

REJOICE IN THE MYSTERY – GOD’S PLAN FOR OUR SALVATION
Sermon for the Epiphany, 2019
Ephesians 3:1-12

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon is the Second Reading from before, Ephesians 3:1-12: **For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles — ² (Surely you have heard that God has given me the administration of His grace toward you, ³ that He has made the mystery known to me by revelation, as I have already briefly written. ⁴ When you read this, you can know my understanding of the mystery of Christ, ⁵ which was not made known to people in other generations, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets. ⁶ This mystery is that, through the Good News, the Gentiles should have the same inheritance, belong to the same body, and share the same promise in Christ Jesus. ⁷ I was made a minister of this Good News by the gracious gift that God gave me by the working of His power. ⁸ Although I am less than the least of all His holy people, He gave me this grace: that I should tell the Good News of the unsearchable riches of Christ among the Gentiles, ⁹ and to make clear to everyone what the administration of this mystery is, which from ages past has been hidden in God, who created all things. ¹⁰ God did this so that through the church His many-sided wisdom might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavens. ¹¹ This was according to His eternal purpose, and He carried it out in Christ Jesus our Lord. ¹² In Him, by believing in Him, we are bold, and can confidently approach God.**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Our world is divided in so many ways. We are divided geographically by mountains, rivers, deserts, and oceans. We are divided linguistically by thousands of different languages and dialects. We are divided by race, culture, and religion, all of which at times have led to conflict. None of this was God’s original intention. His desire was that we live in harmony with each other and with Him. Sadly, sin changed all that. Our sin has caused a division between God and us, and further divisions between mankind. Our sin led to the great flood of Noah’s time and to the confusion of languages at Babel. Today, our sin leads to religion rising up against religion.

While attempts to end conflicts and remove divisions have occurred, yet nations continually oppose other nations. This should not really surprise us, for Jesus warned of this very thing,¹ yet, is there a solution to all of this division and the sin, which causes them?

There are none arising from us human beings, however, there is one arising from the heart of God, a mystery to man by nature, a mystery revealed by God in the person of Jesus Christ. This mystery gives us hope.

The Book of Revelation speaks of “*a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, saying, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’*” (7:9-10). There will be a time and a place where there is no more sin and consequently no more divisions. That place is heaven. In fact, it is interesting to note that when the “*new heaven and a new earth*” are described in Revelation, the phrase “*also there was no more sea*” is added, as if to stress that there will be no more divisions once we get to heaven (cf. Revelation 21:1). In the meantime, we join the apostle Paul in rejoicing in the mystery – God’s plan for our salvation, a plan which will end all sin and division, which causes us so much sorrow and sadness.

We see, first of all, that this is a mystery revealed in the Bible.

Paul writes, “**that (God) has made the mystery known to me by revelation..., ⁵ which was not made known to people in other generations, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets.**”

God’s plan for our salvation is a mystery, that is, something about which we as human beings would have no clue were it not revealed to us by God. Man is unaware that by nature he is *incapable* of dealing effectively with sin. He is oblivious to the fact that he needs a radical rescue from sin, which can only occur through divine intervention by a God-appointed

¹ Matthew 24:6

Saviour. After the fall into sin, God promised such a rescue, as He planned to send His only Son into this world to defeat Satan and all forces of evil, and thereby redeem our souls.²

God gave His plan to Adam and Eve *personally*, but it was all but lost by their descendants at the time of the flood. After the flood God gave His plan to Noah and his family, but it was all but lost once again by the time of the Tower of Babel. God then entrusted His plan to Abraham and his family on behalf of all human beings. He told Abraham, “*In you all the families of the earth will be blessed,*” (Genesis 12:3). That mystery was then further revealed as the Holy Spirit spoke through His chosen Old Testament prophets and its fulfilment is completely revealed in the work of Jesus Christ, as recorded by God’s holy apostles.

Today, we live in a world which suggests that all religious writings should be viewed as equal in value. This is true, our world tells us, whether we are talking about the Bible, or the Koran, or the sayings of Confucius, or the Book of Mormon, or any other. Such suggestions are nonsense! There is a distinct difference between the Bible and all other religious writings. The Bible alone, while written by men, was inspired by God the Holy Spirit and, therefore, is alone the source of absolute spiritual truth. The Bible alone reveals the true God and His plan of salvation. The Apostle Peter says with reference to the Bible, “*Holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit,*” (2 Peter 1:21). Paul assures us regarding the Bible, “*All Scripture is given by inspiration of God,*” (2 Timothy 3:16). Consequently, when we read our Bibles, we can be confident that we are reading exactly what our God has chosen to reveal to us, and that *it is* the truth. We rejoice in the mystery – God’s plan for our salvation! It is a mystery revealed in the Bible!

Second, it is a mystery intended for all people.

Notice what Paul says regarding the extent and effect of this mystery. He says, “**This mystery is that, through the Good News, the Gentiles should have the same inheritance, belong to the same body, and share the same promise in Christ Jesus.**”

Gentiles are those who are not the physical descendants of Abraham through his son, Isaac. God’s plan of salvation is a universal plan. The Apostle Paul once told Timothy, “*God our Saviour... desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth,*” (1 Timothy 2:3-4). Again, Paul told the Corinthian church, “*God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them,*” (2 Corinthians 5:19). And John wrote, “*For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him might not perish but have eternal life,*” (John 3:16). These Bible passages all address the extent of God’s mystery of salvation, and it does not matter where you live, what colour your skin is, what language you speak, how young or old, how rich or poor! All those dividing factors are thrown out when it comes to God’s love for us in Christ! We rejoice in the mystery – God’s plan for our salvation, for it is a mystery intended for all people!

Third, it is, a mystery based upon Jesus Christ.

It is unfortunately true that we so easily take for granted our knowledge of Jesus. This is what has happened within the external Christian church today, where so many bearing the name of Christ have given up the conviction that you must believe in Jesus Christ to be saved. The Bible tells us that there is “*salvation in no one else. For there is no other name under heaven that has been given among human beings by which we must be saved,*” (Acts 4:12). Yet, many who profess the name of Christ are among those who now claim man can indeed be saved *apart* from Christ! Paul would disagree. Listen to the emphasis Paul places upon Christ when he says: “**The Gentiles should have the same inheritance... and share the same promise in Christ Jesus... I... tell the Good News of the unsearchable riches of Christ among the Gentiles, and to make clear to everyone what the administration of this mystery is... this was according to His eternal purpose, and He carried it out in Christ Jesus our Lord.**”

The miracle of Christmas did not occur so that Jesus Christ could be one of many prophets, or one of many teachers. No, He is the Son of God incarnate, sent by God to save the world through His sinless life and innocent death. From eternity God had chosen to save us from ourselves - our sins and the consequences of our sins. The means He chose to do that could not be human, that is, born of a human father and mother, for we have all been rendered spiritually impotent through sin. Instead, Jesus came, conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, to conquer both sin and Satan. Yes, the Baby of Bethlehem became “*the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,*” (John 1:29). God’s mystery is not a “self-help” program. We are terminally ill and need a heavenly cure. That cure is the name Jesus, whose love moved Him to come for

² cf. Genesis 3:15.

us, to live for us, to die for us, to rise for us, and now to rule over us. He will sustain us until that great day when either He takes us to Himself, or until He appears in glory to judge both the living and the dead! We can rejoice in the mystery, God's plan for our salvation, because it is a mystery based upon Jesus Christ.

Finally, it is a mystery intended to give us confidence.

Paul concludes by saying, **“we are bold, and can confidently approach God.”**

The mystery - God's plan for our salvation, is something so very practical. It affects the attitude with which we meet and greet each new day. No one can deny that the consequences of sin afflict our lives. They take the form of illnesses afflicting bodies, or temptations afflicting souls. They include problems within marriages and families, as well as stresses and strains on the job or in school. We all face problems in this world due to sin. While it may appear that some individuals lead lives of comfort and ease, that is only an external smokescreen. Each human being has his or her own problems with which to deal. Knowing Jesus Christ, embracing God's plan of salvation by faith, rejoicing in the love and grace of God cannot, however, but *positively* affect our general attitude in life.

We know God loves us, for we are part of the world He has sent Jesus to save. We know what our future holds for us, because the Bible promises us the gift of eternal salvation by grace through faith in Jesus. We know that as we walk through each day of our lives seeking faithfully to follow our Saviour, He is with us, watching over us, and uses His power to bless us. Those facts give us confidence. Those facts instil a boldness that is not based in self, but rather in our Saviour.

While we can never fully comprehend or understand our salvation, why the Lord would want to save any one of us, yet this is exactly what He has done. Therefore, rejoice in this mystery, and continue to trust in the Lord. He is our Saviour King, come into the world to set us free from all our sins.

Praise God, for His Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ! Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR EPIPHANY

Heavenly Father, eternal God, Yours alone is the kingdom, the power, and the glory. We bring our worship and praise To You, the living Lord over all created things.

We praise You that You led the Wise Men from the east to offer gifts to Jesus, and in so doing showed that You want people of all nations to come to Your Light and to rejoice in Your mercy. By Your Spirit's power, lead all peoples of the earth today to acknowledge Christ Jesus as Lord. Bless the teaching and preaching of Your Word, that many may come to faith in Jesus Christ, that the ends of the earth may rejoice in His salvation. Give Your Son the nations of the earth as His possession, and defeat and destroy all enemies of His truth. Pour out Your power and grace on all who teach and preach Your Word, and grant that their work may be richly blessed. Grant faith in Your Word to all who hear it; grant them courage to confess it, and give them the strength to live by it. Enable Your servants to share the light of Your Gospel with people in darkness until all fall on their knees before Your Son, and proclaim that Christ is Lord, to Your glory, O Father.

Look with mercy on us, who have gathered here before You. Help us to give to Your Son the treasures of our time and abilities and to use our whole lives to serve Him.

Look with compassion on the sick. Comfort with Your presence the aged, the lonely, and the forsaken. Relieve the sorrowing. Heal the broken-hearted. Shepherd the young.

Forgive us our sins, O Father, and give us new life in Jesus Christ our Saviour. Grant that we may finally receive the crown of eternal life, see You face to face, live in Your new peace, and praise Your great name for ever and ever. We praise you that finally You will gather your chosen remnant in the New Jerusalem, that there we shall see the full light of Your glorious presence, and there bring You gifts that are appropriate to Your glory. Amen.

THE EPIPHANY OF OUR LORD

Isaiah 60:1-6

¹ Arise! Shine! For your Light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen like the dawn on you. ² For look! The darkness will cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples. However, the LORD will shine on you, and His glory will appear over you. ³ Gentiles will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. ⁴ Lift your eyes and look around! They have all assembled and come to you. Your sons will come from far away. Your daughters will be carried on your hip. ⁵ Then you will see it and become radiant. Your heart will tremble and swell with joy, because the abundance of the sea will turn toward you. The wealth of the nations will come to you. ⁶ Many camels will cover your land, young camels from Midian and Ephah. All those from Sheba will come. They will bring gold and frankincense. They will proclaim the praises of the LORD as good news.

Ephesians 3:1-12

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Matthew 2:1-12

¹ After Jesus had been born at Bethlehem in Judea during the time of King Herod, Wise Men arrived from the East at Jerusalem. ² They asked, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him.”

³ When King Herod heard this, he was alarmed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ He called together all the Chief Priests and scribes of the people and tried to find out from them where the Christ would be born. ⁵ They told him, “At Bethlehem in Judea. For this is what Scripture has said through the prophet: ⁶ ‘You, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means the least among the leading towns of Judah. For from you will come a Ruler, who will shepherd My people Israel.’”

⁷ Then Herod secretly called the Wise Men and found out from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ When he sent them to Bethlehem, he said, “Go and search carefully for the Child and, when you find Him, report to me, that I too may go and worship Him!”

⁹ After they had heard the king, they went on their way. There was the star that they had seen in the East! It kept leading them on until it stopped over the place where the Child was. ¹⁰ They were extremely happy when they saw the star. ¹¹ When they came into the house, they saw the Child with His mother Mary. They knelt and worshipped Him. Then they opened their treasures and presented gifts to Him, gold, frankincense and myrrh. ¹² When God warned them in a dream not to go back to Herod, they went back to their country by another road.