manifold wisdom of God is the so that of the mystery. It's the purpose. Right? So we start with the purpose. We work back to the mystery. What's the purpose, the manifold? Now what does the word manifold mean?

This is a word you hear out and about today, but it's not super clear. It's not super common in current English, common English. The word literally means something like many sided or multifaceted or multi dimensional.

But if you go back behind the term here, the Greek term, it's actually a term that comes from art. So maybe if you're an artist in the room, you've used this term more often than the rest of us do.

It's a term that comes from art. I think the best way to describe it is like this. Think about the color wheel. It's basically the color wheel is basically just the rainbow completed into a circle.

It's got all the different colors all the way around it. You've seen this on your computers when you're on Microsoft Word and you need to click a certain color and write something or whatever. There's just thousands of variations around the color wheel.

[11:53] So you've got your three primary colors, red, green, yellow. And as you transition from red to purple, it slowly changes, right?

In shade, in tint, you get these slow little intervals of different colors. Look, there are thousands of colors, millions of hues. I don't know how many. I can't even conceive of how many colors there possibly could be out there.

But there's tons, right? Now look, it's just like, I don't know if they had this in the UK, but in the States we had the gigantic crayon box. You know what I'm talking about?

The big crayola crayon box. Like 164. I mean, they even had like 232, something like that crayons in one box. I mean, it was just the thing. Like if you were in kindergarten and you brought the 232 pack in, that was something.

You had set your trajectory for the rest of your elementary years. So many colors in this one box, right? And they're all different colors. But look, they all share one thing.

[12:57] They are colors. You see, color is one thing. It's an entity. It's out there. Color. Without it, this world would be so boring.

Color, right? And at the same time as this one thing that we call color, there are colors, tons of them, colors.

The manifold is one thing with many different hues. You see, it's multicoloredness.

You can think about it this way. We go together to Chicago or Paris to see one of Monet's water lily paintings. And we're sitting there in front of Monet and somebody comes along and asks me, what is that?

And I say, it's 2,652 separate brush strokes featuring 641 colors on a canvas.

[14:03] And then the person thinks, okay, that's weird and turns to you and he says, what is that? And you say, it's Monet's water lily pond. It's a painting, right?

Now we've both said things that are true. I've brought out the differentiation, the many sidedness. That painting is in fact composed of 2,600 whatever it is brush strokes.

But most importantly, it's a painting. It's Monet's water lily pond, right? It's one thing. It's a unity composed of thousands of parts, just like the human body, just like everything in the world.

This is the manifold. Human brought together diversity in unity. Okay? Now, what does that word have to do with what Paul's doing here?

What's the painting that Paul's giving us here? In the previous chapter and in our chapter, Paul is highlighting something.

[15:06] You who were once far off Gentiles outside of the covenant promises of Abraham, far from the fold of Israel have now been brought in by the grace of Christ.

You see? In other words, the manifold display of God on earth today is the church.

The church is literally multicolored. That's the point of using this art term. God's wisdom is on display in the church by bringing together things that were once completely separate, completely hostile to one another.

You see? Jew and Gentile, Jew and Samaritan, black and white. The church is the location where these distinctions are no more.

One in Christ, unity in diversity. You see? One body. Now, why is this so important? What is this telling us about the big, huge picture of what God's doing in history?

[16:20] If you remember from the very get-go of our study of the letter of Ephesians, we said that there's one single verse in this whole book that summarizes the book. If you want to know what this book is about in one verse, it's found in Ephesians chapter one, verse nine and ten.

God has made known His purpose. What's the purpose of God? What is it? Christian in one line. What's the purpose of God?

He set it forth in Christ, His plan for the fullness of time to unite all things in Jesus Christ, things in heaven and things on earth.

It's the unity of all things. In other words, the word unity there, it means reconciliation. In the Garden of Eden, sin came and tore the world apart.

Sin is the great cosmic power of disunity. You see? In death, our bodies are ripped from our spirits. It ought not be like that way.

[17:26] Because of sin at the tower of Babel, languages are multiplied and people groups are dispersed across the whole of the earth in disunity.

You see? In a way that ought not be. What Paul is saying to you is that the church, you guys, look around, look around.

This right here is the glimpse of the wisdom of God in all of history, reversing the problem that came in at sin. Disunity, right?

People groups set against one another. It ought not be that way. The church is the glimpse, the manifold of God's wisdom. You see it in verse 11, this was according to the eternal purpose that was realized in Christ Jesus.

The church, you see, the manifold wisdom of God and the coming together of peoples in the church is according to the eternal purposes of God.

[18:28] The church is the outworking of what God decreed from eternity is the point. See the hugeness.

This is what Paul's bringing you to. You're discouraged by suffering. Yeah.

This right here doesn't get you going in the morning. Paul's trying to simply bring us back to the fact that understand what's happening in all of history and how the church is a witness, a glimpse of a huge cosmic reconciliation that's happening before your eyes.

You can't see it so clearly yet, but this is the glimpse, the church. Look around you. Be encouraged. We need a little bit more diversity, in fact, in here, perhaps.

We have some, though. Scots and Englishmen, right? Irish, American, 28 years old, 88 year old.

[19:33] Where in the world else will we come together like this but the church? Right? It's a glimpse. It's a foretaste. All right. We've established what the manifold of God's wisdom in the church is, this multicolored painting that God's painting and his big eternal purpose throughout all of history in an antithesis to the power of sin and death because of Jesus Christ.

Now we come to our final point and that's what is this mystery? What is this mystery? So we back up into the first half of our passage.

What's this mystery? The mystery, I want to say, there's three ways to think about it.

What does it mean first? When we think of mystery, when you think of mystery, what do you think of? You think of crime, crime movies.

You think of unsolved mysteries. You think of who built Stonehenge. I don't know if they know that yet. Maybe they do, but I don't know it.

[20:39] It's a mystery to me, at least. That's how we think of mystery, the things that we don't yet know. Now for Paul, mystery means the total opposite of that.

So don't get caught up in misunderstanding what mystery means. Mystery means the complete opposite of that for Paul. You see a definition for it in verse 9. A mystery is bringing to light for everyone what is hidden for all ages.

In other words, mysteries are not things that you don't yet know for Paul. Mysteries are things that you did not know in the past that have now been made known to you.

Another word for mystery is very simply a word that we use all the time in the Bible and in theology, and that's the word revelation. Revelation revealed before your eyes. Things that were hidden of old that have now been made known to you, been opened up before your face.

That's the definition of mystery. There's two mysteries in this passage that he points us to. The first is in verse 4. When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ.

[21:44] Now what is the mystery of Christ? How is Jesus Christ a mystery? What about him, in other words, has been revealed?

What in him has revealed something that we did not know in the past that was hidden in God? Well, Paul tells us in Colossians. Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God.

None of you have ever seen God. No one has, in fact, the scripture tells us. Moses could not look at him lest he die.

He had to hide in the cleft of the rock. Isaiah, when he was brought up into a vision of the highest heaven, had to cover his face like the seraphim. He could not look at God.

No one can see God. No one can see God's essence. Jesus made that clear. The mystery of who God is, of what he looks like, has now been unfolded before our faces in Jesus Christ.

[22:46] That's the mystery of Christ. And even more than that, the mystery of Christ is the mystery of the gospel. The mystery of the gospel. In other words, what is God doing in all of history about sin?

We didn't know in the past, and now we know. And this is what he's doing. Jesus Christ comes and wins by losing.

That's the mystery of the gospel. People like Barabbas set free because the innocent man goes condemned. God, what are you doing in history without the suffering, without the pain?

What are you doing when Cain and Abel are set against each other right after the good creation? What is this? Why does suffering have to be a part of your eternal plan that you're unveiling before us?

We don't know all the answers to that, but what we do know is Jesus Christ won by suffering.

[23:54] That's the mystery of the gospel that's been unveiled before our eyes, you see. The final mystery is this. It's the mystery of the church. That's the mystery we just read about.

He spells it out for us in verse 6. The mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promised in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

The mystery of the church is that God is reconciling all things, uniting all things in him through this man, this God man who suffered so that we might live.

This is mystery. This is what mystery means. Secondly, what is the mystery not? What is the mystery not?

The mystery is not this. It's not that you actually comprehend exactly what God's doing in all of this. I think this might be the most important thing Paul wants you to see.

[24:56] Paul is saying, look, see that God has unveiled before your face something that was hidden in his decree, in his mind from all of eternity.

It's now being unfolded before you. You're getting discouraged. You need to see the huge picture, the history of reconciliation, of the union of all things in Christ Jesus.

You get a glimpse of it now in the church, but they're still suffering all around you. You don't see the whole thing, right? There's so much more to see. Look, here's the point. He's unveiling it before your face, but you don't get it all.

You don't see it all. It's still a 21st century sense of the term mystery in many ways.

That's why we have to ask questions like, God, what are you doing in this situation? Why are parents burying their children, God?

[25:53] Why are bombs going off in European airports? Why? Why is this a part of the unfolding of history according to your eternal plans and purposes?

Why? And Paul's pointing us to the fact that we don't know. What we do know that the mystery is being unfolded.

See, perhaps for most of us today, you're not so captured by this phrase, don't lose heart in verse 13.

You know, I mean, you're just, you're not at the end of your rope, probably, most of you, especially with Christianity. I mean, you're sticking it out.

But maybe the losing heart sense that we get here is something a little bit different. Are you bored? Are you bored with Christianity?

[26:59] Does this kind of bore you a bit? Be honest. I think what Paul's doing is he's unveiling the huge plan of God before your face, the mystery of hidden in all ages to show you that you don't get the whole picture yet.

Wake up, people. When you come to the Bible, it's not about getting time. It's not about a simple quiet time. It's about coming and have your eyes woken to the majesty that is the great mystery of God's purposes and all of history.

He's drawing us back to revelation, back to the scriptures and saying, see it afresh today. Read passages like this and be amazed and say, I just don't get it.

And that's good in a lot of ways. Look, the mystery of God revealed in Scripture is the death of boredom, or at least it ought to be for us.

Thirdly and finally, and we'll be done. I just want to go back to the initial question, the big question. Why does Paul, when he's trying to help us with discouragement, turn to this stuff?

[28:11] The stuff about eternal purposes, mysteries, manifolds. Why does he do that? Final thing. Come with me to verse 13, the very end of the passage.

So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory. So Paul says, I'm in a Roman jail cell.

I'm bound up in chains. I'm on death row and I'm happy about it. He says, all over the New Testament, I'm rejoicing in my tribulations. I'm finishing what was lacking in the sufferings of Christ, he says in Colossians.

And it's all for your glory. Gentiles, all of us in here today, for your glory. That's why he did it. That's why he's doing it. Now, what in the world does that mean? For your glory, that Paul is tied up in a Roman jail cell for your glory.

What does that mean? I think what it means is that it's the manifestation of the mystery of the gospel.

[29:20] What do I mean by that? I say this, that suffering is the prelude to glory.

Suffering is the prelude to glory. Remember the mystery of the gospel of Christ Jesus? Suffering for Jesus was the prelude to glory.

God, what are you doing in this world with suffering? It makes no sense to us. Why this way? It hurts. And in a twist of events, at the crucifixion, suffering becomes the path to glory.

Crucifixion precedes resurrection, you see. And when Paul says, I'm doing this for your glory, he's exemplifying, he's manifesting the mystery of the gospel.

Yeah, I'm suffering and things don't look good. But suffering is the prelude to glory. And God's eternal purposes, for whatever reason, according to his wise counsel, this is for the good.

[30:32] I'm manifesting to you the gospel in my chains, you see. Joni, Eric, Centada, and I'll shamelessly just say before I tell this that I'm taking the story straight from Tim Keller and it was too good not to use.

So, shameless, shameless reference there. Joni, Eric, Centada, many of you will know who she was or who she is. Her story, she's a young girl, 17, 18 years old.

She dives into a pool in a swimming accident and now she's a quadriplegic. She finds herself waking up in the hospital, unable to move her body.

And over the next coming months in the city of Baltimore and the states, she's in a debilitating condition, going through rehab, trying to learn to function as this new type of human being she is. She writes later on as she was wrestling with this question, why in the world is suffering here, God? Why me? Why this?

[31:35] That she recalls being next to a girl named Denise Walters in the hospital. This girl was a 17-year-old high school senior in Baltimore, she was walking up some steps one day and her knees went weak and she felt strange.

She took a nap, she woke up that evening and she was paralyzed from the waist down. Two days later, she's paralyzed from the neck down. She gets in the hospital and she's blind in a matter of days.

It gets to a point a few weeks later where she can't hardly hear or speak. She had a really advanced, very rare form of multiple sclerosis that just absolutely attacks autoimmune disease. Now Joni recalls the fact that she's a quadriplegic and she's talking and she's got the ability to communicate and she's sitting here next to Denise in this hospital bed and she's saying, why me, God?

No, wait, why her? What is this? And she was especially troubled by the fact that hardly anyone came to see Denise.

[32:45] Her mother came and her mother was a Christian and she read the scriptures out loud to her, not knowing if she could hear or know anything that was happening. Denise died some short time later.

For years in some of Joni's writings, she wrestles with this question. What about this silent suffering? The Denise's of the world, she's a Christian girl and nobody sees this.

Now she's troubled because she knows like you know that the Bible's very clear that suffering has a purpose in the Christian life, that through suffering we are refined, purified, made holy by the Spirit of Christ.

Through suffering we pronounce a testimony to the world when we suffer well. They see our good deeds and glorify the Father who is in heaven.

Suffering well is a glory to God, right? But what about Denise? Nobody sees it. What do you do with that?

[33:49] And maybe Paul's wrestling with questions like that when he's thinking these people are discouraged. They're just one year or so away from Nero coming and burning them alive.

Joni didn't know what to do with it. A friend came to her later in life after she had written some of these things and pulled out Ephesians 3 and came to Ephesians 3 verse 10. Come back with me to verse 10.

The very end of it, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places. Did you catch that when we read it, that the wisdom of God might now, through suffering, be made known to the rulers and the powers, the authorities and the heavenly places?

What in the world is that? Paul tells us in Ephesians 6, the rulers and authorities and the heavenly places are the cosmic powers over this present darkness, the spiritual forces of evil.

On the one hand, he's talking about demons, on the one hand he's talking about angels. Who sees this?

[35:00] All the little sufferings in this life of the Christian. Who sees it? Is it testifying to anybody? Is it doing any good God? And Paul says, don't be discouraged.

The demons are looking on and the angels, it's all over the Bible. In fact, Luke 15, the angels look on in amazement and rejoicing at those who repent.

First Peter 1.12, after preaching the gospel, even angels long to look into these things. But the demons, they shudder at God's purposes for suffering.

The whole book of Job, there is an audience, a satanic demonic horde that looks on at Job's suffering. Even in the moments that nobody else can see and they look on and shudder, you see,

and this is the last thing I'll say, suffering must have taken on a new meaning for Satan and his demonic horde after Jesus comes.

In the book of Job, suffering is a tool. Satan uses it to sift Job, to bring pain. Look, suffering for Satan must, for centuries and centuries, have looked like, I've won this thing.

[36:25] I'm killing these people. They're suffering. But when Jesus comes, he brings a great reversal.

No longer is suffering simply Satan's tool to make you hurt. It's the tool of redemption.

Jesus Christ wins by losing. Jesus Christ suffers the most devastating final death of sin so that you who suffer temporally would never suffer the final, most devastating death of eternal death.

Jesus Christ is the reversal of this cosmic view of suffering as being pointless. You see, suffering is the prelude to glory.

It's still hard. It doesn't diminish it. Don't lose heart though. The sufferings of this present age are not worth comparing to the glory that is to be revealed.

[37:32] The mystery, the revelation that is to be revealed in the saints. See the enormity and immensity of God's plan and that will help.

That will help. Let's pray. Our Lord and God, we ask now that you would make us see Jesus. So you would see the cross and the resurrection as the good end of all of our pain in Jesus.

You pray that you would make those of us who don't know this Christ to see him now and that we would wrestle with these claims and help us to walk away here loving the gospel all the more.

We ask for this in Jesus' name. We seek kasih!