

MYSTERIES

Ephesians 3:1-12

Dr. Trevor Brown

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The verdict is in: we love a good mystery. The world of entertainment sure hasn't missed the memo. TV and docu-series creators race to feature the next fictional sleuth or true-crime saga. After comedy and news, true crime are the podcasts Americans listen to most. Right behind Checkers, monopoly, and scrabble, Clue is the highest selling boardgame in history. Of all the literary genres of fiction books, mystery/thriller/crime books rule the U.S. today. Even more than a good romance novel, people reach for mystery thriller.

Merriam Webster has even added the made-up word for this genre to the dictionary: "whodunit." In 1930, a book reviewer needed to come up with something to say about a rather unremarkable mystery novel. It was "a satisfactory whodunit," he wrote. It sure seems like a lazy way to make several words into one, but it caught on anyway. "Whodunit" became so popular that by 1939 at least one language pundit had declared it "already heavily overworked" and predicted it would "soon be dumped into the taboo bin." History has proven that prophecy false, and "whodunit" is still going strong.ⁱ

Nearly a century later, a good mystery still grabs our attention.

A Mystery Revealed (3:1-5)

"Mystery" is the word that appears again and again in our text. Maybe it catches your ear today. After all, we love a good mystery. In fact, *mysterion* appears 21 times in Paul's letters, and 6 of those are here in Ephesians. But this mystery is unique. It has some of the characteristics of a classic crime thriller: there's **an inheritance** hanging in the balance, we'll discover **a body** along the way, and clues will lead us to **a promise**.

But *mystery* for Paul is not a modern crime drama. In fact, all the verses in Ephesians and Colossians that refer to *mystery* also indicate that it is now "revealed," "known," "understood," or "spoken out." In every case, it's something that's disclosed.ⁱⁱ Whereas in modern usage mystery refers to what is unknown, in Jewish and early Christian literature this word refers to the hidden divine plan now revealed by God.ⁱⁱⁱ

John Stott points out, "We need to realize that the English and Greek words do not have the same meaning. In English a mystery is something dark, obscure, puzzling, secret. What is mysterious is inexplicable, even incomprehensible. The Greek word is different. Although still a secret, it's no longer closely guarded but open. The Christian mysteries are truths which although beyond human discovery have been revealed by God and so now belong openly to the whole church."^{iv}

This is a circular letter. It made its way around to Gentile churches in the region, teaching them and enriching them in their faith. In Ephesians 2, Paul had covered the depths of God's amazing grace which brings spiritual life to those who were once dead. All of this sends him launching into a prayer in chapter 3, but he interrupts that train of thought to recount his own role in what he calls the "stewardship of God's grace" (2) and the "administration of the mystery" (9).

I was forwarded an email recently from a family member who works for a large firm. The information had been sent to him by a coworker. The email signature had her title just below the name: Knowledge Manager. That a new one for me. I wasn't sure if it was prestigious or one of these prestigious names given hype up a corporate role.

I came across another of these job titles recently, a woman working for a Massachusetts tech company whose job title was Crayon Evangelist (graphic design manager). "Visual impact," she said. "My job is to spread the gospel of great design. I energize the company around building a single, powerful corporate image."

Paul has his own unique role and title here. "Surely you have heard!" Paul says. I am steward and a manager of a mystery of all mysteries. My job is to manage this new knowledge. I'm here to energize this body around a single image. The *mysterion* which Paul writes about is not an unsolvable crime or an event beyond explanation.

Something that was once veiled has been unveiled. Something previously hidden has been revealed. As Theodoret says, "they did not see the whole picture but wrote down words about aspects of it." The Old Testament pointed to God's intention to encompass the nations within his saving plans, but to bring together all people, both Jew and non-Jew, into one new entity, to give equal status to all – this is a development that was completely hidden.^v

To paraphrase Augustine, "In the Old the New is concealed, in the New the Old is revealed."

God has revealed the mystery. Not just any mystery, but the greatest mystery of all time. It has been hidden through the ages (9), but those who will look and listen to what Paul has been given will come to know this great mystery. In verse 4, Paul assures the readers, and us, that if they will hear him out, if they will read his letter (in this case publicly in worship), they will come to know the insight Paul has been gifted about the mystery "of Christ."

It's not that Paul is smart or has been a better sleuth than someone else. No, in his underserved grace, God has commissioned Paul for a role in his divine plan. As this plan is unveiled today, we discover we have a task too. Make no mistake. This is a plan which belongs to God. He is the true owner. But like a manager oversees all the tasks in a house, God has appointed Paul to carry it out. And, Paul adds, this is all for you. This is all for the Gentiles. He has received God's grace so that he might bring the message of salvation to Gentiles.

Ephesians 3:6-7

In verse 6, we learn the content of this mystery revealed by God:

I. An inheritance (fellow heirs, heir together with)

He is describing distinctly different people with the language of a joint inheritance. Paul envisions two people (or here, groups of people) who stand on equal footing in relation to an inheritance. As he writes in Romans 8:17: "Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ..." Whatever riches they envisioned God has in store for them would be equally given to others as well. Does that bother you, the text asks? Why would we ever treat God's endless grace and wisdom as a zero-sum game? As if someone's extra grace is less for me?

Even more than an equal share of an inheritance, Paul says there is a body.

II. A body (fellow members, members together)

Prior to this the word is found nowhere else. Some even hint that Paul coined the term himself. It means belonging to the same body. Literally, they are to be co-bodied. Things that were once of apart will be joined together by their shared faith in the risen Lord.

As William Klein points out: "What is it 'about or in Christ' that was formerly hidden and that God is now disclosing through Paul?... [It is] that 'in Christ' God has united Jews and Gentiles. Who could have come to the conclusion by the OT or surveying the history of God's people? Who would have surmised that God would create a new body based not on the covenants of the law of Israel but by allegiance to his crucified Son Jesus?"

Not only is there a shared inheritance and shared body, but they will share a promise as well.

III. A promise (fellow partakers, sharers together)

This language speaks of people who have a share together in some possession or relationship. Paul says Gentiles share with the Jews is the "promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel." We've heard this teaching so often that it doesn't startle us. It startled the Jewish world of Paul's day, though. Popular Jewish teachings about Israel's history and heritage excluded Gentiles. Jews called them dogs. Gentiles considered Jews stubborn and hateful.

Our English translations offer the same adjective to each of these words, reminding us that for each of these three new realities Paul has intentionally chosen "together" words. NASB: fellow heirs, fellows members, fellow partakers. NIV: heirs together, members together, sharers together. In Greek, its alliteration for all three words. "All three stress equivalence, equal footing, and identical status."^{vi} The result of the mystery of the gospel is that all believers in Christ, whether Jew or Gentiles, share equal status in ways that transcend any former privileges, divisions, and boundaries.

Now, God's people exist as one corporate body – the body of Christ. God's grace brings Jew and Gentile together, creating one, new reconciled people – the church.

A Mystery Proclaimed (3:8-10)

In a world in which one third of the human population identifies themselves as Christians, it is actually not all that wild to think that it could influence the world. However, consider the conviction required to preach and hear this message in Ephesus and the other house churches around first century Asia. At the time this vision is taking root, the church would hardly have measured as a blip on the radar, a non-relevant group in a demographic study.

Ephesians sees the church at the center of what God is doing! They dared to believe that their little assembly of faith in Jesus could have not just personal implications, not just social impact, but could make God's manifold wisdom known on a cosmic scale. They dared to believe that their existence was God's plan for the world. Even more, they were able to imagine that it was revealing God's wisdom to the forces that control the universe.^{vii}

The 1920s and 1930s are widely considered The Golden Age of detective fiction. It was the era of classic murder mystery novels, all of similar patterns and styles. Most of the authors were British: Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, even GK Chesterton.

They shared common cliché's and conventions. The majority of novels of that era were "whodunits." Authors would mislead their readers, revealing in the end the least likely suspect convincingly as the villain. There were also certain casts of characters and certain settings. The rules of the game were codified in 1929 by Ronald Knox. According to Knox, a detective story:

"must have as its main interest the unravelling of a mystery; a mystery whose elements are clearly presented to the reader at an early stage in the proceedings, and whose nature is such as to arouse curiosity, a curiosity which is gratified (satisfied, relaxed) at the end." The whole genre is built on the idea that a short story can capture your attention for a moment, hold your curiosity captive, resolve it all, and send you on your way.

For too many the mystery of the church has been exactly that: momentary curiosity, a fleeting interest, a story that meets a resolution in Jesus after which you can go on your way. But, conversion - salvation - is a beginning not an ending. It ought to take hold of you! **God's grace to us in Christ Jesus is both a gift and a task.**^{viii}

Paul says that he has been commissioned to proclaim the unfathomable riches of Christ and to turn the lights on the mystery so that every ruler and power here and in heaven might be drawn to it, captivated by it. This is not just Paul's purpose. It is not just your purpose. This is our role (vs 11) in the eternal purposes of God "which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord."

In his book, *The Open Secret*, Leslie Newbigin says that: “The church lives in the midst of history as a *sign, instrument, and foretaste* of the reign of God.”^{ix} The kingdom of God is the “secret” that is now “open” as God reveals himself through the church he has sent into the world.

To paraphrase Newbigin: “The Greco-Roman world in which the New Testament was written was full of societies offering... a way of personal salvation through religious teaching and practice. There were several commonly used Greek words for such societies. At no time did the church use any of these names for itself. It was not, and could not be, a society offering personal salvation for those who cared to avail themselves of its teaching and practice. It was from the beginning a movement claiming the allegiance of all peoples, and it used for itself with almost total consistency the name “ecclesia” — the assembly of all citizens called to deal with the public affairs of the city.

The distinctive thing about this assembly was that it was called by a more august authority than the town clerk: it was the “ecclesia theou,” the assembly called by God... The church could have escaped persecution by the Roman Empire if it had been content to be treated as a *cultus privatus*—one of the many forms of personal religion. But it was not. Its affirmation that “Jesus is Lord” implied a public, universal claim that was bound eventually to clash with the *cultus publicus* of the empire. The Christian mission is thus to act out in the whole life of the whole world the confession that Jesus is Lord of all.” (*The Open Secret*, 16-17)

The church is the place where the mystery of the kingdom of God is made present here. *This* is the place where the mystery is made known so that all people, righteous and unrighteous, are enabled to take and share the love of God. *We are the place* where the glory of God actually abides among us so that the love of God is available to sin-burdened men and women.

In Newbigin’s words, “I believe that the reign of God is present in the midst of sinful, weak, divided community, not through any power or goodness of its own, but because God has called and chosen this company of people to be bearers of his gift on behalf of all people.” (*The Open Secret*, 54)

Does your world seem fractured by inequality?

The church is the community that proves and proclaims that we are heirs together in Christ.

Does division seem to run rampant in your day?

The church is the body that shows the world the only power capable of holding us together.

Is there confusion today about what’s right and wrong, up and down?

The church is the new humanity that makes God’s wisdom known to a wisdom-less people.

We are the place where the promise of Jesus is fulfilled: “I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.” We are the place where the reign of God is present as love shared among the unlovely.

If you're looking today at the problems of the world and wondering where to aim your creative energy to do something, I'm telling you the answer is here. It is in Jesus. It is in the called and equipped community whose allegiance is to Him alone.

The problem with mysteries is that once we figure them out, they're yesterday's news. A detective novel is only compelling while the solution remains unknown. A mystery film only captivates my attention if I don't know how it will turn out. Once a case is solved, it's featured in the newspaper for a day or two, then, the story fades as other issues dominate the front page.^x

For the sake of the world, the mystery of the gospel has to be the opposite. For Paul, the pattern is reversed. What I'm saying today is that maybe we've fallen into the trap of letting other things be front page news.

The revealing of the mystery of grace is the greatest gift imaginable. God has revealed it in Christ so that his unsearchable, many-sided wisdom would be proclaimed to all the world and every power in it. We are the place where God's purposes are unfolding before the eyes of the world. God's grace to us in Christ Jesus is both a gift and a task.

The mysteries of salvation have been revealed. The mystery that remains: Will you receive this gift through faith? Will we take this task of grace?

ⁱ "whodunit," *Merriam-Webster*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/whodunit>

ⁱⁱ Charles Brown, *The Church That's More than a Place* (Maryville, TN: New Century Publishing, 1996), 55.

ⁱⁱⁱ Raymond Brown, "The Semitic Background of the New Testament *Mysterion*," *Biblica*, 1959, Vol. 40, No. 1 (1959), pp. 70-87

^{iv} John Stott, *The Message of Ephesians: God's New Society* (Leicester, England: Intervarsity Press, 1984), 66.

^v William W. Klein, "Ephesians-Philemon," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 12, 87-88.

^{vi} Klein, 90.

^{vii} Pheme Perkins, "Ephesians," *New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 10, 55.

^{viii} Klyne Snodgrass, *NIV Application Commentary: Ephesians*, 166.

^{ix} Leslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret* (Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 1995), 16ff.

^x Craig Koester, "Commentary on Ephesians 3:1-12," (2008)
<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/epiphany-of-our-lord/commentary-on-ephesians-31-12-2>