

Ephesians 3:1–12

1 For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles— **2** if indeed you have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which was given to me for you, **3** how that by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I have briefly written already, **4** by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ), **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: **6** that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel, **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. **8** 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, **9** 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; **10** 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, **11** according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord, **12** in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through faith in Him.

EPIPHANY SEASON: THE PLOT THICKENS

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A good novel will keep the reader intrigued, waiting, hoping, anticipating what will develop next. For the Old Testament believer, this was most definitely the case. Think of the whole history of this world as God's novel. Some of the elements of a good novel include a theme, compelling characters, and a developing plot. Well, the story of salvation fulfills those requirements. We have the theme – a Savior comes to save sinners. We have the conflict of good and evil as God establishes His people in foreign lands, protects His promises against Satan, and dramatically the hero faces the villain at Calvary.

And here we stand in Epiphany season, a Child has been sent as promised to rid the world of sin and death. The word “epiphany” means “made visible.” It pictures a revealing of what was once hidden. And so in our text, the Apostle Paul brings to us an epiphany – notice what I like to call “epiphanic” words – **v.3-revelation, mystery; v.4-understand, knowledge, mystery; v.9 make see, mystery, hidden, made known.** God's novel develops ... with the coming of Christ in the flesh, the plot thickens.

1. A mystery for many years

For many many years this novel contained a mystery. In Scripture, anytime you see the word “mystery,” think “something hidden from man which God has to reveal in order for man to know it.” We are not saying that the plan of salvation was a mystery – the OT prophets spoke repeatedly of the nature of this Salvation. Let's be clear – the OT believer was saved in exactly the same way you are: **Acts 10:43 (NKJV) – 43 To Him**

all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins.”

And yet there remained a mystery – something hidden. (**v.3–5**) From the first promise in the Garden of Eden, all throughout the ages, this plot was thickening. If you were to just look at a chronological list of the prophecies in the OT you would find that as time wore on, the prophecies became more and more specific, to the point where in Zechariah we read of how the Messiah would come to His people riding on a donkey on Palm Sunday, how Judas would betray Jesus for 30 pieces of silver, and how the people would “look upon Him whom they pierced” at Jesus’ crucifixion.

2. A thicker plot is revealed

Yet still there is more. (**v.6**). A thicker plot is revealed. Actually, leading into our text the Apostle Paul has already set the stage for what he says here. **Ephesians 2:14–15 (NKJV) – 14 For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, 15 having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace,**

Through Christ’s death on the cross He has put an end to the countless years of hostility between Jew and Gentile. We use the word “Gentile” to refer to anyone who is not a Jew by birth. If you were not born to Hebrew blood, you are a Gentile – so all of us here today, as far as I can tell. Paul refers to this difference between Jew and Gentile a wall of separation – the Law, specifically the Old Covenant Law. Under the Old Covenant which God gave at Mount Sinai, there was a vast separation between Jew and Gentile. There was a difference in culture, in worship, in ceremonies, and especially in gods.

As Gentiles, in Old Testament times we would not be allowed into the main Temple worship. The Temple contained a special outer court known as “the Court of the Gentiles.” If you, as a Gentile, wished to be considered a member of Israel, you were expected to be circumcised, and observe all Old Testament ceremonial laws – including what you eat, how and when you worship, tithing your offerings to the Temple, and making animal sacrifices.

Now, Paul says, all that has changed with the coming of Christ. This is what he calls “the mystery of Christ.” Something hidden for generations from the sons of men. God is now thickening the plot. (**v.6**) Notice the three fold emphasis – in the original it reads, “fellow heirs, fellow members of this body, and fellow sharers in the promise.”

But what does this make of Gentiles before the coming of Christ? Were they all doomed from birth, since they were not of Jewish blood, and were not of the Old Covenant? Maybe we could understand it with an illustration. The difference in outreach to the Gentiles between the Old Testament and the New Testament is like the difference between centripetal and centrifugal forces. The Centripetal (“center seeking”)

force is always toward the center. In Old Testament times the Old Covenant was meant to separate Israel from the surrounding nations. It made them distinct. They had only One God. The alone had the true inspired Scriptures and an understanding of sin and salvation. As they made themselves known in Egypt, in the land of Canaan, and throughout the world, Gentiles were drawn toward Jerusalem, toward the Temple where God dwelt, and toward the one nation of the true God. The gospel promises drew the Gentiles in. This is why we find Isaiah prophesying of how Gentiles and kings would come to the brightness of Israel. This is why we find wise men from the East, Gentiles, journeying toward this center, drawn toward this glory in Israel.

On the other hand, the New Testament now is the opposite. The force is centrifugal (center fleeing). Jesus said in Acts, **and you will be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.** Rather than drawing Gentiles toward the gospel, the gospel now was sent out toward them. The gospel never changed, but the plot of salvation did thicken as the Christ was revealed. **Romans 10:4 (NKJV) – 4 For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.** As Jesus said, He did not come to destroy the Law but to fulfill it for everyone.

(v.8–9) Paul is a key character in this novel of salvation. He is called in verse 1 “the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles” – for you. And so we have this inspired epistle which, as v.4 says, “when we read, we are able to understand.” God chose to use Paul to record this next chapter in His Story of salvation – to preach this message to the Gentiles. For Gentiles in Paul’s day this was truly a profound revelation – an Epiphany. What they are discovering is that Christ has fulfilled all that we could not do. That Christ has kept the Old Covenant Law perfectly in our place. That the separation that the Law once established between Jew and Gentile no longer existed. You don’t have to be circumcised to become a member of God’s people. You now become a member of God’s people through baptism. It is no longer a necessary fruit of faith to journey to Jerusalem every year for the Passover. Now God dwells where ever His Word is preached. He comes to you through this hearing of His Word today. You don’t have to gather for worship on Saturdays. We find rest every time we hear the gospel. **(v.12).**

3. New characters are introduced

As we turn the next page, we find this epiphany season that the plot continues to thicken. New character are introduced every day into this story. This revelation of things hidden has reached you. As Paul says in verse 9, literally, to “**bring to light**” **what has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ.**

And so where do you fit in this story? What role does God have for you to play? Let’s look at your character to see where you come in. First of Paul early in chapter two describes your character without Christ: **Ephesians 2:1–3 (NKJV) – 1 And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, 2 in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, 3 among whom also we**

all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others.

That was your characterization. In fact that is still your character according to your sinful flesh. That sinful nature has not changed. It is still there. It fights against your new man, bringing lusts, bringing the temptations of the world, which is why as far as the Law is concerned, you are dead. You cannot in any way fulfill God's righteousness without Christ. So as our character looks into the mirror on the wall what do we see? Who is the fairest of them all? We were by nature children of wrath. If we compare ourselves to the Law with its commandments – we find anything but perfect love for our One God as we seek to satisfy our own needs and seek our own will; we find anything but perfect love for those around us as we gossip and focus on other people's flaws as an attempt to make ourselves feel better.

Nevertheless God brings you into the story. He gives you into a whole new characterization. It is no longer your lifestyle to fulfill the desires of your flesh. You hate those sinful ways. And why? Because your new characterization is covered with Christ. Because you have been made alive by the gospel. Because you have received the forgiveness of all your sins. And not by works of your own, not by circumcision, nor by journeying to Jerusalem, nor by loving your neighbor, nor by finding God; He found you, He conquered the works of the Law in your place.

(v.8) “The unsearchable riches of Christ” – meaning you can never find an end to them. The deeper you find yourself steeped in sin and doubt, the deeper Christ's riches go. Think of what Paul is saying. He, the least, not just the least of the apostles, not just the least of his companions, but the least of all the saints. He persecuted the Church of Christ, watching as his fellow Jews stoned Stephen to death. This same Christian killer, now receives the unsearchable riches of Christ and the unsearchable forgiveness that God has pronounced upon you also. What verse 10 calls “The many sided wisdom of God” shows on every side an answer to your problems. As many sides there are to your sins and problems, there are more sides to the rubrics cube of Christ.

Thus your role develops in this eternal purpose of God. Your next chapter involves you doing the same work that the apostle Paul does. We, who are least of all the saints, have been given this grace. We have been given this undeserved privilege to know the mysteries of God. We are stewards of these mysteries, that we would put God's resources to good use – proclaiming to the world the unsearchable riches, the revealed grace, the story of Christ.

As we take these mysteries out into the world, let us be story tellers. If you read a really good novel, don't you want to tell others about it? Well here is a story that surpasses all others, that the Gentiles saved by God's grace are fellow heirs of eternal life. This Epiphany Season, the plot thickens.