

INTRODUCTION

Today I want to talk to you about the world's greatest mystery. When I say the word, mystery do you think about an Alfred Hitchcock movie or an Agatha Christie novel where you are trying to figure out "who dunnit?" That's one meaning of the word *mystery*, but in this passage of scripture the apostle Paul is going to use the word *mystery* four times. In the biblical sense, this word, *mysterion*, from which we get our English word "mystery," basically means "a statement or a truth which doesn't seem to be true, but when you dig below the surface you discover it can be true." We're going to be looking at four aspects of this world's greatest mystery.

Ephesians 3:1, 13. "For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles... I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory."

This is an interesting passage of scripture, because actually verse 1 connects with verse 13 and everything in between is a digression of thought. When he says the word "Gentiles" in verse 1, it makes him start thinking about something else and he is like a preacher who chases every rabbit that runs out of the woodshed—he just takes off on that subject and doesn't get back on track until verse 13.

Ephesians 3:2-12. "Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, that is, the MYSTERY made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the MYSTERY of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. This MYSTERY is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and *sharers* together in the promise in Christ Jesus. I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this MYSTERY, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. His intent was now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, [God is revealing it to angels] according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. In him [Jesus] and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence."

1. MYSTERY: SUFFERING CAN BRING GLORY TO GOD

I want to look at the four aspects of this "mystery" and then lead you to scripture that will further illuminate the truth of each part of this mystery. Here's mystery number one: This suffering can bring glory to God. Paul says, "I am a prisoner in Christ Jesus." Paul would rather be out preaching the gospel and starting churches, but for the past five years he had been in a Roman prison. But he said, "I am not a prisoner of the Romans. I am not a prisoner of the Jews. I am a prisoner of Jesus Christ." Then in verse 13 he says, "I'm suffering, I know but I don't want you to get discouraged, because this suffering can work out for your good and your glory." That's the

first part of this mystery. Why is it a mystery? If I were to give you a choice between suffering a little bit or being free from suffering, you would say, "I choose to be free from suffering. I don't want to suffer." I don't know anybody who has this attitude: "Man, I can't wait to suffer some more. I am looking forward so much to suffering this next week, I can hardly wait!" No. The mystery is that even though we suffer, it can bring glory to God and it can work out for good to us.

Max Lucado wrote a great little book called *On the Anvil*. If you are my age or younger, you have probably never been in a blacksmith shop, unless you have been to Williamsburg or something, but some of you older folks may remember the old blacksmith and how in his shop he had three kinds of tools. Max Lucado says these are like three different groups of people. Some tools are bent and broken. They are discarded and gathering dust in the corner. There are a lot of people in this world today, they are not suffering, but they are not doing anything for God either. It's like God has put them on a shelf and they are like these broken tools back in the corner. But, there are other tools Max Lucado says are sharpened and honed, ready for use. That represents people who have already gone through the fire and the tribulation and adversity, and they are ready to be useful for God. The only thing is, when God uses those sharp tools, they get dull and he has to continually sharpen them. The third kind of tool or implement describes what I am trying to talk about, the value of suffering. Max Lucado says the blacksmith put metal in the fire and pump the bellows to make the fire much hotter. He removes the metal when it is white hot. He'll look at the metal to see if there are any imperfections, because you can't tell if there are flaws in it until it gets hot. Some of you (if you were honest) would say, "Pastor, I'm going through the fire. I'm suffering in my job, in my marriage, in my health, in my family. I am going through a real tough time. I'm in the fire." God may be just trying to look at you to see if there are any flaws or imperfections. He can't tell that when things are cool in your life only when the situation gets hot. Then the blacksmith takes the hot metal and puts it down on the anvil and begins to hammer it, shaping it to make a useful tool. That could be what God's trying to do in your life. You are suffering. You are going through a rough time, but God may have you on his anvil trying to shape you so you can be a useful tool for him. Does that mean your suffering comes from God? Not necessarily, but God can use it.

In 2 Corinthians 12:7-9, Paul talks about his "thorn in the flesh." He said, "I have a chronic, recurring problem and it is driving me crazy! I asked the Lord three times, 'Lord, take it away, take it away, take it away,' but God said 'No.'" So, Paul says, "This is a messenger of Satan to torment me." Paul says, "But God's grace is sufficient, so I am going to glory in my weakness that the power of Christ may rest on me." The author of your suffering may be the devil. Don't blame God, but God can make you stronger during this time of suffering. He can make you better; he can mold you into a tool. Suffering will either make you better or make you bitter. It's up to you. How many of you have endured a period of terrible, intense adversity and then after you got through it, you could look back and say, "As bad as I thought that was, when I was in the middle of it, I am a better person because I survived, I endured—I learned something. I can look back on that and say it was profitable." That's called "hindsight." Everybody has 20/20 hindsight but few have foresight to be able to look ahead; you have to be a prophet.

Paul uses that insight into the "mystery." Insight is the ability to understand what God is doing when you are in the middle of it; to look around and have that insight into what he is doing in

your life. Can you think of some experience you have gone through when God made you stronger? It could be that what you are going through right now is being used by God and he needs to give you insight into that truth. Suffering can bring glory to God. There are a lot of experiences I could tell you about suffering in my own life and how God used it, but one comes to my mind from the time I was in the ninth grade in high school. A few weeks ago, I told you how much I loved sports in the ninth grade. I grew very fast. I was about as tall as I am now when I was in the ninth grade. The coaches all thought I was going to keep growing and be 6'6" or something like that. So, when I was a freshman in high school, I was playing on a varsity football team. I made the varsity basketball team and everybody thought I was going to be a great athlete. The coaches were telling me, "Listen Dykes. You just hang in there and practice hard, lift weights, work out and for sure you will get a college scholarship."

One night (I was not really close to the Lord at that time) I was going to church, but I was really a hypocrite. I prayed a stupid prayer like this. I said, "Lord, if you will just let me go to college and play sports and then let me have a pro career in athletics then, after I have won the Heisman Trophy and after I am in the Hall of Fame when I retire, I will go around and talk to people about you Amen." Then, I can remember specifically rolling over in my bed, chuckling and thinking, "I'm going to trick God. I'm going to let him keep his end of the bargain, and then I am not going to keep my end of the bargain." Why do we think that when we say, "Amen," God stops listening? He doesn't.

It wasn't two weeks after that in my freshman year spring training for football and I was running the football and got tackled. My foot crumpled under me and I broke my ankle. If you're going to have an injury, at least it ought to happen during the game so the cheerleaders can fawn all over you. This was in practice. Nobody saw it. They took me to the doctor and he put a cast on my leg. For six weeks I wore that cast. The orthopedic surgeon said later he didn't set my foot at the right angle, so my Achilles tendon shortened a bit and got real soft. A couple of days after getting the cast off, I was jogging around trying to get my leg back into shape, because football season was coming during the summer. I didn't see a hole in the ground that was covered by tall grass. As I was jogging around I stepped, heel first, into that hole. It stretched my Achilles tendon and basically snapped it right there. It was a cloudy day and rain was threatening. For a split second I thought I had been struck by lightning. That's how badly it hurt and it knocked me out for a few moments. I got up and they dragged me back to the doctor who sent me to an orthopedic surgeon in Mobile. He examined me and said, "Your Achilles tendon is torn. I don't recommend surgery, because it would be like trying to sew together pieces of spaghetti of different lengths." He put me in a series of three casts; three months per cast. For my entire sophomore year, I was walking around on crutches when I wanted to be playing sports. I went to football practice, I went to the football games, I stood on the sidelines and kept the stats; I went to every basketball practice and I was there with my friends, but I was terribly depressed. It is probably the closest I have ever been to suicide in my entire life, because I wanted to be playing sports.

I was angry at God and I was angry at myself for praying that stupid prayer! I was about ready to give up. One night my mother came into my bedroom. Some of my friends were out doing things, and I did not want to go—I was just too depressed. She came in and said, "David, you can't give up on life." When you are that age, you don't listen to your mother. But, she did

something better than that. The next week she went out and bought a guitar. She had heard me say before that I wanted to learn how to play. I never had time to learn how to play the guitar, but guess what? I had plenty of time now. She also bought a little Mel Bay book, "How to Play the Guitar." I sat down and started picking away, learning how to play the guitar. Pretty soon I could play, "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star." I was so excited when I got that. I didn't play one down of football or one basketball play my whole sophomore year, but I *did* learn how to play the guitar. I love to play the guitar and I love to sing. If you were to ask me, "If you could go back and avoid that injury and you could have played sports but the tradeoff would be you wouldn't know how to play the guitar what would you choose?" I guarantee I would say, "Let me hurt my leg again," because I get so much pleasure and enjoyment out of playing the guitar today. That's just one example of how you can go through suffering and tribulation and something good can come out of it.

Some of you are suffering right now, going through the fire. I want to show you an example from the scripture of what you are supposed to do. The example is Jesus himself.

1 Peter 2:20-23. "But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and you endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you ENDURE it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he ENTRUSTED himself to him who judges justly."

Are you suffering right now? Look at those two words *endure* and *entrust*. Stick it out. Don't give up on God. Don't give up on yourself. Don't complain. Don't retaliate. Don't try to get even. Just endure and entrust. Say, "God, I don't understand what is happening. I don't understand why I am suffering, but Lord I just trust you. I trust the fact that it is a mystery, but I believe it's true you can get glory out of my suffering." That's the first part of the mystery: Suffering can bring glory to God.

2. MYSTERY: SALVATION IS A GIFT AVAILABLE TO ALL PEOPLE

Here's the second aspect of the mystery: Salvation is a gift available to all people. Three times Paul says, "Grace is a gift." Look at the passage from Romans 5:14. It says, "Nevertheless, death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, even over those who did not sin by breaking a command, as did Adam, who was a pattern of the one to come." On one hand, there is Adam, who sinned, and because he sinned we all are guilty, we all deserve death. "But the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many!" (vs. 15) This illustrates the fact that salvation is a gift. There are still multitudes of people in Tyler, Texas who think salvation is something you have to *earn*. You have to be good enough to deserve salvation. No, it's a gift.

Have you ever made the mistake of saying something like this about a gift? Maybe you opened a gift at Christmas and you didn't think it was quite good enough or maybe you retired from

business and they gave you a fake gold watch or something and you didn't think it was good enough. Have you ever made this statement or had this thought? "I deserve a better gift than this." That is an oxymoron, because a gift is not something you deserve at all. If it's something you earn, that's something you've earned something that you deserve. It is like a salary. It is like a payment. But, the very nature of a gift stipulates it is something given to you and you don't deserve it. It is not dependent upon what you have done it is dependent upon the character of the one who gives the gift. In this sense it is the character of a God who loves us unconditionally who says, "Here is a gift." The only thing you can do with this gift God offers you is to either accept it or reject it.

If I showed up on your doorstep tomorrow with a gift in my hand and rang the doorbell and you opened the door and I said, "Hey, I have a gift for you." There are only two things you can do. You can either say, "No, I don't deserve that, pastor. Don't give that to me. I don't want it." And you could reject it. Number two you could graciously say, "Hey, I don't know why you are doing this, but I accept it." It would give me great pleasure if you would accept the gift I offered. God offers you the gift of eternal life and he says, "Here." How many times do we say, "No, that's too easy. I don't deserve it. I'm a sinner. Don't give it to me." When, instead, God wants us to say, "Oh, Lord. I don't deserve it, but thank you." You receive it and it gives him pleasure when we accept his gift that we don't deserve.

That's just part of the mystery. It is given to all people. Look at verse 6 again. Paul says, "Do you want to know what this mystery is? It is this. That through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel." For Paul to say the Jews and the Gentiles are equal and together they make up the church was a revolutionary statement. Paul was born a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin, circumcised the eighth day, and a Pharisee among Pharisees—he was taught to *hate* Gentiles. He was taught to believe Gentiles didn't even have a soul, that Gentiles were like dogs. In fact, one of the words the Jews used to describe Gentiles was the word, "dog." For him to say, "I'm going to preach the good news to the Gentiles" was revolutionary.

This week as I was preparing for this message I said, "Lord, how can I get this truth over to these people how revolutionary it was for Paul to do that?" God gave me this idea: What if I told you this morning I was resigning from Green Acres Baptist Church and I was going to go and start a new church in Tyler, which was going to be a church made up entirely of cats? That's right! I'm going to go preach to cats. Why? Because God revealed a mystery to me. God revealed that cats have the same spiritual capacity as human beings and I'm going to go preach the gospel to cats. I'm even going to try to baptize some cats, although that's going to be hard, since they don't like water. I'm going to form a "cat church." I want you to visit our "cat church." We will have "cat-achism" every Sunday morning at 9:00 and the "meow-sic" will be "purr-fect." So you come out and visit my "cat church." You say, "Well, pastor I suspected you were crazy and that just confirms it." If I were to do something as foolish as to leave a congregation of human beings and go preach to cats, you would think I was crazy. That's similar to the reaction the Jews had when Paul said, "I am going to preach to the Gentiles." They thought Gentiles were like dumb animals. That's a mystery that the gospel is available to the Gentiles as well as the Jews. It is a gift available to *all* people.

3. MYSTERY: GOD'S PLAN IS BEING REVEALED THROUGH ANGELS

Here's mystery number three, and perhaps this is something you never thought about. God's plan is being revealed through angels. Look at verse 10. It says, "God's intent was that through the church the manifold wisdom of God should be revealed or made known to the RULERS and AUTHORITIES in heavenly realms." Every time those two words are used in the New Testament, it speaks of angels—both good angels and fallen angels. God is saying, "It's a mystery." Why is it a mystery? Because we think the angels already know everything. They're spiritual creatures. They're created by God. They're different than we are. Don't they understand everything that is going on? No they are still learning.

It's rather presumptuous for us to think that we are God's only act in this universe. Do you think the only thing God is up to is redeeming us and saving us? Instead, God is doing a lot of things at the same time and one of those things is teaching the angels something and he is using the church to do it. Imagine a cosmic drama in which the world is the stage. In fact, *all* the world is a stage: the cast of this drama is the church, the author and the director of the drama is God and the angels are the audience. They are watching. It says in 1 Corinthians 4:9 that "We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to men." That means the angels are watching us right now. I don't want you to get paranoid or anything, and I have preached on angels before. I believe there are many angels right here where we are today. You just can't see them. They're watching. They're interested in what's going on, because they're in the university themselves. They're being trained. They're being taught something by God.

The writer of 1 Peter says, "It was revealed to them [the prophets] that they were not serving themselves but you, [the church] when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things." (vs. 1:12) That phrase literally means the angels are stooping down to see what is going on. Have you ever found something you are interested in and you stoop down to look at it? That's what that word means. Angels are stooping down to see what is happening. Let me give you an example. God knows who is going to be saved and who is not going to be saved, but the angels don't. By the way, Satan, who is a fallen angel, doesn't know who is going to be saved and who is not. The demons don't know. *Only God knows*. I believe there are angels here this morning. Let's say you are here today and you are not a Christian, but the angels want you to be saved. Let's say when I give the invitation, the Holy Spirit convicts your heart and you say, "I have been running from God long enough. Today I am going to repent of my sins and I am going to accept Jesus as my Lord and Savior." Let's say this morning you get saved. That's why the Bible says, "There is joy in the presence of angels over one sinner who repents." The angels turn angelic somersaults when somebody gets saved, because they are watching. You might not have known that, but the Bible says God is teaching the angels something about us, and it's a mystery.

4. MYSTERY: THROUGH JESUS WE CAN APPROACH GOD WITH CONFIDENCE

Here's the fourth part of the mystery: Through Jesus we can approach God with confidence. What's the mystery in that? Most people on earth think God is some cosmic killjoy some mighty, tough deity you have to crawl before, that you have to approach with trembling, to present yourself with gifts and sacrifices. No. The Bible says, "Through Jesus you can approach God

with freedom and confidence." Compare the Old Testament and the New Testament. In Psalm 24:3 David asks, "Who may ascend the hill of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place?" In other words he asks, "Who can approach God?" Then he answers the question. He says there are four things you have to do to approach God. (1) He who has a clean hand; (2) a pure heart; (3) he who does not lift up his soul to an idol and (4) he who does not swear by what is false.

How many of you can say, "Pastor, my hands are clean. They have been clean all of my life, spiritually speaking. Pastor, my heart is pure. It has been pure all of my life. Pastor, I have never bowed down before any idol whether it has a statue or not. Pastor, I have never sworn falsely never told a lie"? Is there anybody in this room who can stand up and say, "I meet all of the qualifications to approach God"? None of us can. The one who wrote these words couldn't say that. David didn't have clean hands; there was blood on them. He committed murder. David didn't have a pure heart; he committed adultery. He had bowed down before idols. He had lied. David is really asking "Who can approach God?" *Nobody can*, because we are sinners. Then Jesus brings the answer. In John 10:9, Jesus says so simply and beautifully, "I am the door; if anyone enters by me, he will be saved." The only way you can approach God is through the doorway of Jesus Christ. There is no other gate; there is no other doorway; there is no other way you can approach God except through Jesus. But when you go through the door of Jesus and you turn from your sins and put your faith in him, you can approach him with confidence.

CONCLUSION

This summer my family and I traveled to New Mexico for a few days of vacation. My former secretary told me about the Chapel Chimayo, a beautiful old Roman Catholic Chapel where many miracles have taken place through the years of healing. We traveled up into the mountains of New Mexico to find this beautiful old Catholic Chapel. Every year hundreds of people make pilgrimages to this little building. My family and I entered this church and sat down and began to pray, not because it was a Catholic church, but just because you can pray anywhere at any time. I looked in the center aisle of this little old Catholic Chapel and there was this middle-aged woman dragging herself along on her knees. She would drag herself a few feet and then she would stop and cry. Then she would drag herself a few more feet and stop and cry. Her knees were bruised and bloody. I later learned she had done that for miles to get there to crawl up before the altar. I know that she was sincere and I am not taking that away from her, but I thought to myself, "I'm so thankful we don't have to drag ourselves before God with bloodied knees. I'm so thankful the Bible says that through Jesus Christ we can approach God with freedom and with confidence."

If you don't know Jesus you had better drag yourself before God in any way you can, but nothing you can do will ever be good enough. But if you are in Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ is in you, there is nothing else you need to do for Jesus Christ is the door through which you can reach God.

OUTLINE

MYSTERY:

1. SUFFERING CAN BRING GLORY TO GOD
2. SALVATION IS A GIFT AVAILABLE TO ALL PEOPLE
3. GOD'S PLAN IS BEING REVEALED THROUGH ANGELS
4. THROUGH JESUS WE CAN APPROACH GOD WITH CONFIDENCE



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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes