

WHAT CAN JESUS DO?

SERIES: EPHESIANS: THE MYSTERY OF CHRIST



Catalog No. 20220206
Ephesians 3:1-13
Fifth Message
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February 6, 2022

Ephesians 3:1-13

Comet Kohoutek, called “The Comet of the Century,” created quite a stir. Mark Lane, an editor at the Daytona Beach News-Journal, looks back on his experience with it as a teenager:

In 1973, my friend Bud and I had discussed the logistics of sighting The Comet of the Century. Bud was a Certified Bad Influence in most parental eyes. Mainly it was the hair.

Bud decided the optimum viewing site would be at his girlfriend’s house on Saturday night. So, dusk found the three of us sitting on her front yard peering between trees and rooftops to where the comet should appear.

The session might have ended right there except the man across the street was out, too. He had a ladder next to the house and was fiddling with his television antenna.

Wire in hand, he glanced at us suspiciously, the way adults have always looked at gatherings of three or more teens.

“Hey, Mr. Thomas!” Bud’s girlfriend shouted and waved.

We ran over, told Mr. Thomas about the Comet of the Century, and well, the ladder being right there and all . . .

The neighbor let us up, but not out of the spirit of scientific inquiry. No, he had a certain knowledge that once he came down from the roof, his wife had another job waiting. This seemed the perfect excuse and, well, this is the Comet of the Century, the paper said so.

Within three minutes, the guy from the next house wandered over and asked what was up. We told him and he clambered up, too. This attracted the attention of someone across the street.

Soon a half dozen people were standing on Mr. Thomas’ roof peering intently into northeast sky. Somebody brought up a lawn chair. Somebody else brought refreshments. It had turned into a block party.

“What is going on up there?” Mrs. Thomas yelled from the kitchen window. “You still on that antenna?”

“Just got a little help. Shouldn’t be too long.” He pulled the flip-top off the can appreciatively. The evening now was spoken for.

No sight of the comet, though.

Kohoutek never was bigger than a tiny pinpoint, even if you could find it, and I never did. Still, it did cause a minor neighborhood event. People do not get together much and if comet hype can promote that, well, so much the better. Mr. Thomas was always nicer to us after that, and stopped calling the police when Bud parked in front of his house. How can you call the police on someone with whom you’ve shared your roof? Besides, TV reception was never better. The aluminum can that got lodged in the antenna must have done the trick.

As for me, I always look up when I see someone squinting at the sky. It could be a comet. It could be a party. I’m up for either.¹

If a comet can bring people together like that, what do you think Jesus can do?

We saw in Ephesians 2:11-22 that Christ unites Jews and Gentiles, which means he unites all races. Through the cross, he creates “one new man,” he reconciles us in “one body,” he makes us all “members of the household of God,” and he builds us together into a “dwelling place for God.” In Ephesians 3, Paul continues in the same vein.

A prisoner of Christ

Ephesians 3:1-3:

For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles— 2 assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God’s grace that was given to me for you, 3 how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly.

It looks as if Paul intends to give the Ephesians another prayer report (the first prayer report was in Ephesians 1:15-23) but delays doing so until Ephesians 3:14. Note that both Ephesians 3:1 and 3:14 begin with the words, “For this reason.” Apparently, Paul had

originally intended to give the report beginning in verse 2 but then realized he had a few more things to tell the Ephesians first.

Paul, who has been imprisoned by Rome at the behest of Jews who oppose his mission to the Gentiles, identifies himself not as a prisoner of Caesar but as a prisoner of a different king, Christ Jesus, who, as Paul has already noted, rules not only over Caesar but also over the entire world (Acts 21:17-36, Romans 15:14-32, Ephesians 1:20-23).

As a prisoner of Christ, Paul is free to follow Christ, who has called him to preach the gospel to the Gentiles, or non-Jews. Therefore, having been imprisoned because of the gospel, Paul sees himself as a prisoner “on behalf of you Gentiles,” the believers in Ephesus.

Likewise, we’re prisoners of Christ—which means we’re free to follow him no matter what restrictions have been placed on us.

The words translated “assuming that” imply that the Ephesians indeed know of the “stewardship of God’s grace” that God gave to Paul. God has entrusted Paul with the message of grace so that he could communicate it to others, especially the Gentiles.

Paul learned of God’s grace, which features “the mystery,” by “revelation.” Paul has already “written briefly,” but not completely, about the mystery in Ephesians 1:9-10 and 2:11-22.

What’s the mystery? It has something to do with Christ.

The mystery of Christ

Ephesians 3:4-5:

When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, 5 which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.

Paul wrote this letter so that it will be read aloud to the church. When the Ephesians hear the letter read, then they too will understand the mystery that God has made known to Paul.

The Holy Spirit has made known the mystery to Paul, and other apostles and prophets, and this is a new

revelation from God in that it was not made known to “the sons of men”—meaning, people—in generations gone by.

So, what’s the mystery of Christ?

Inclusion of Gentiles

Ephesians 3:6-7:

This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. 7 Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power.

The prefix translated “fellow” appears three times in verse 6, though it only appears once in the English Standard Version. The Gentiles are “fellow” heirs, “fellow” members, and “fellow” partakers.

The inclusion of Gentiles was called for in the Hebrew Scriptures and in fact envisioned on a grand scale. So, what’s new? God had not revealed to his former prophets that the Gentiles would be totally incorporated into the people of God, resulting in the complete union of Jews and Gentiles through the union of both with Jesus Christ, the Jewish Messiah. This is part of the greater mystery, now revealed, to “unite all things” in Christ, “things in heaven and things on earth” (Ephesians 1:10).

First, the Gentiles are fellow “heirs”: they too inherit the land promised to Abraham’s descendants, which expands to become the new creation (Ephesians 1:14, 18). As we have already seen, the Holy Spirit has been given to believers in Christ as a guarantee, or down payment, of our future inheritance (Ephesians 1:14).

Second, the Gentiles are fellow members of the “body” of Christ (Ephesians 1:23, 4:12-16).

Third, the Gentiles are fellow “partakers of the promise in Christ,” which at the very least includes the gift of the Holy Spirit, who gives us spiritual life (Deuteronomy 30:15-30, Galatians 3:14). The promise comes to us “through the gospel”—that is, by means of the gospel proclamation.²

In verse 2, Paul said “the stewardship of God’s grace was given” to him. Along the same lines, he now says he was “made a minister” of the gospel “according to the gift of God’s grace.” He serves God, and God has put

him in service of the gospel. The gospel is a message of grace, but for Paul, being a minister of the gospel is itself a “gift of God’s grace.”

The many become one

The gospel, of course, saves individuals, but it also incorporates those individuals into the worldwide, multiethnic, eternal people of God. As humans, of course, we are equal before God. As Paul says in Romans 2:11, “For God shows no partiality.” But that’s not all.

Part of the mystery, now revealed, is that all believers who are united with Christ are also united with each other. We are “fellow” heirs, “fellow” members of the same body, “fellow” partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus. Christ has made us “one.” He has created “one new man.” He has reconciled us to God in “one body.” We are all “members of the household of God” (Ephesians 2:11-18).

This is not simply tolerance. This is not simply coexistence. This is not simply equality. This is unity. The many become one. Christ unites us. Especially, Christ unites people of different ethnicities.

We can understand this mystery the same way the Ephesians did, by reading the letter Paul wrote to them, especially Ephesians 2:11-3:13: “When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ . . .”

Sadly, many today who claim to be followers of Christ seem ignorant of the apostle Paul’s teaching about multiethnic unity in Christ. It’s as if they haven’t read Romans, Galatians, or Ephesians. Well, maybe they haven’t. Moreover, I’ve read a few sermons on this passage that glossed over or Paul’s teaching on unity.

On the other hand, God must be especially pleased when he sees people of different ethnicities worshipping together and following Jesus together in the same church. While we could long for even more diversity at our church, we have a lot of diversity, and that’s something to celebrate. God has been good to us.

However, unity has its challenges.

Fuller picture

Jerry and Alice Yan, who were born overseas, became involved at PBC in 1985, a few months after they were married. Jerry is a longtime elder, and Alice has served us in multiple ways, most recently as children’s pastor.

When they arrived, the church included few Asians.

Jerry and Alice share what it’s been like:

We have no shared background. Relating and communicating requires deliberate effort. We did not grow up in the states, and we did not share common customs, enthusiasm with sports (we still do not quite understand the fuss made about baseball), or even jokes.

We express our family values differently. This touches our everyday lives, from how we relate to what is expected of each other as we go through different life stages.

Particular to Asian families in this part of the world is that many of us were recent immigrants or foreign nationals. Many of us have worries about our future in this country and our family abroad.

Nevertheless, we decided to stay and grow with this community because we were encouraged, challenged, and attracted by the teaching of God’s word here—teaching that directed us to seek, appreciate, and love God more. We were fed with solid food, not just milk.

We appreciated the authentic faith in this church. No one was more godly/holier than another. There were no experts here. We were all seekers/disciples of Jesus. This genuineness and simplicity were refreshing and attractive.

We were seen, valued, and loved. We were cared for and supported. Many invested their lives to train us, gave us opportunities to serve, encouraged us to use our spiritual gifts, and affirmed us that our contributions made a difference.

Someone once told us, “Seeing and knowing about God from a different culture allows us to have a bigger and fuller picture of who God is.” This has certainly been our experience. PBC has helped us increase not only our understanding of who God is but we have also been able to experience the width and depth of Jesus’ love through this community.

A bit off

Several years ago, when I was traveling to another state, I attended a large church. Immediately upon walking through the doors of the church, I felt that something was a bit off. At first, I didn’t know what it was. Then, looking around, I realized what was bothering me.

Everyone looked like me. It was a church full of white people. At that point, I had been involved at PBC for so

long, becoming acclimated to a diverse community of worshipers, that walking into such a church put me off for a moment.

Once I realized what was bothering me, I adjusted soon enough and enjoyed worshiping with brothers and sisters. The area I was visiting was populated by mostly white people, so the church simply represented the demographics of its location.

The mystery of Christ, which features the unification of Jews and Gentiles, has a fascinating outward effect, which is cosmic in scope.

Unsearchable riches

Ephesians 3:8-12:

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, 9 and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, 10 so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. 11 This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, 12 in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him.

Elsewhere, Paul calls himself “the least of the apostles” because he formerly persecuted the church (1 Corinthians 15:9). Here, he calls himself “the very least of all the saints,” perhaps for the same reason.

Nevertheless, God gave Paul “this grace”—that is, this ministry of grace—to bring the gospel to the Gentiles. At first, Paul himself put up a fight because he wanted to preach the gospel to the Jews. Finally, the Lord told him, “Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles” (Acts 22:21).

The gospel conveys “the unsearchable riches of Christ.” Thus far in Ephesians, Paul has extolled the riches of Christ in glorious terms (Ephesians 1:7, 18; 2:7).³ Still, as much as the Spirit has shown Paul the riches of Christ, they remain beyond complete understanding, at least for now. We can never completely know how awesome it is to know God and follow Jesus until we see Jesus face to face.

Nevertheless, we can grow in our appreciation of how awesome it is, not least through the words of Paul—which, as I’ve said before, makes for an exciting adventure. It’s encouraging that we have not yet grasped everything. That means there’s so much more to grasp. Scholar Tom Wright observes, “Being a Christian is meant to consist of going from room to room in the king’s palace relishing the beauty and splendor of it all.”⁴

God not only called Paul to preach the gospel to the Gentiles; he also called him to “bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God.” Earlier, Paul said the mystery of Christ, which was previously unknown, had been revealed through the apostles and prophets of Jesus. Now, he says that God himself had hidden the mystery until he was ready to reveal it.

The multifaceted wisdom of God

And what’s the mystery? Paul has already revealed it: the Gentiles are fellow heirs, fellow members of the same body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus. In these verses, however, he gives us a few more details.

The mystery has a certain “plan,” or arrangement, so that the “manifold,” or multifaceted, wisdom of God might now be made known. The arrangement involves the multifaceted wisdom of God in that it unites Jews and Gentiles in the church of Jesus Christ. Inasmuch as Gentiles include all those who aren’t Jews, the arrangement unites all ethnicities in the church.

And to whom, or to what, is the multifaceted wisdom of God made known? To “the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places,” which include angels and, especially in the book of Ephesians, demons. One of the reasons God unites different races in the church is to let demons know what Jesus can do for humans.

Demons want to foment division among humans. God wants to bring humans together. One day, of course he will. Listen to the apostle John in the book of Revelation:

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” (Revelation 7:9-10)

When the demons see people of different races coming together in Christ, they're getting the message that their time is up. Even now, God's "eternal purpose" to unite all races has been "realized in Christ Jesus our Lord"—even if it has not yet been completely realized.

Based on the blood of Jesus, each of us who believe in him can approach God with boldness and confidence. Here, though, Paul uses the first-person plural pronouns "we" and "our" to convey that this is true for both Jews and Gentiles in a collective sense (Ephesians 2:18). Together, as the people of God, we "have boldness and access with confidence."

How sweet the sound

When we come together as the people of God, especially when different ethnicities are represented, we're embodying the multifaceted wisdom of God. Moreover, we're tasting heaven. Furthermore, we're letting Satan and his demons know that their time is up. As we gather, we're on a cosmic stage so to speak. Did you know all that was happening when you come to worship with your brothers and sisters on a Sunday morning? Powerful stuff.

When I was part of a church in Pleasanton years ago, we took an annual missions trip to Ensenada, Mexico. On Sundays, we would always worship in a small, cinderblock church in the barrio. During a worship service one day, we sang, without instruments, the hymn "Amazing Grace." The Mexicans sang in Spanish. The Americans sang in English. We harmonized, not musically but ethnically.

On the one hand, I'm sure we didn't sound that great. On the other hand, "Amazing grace how sweet the sound." When we finished, we all knew we had experienced something powerful.

Paul, who introduced this section by calling himself a prisoner of Christ, finishes it by referring to his suffering.

Happy to suffer

Ephesians 3:13:

So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory.

It looks as if Paul began Ephesians with the intention to pray for his readers. Then, when he realized he had a few more things to say, he called himself "a prisoner of

Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles." Then, he showed the Ephesians the magnificent things that God had done for them.

If they are in any sense inclined to "lose heart" because of his sufferings, he wants them to be encouraged. His suffering, brought about because of his ministry to the Gentiles, is for their considerable benefit, and he's more than happy to suffer for such a cause.

Paul not only preaches the gospel, which features the death and resurrection of Christ, he also lives the gospel, suffering and enduring, by the Spirit, for the sake of love (2 Corinthians 4:7-12).

Inching away

What can Jesus do?

Ken Parker was a grand dragon in the Ku Klux Klan and a neo-Nazi. He marched in the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017, spitting out racial slurs, clashing with counter-protesters, and celebrating the violence. When a neo-Nazi plowed into the crowd, killing Heather Heyer, who was standing against white nationalists, Parker and his companions were giddy.

After Charlottesville, however, something shifted inside Parker. He was influenced both by his fiancée and by an encounter with a woman of Southeast Asian descent who was kind to him. He began to inch away from his racist beliefs.

Parker then met a neighbor, William McKinnon III, the pastor of All Saints Holiness Church, a predominantly African-American congregation. Like the woman of Southeast Asian descent, McKinnon was kind to him. The two began to meet up. McKinnon invited Parker to his church, and Parker took him up on his offer. In fact, Parker and his fiancée began attending the church.

McKinnon invited Parker to share his testimony with the church. Parker recalls:

I said I was a grand dragon of the KKK, and then the Klan wasn't hateful enough for me, so I decided to become a Nazi—and a lot of them, their jaws about hit the floor and their eyes got real big. But after the service, not a single one of them had anything negative to say. They're all coming up and hugging me and shaking my hand, you know, building me up instead of tearing me down.⁵

Almost a year after he marched in Charlottesville, Ken Parker, the former white supremacist, walked into the Atlantic Ocean, hand in hand with William McKinnon III, his black pastor, and was baptized.

Question: What can Jesus do?

Answer: More than we think. It continues here today. Let's join our voices with all the saints throughout history and praise God, who is building his dream home here in us.

Endnotes

1. Mark Lane, *San Jose Mercury News* (March 267, 1996).
2. The gospel, or good news, is the story and announcement concerning the victory of God over evil in Jesus Christ, which includes, but is not limited to, the forgiveness of sins.
3. John Stott takes stock of the riches: "They are riches freely available because of the cross. They include resurrection from the death of sin, victorious enthronement with Christ in the heavenlies, reconciliation with God, incorporation with Jewish believers in this new society, the end of hostility and the beginning of peace, access to the Father through Christ and by the Spirit, membership of his kingdom and household, being an integral part of his dwelling place among men, and all this only a foretaste of yet more riches to come, namely the riches of the glory of the inheritance which God will give to all his people on the last day." [John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians: The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove, ILL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1979), 120.]
4. Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2002), 37.
5. "Ex-KKK member denounces hate groups one year after rallying in Charlottesville" *NBC News*, 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/ex-kkk-member-denounces-hate-groups-one-year-after-rallying-n899326>.