

Home Group Leaders Discussion Guide

Ephesians 3:1-13

Have you ever had a secret that was really tough to keep? Inside you just wanted to burst out and tell someone, anyone, everyone this piece of information you had. Ever have that experience? If so, then you are in good company. That is pretty much how the apostle Paul felt...and truth be told, he wasn't very good at keeping it secret (though to be fair, it wasn't really his intent to keep it a secret, but rather to make it known.)

If you want a phrase that encapsulates the theme of this section it would be "make known the mystery".

That obviously begs the question, "What mystery?" or "What is this mystery?" Our word "mystery" comes from the Greek word "mysterion" which denotes the idea of a secret. Culturally, the reason Paul likely used this word was because his audience would be familiar with the mystery cults of the day. In those cults the mystery/secret was what those who were initiated would learn as they delved deeper into the cult. Paul, it appears, sort of co-opts that word but turns it on its head. What I mean by that is that whenever Paul uses the term "mystery" in his writings it's almost always in the sense of making the mystery/secret known to whoever would listen. So, as you read this passage, notice the word "mystery", but also notice "make known...", it is very telling.

So, what is the content of this mystery/secret? Here we want to borrow from Paul's similar use and thinking from Colossians (which Paul wrote within the same prison stint as Ephesians). In Colossians Paul writes: *"I have become its [the church's] servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness—the mystery that has been kept secret for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory....My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."* (Colossians 1:25-27, 2:2-3 NIV)

The crux of this mystery/secret is Christ; more specifically Christ in us (or as Paul has been stating throughout Ephesians we as "in Christ"; but to be very clear—and this connects with everything Paul wrote in Ephesians chapter 2—this is all inclusive, for Jew and Gentile alike, thus for EVERYONE.

Notice the irony: Paul's intent and desire was to disclose, reveal, make known the mystery/secret...it's for everyone...he's not keeping it a secret, he's shouting it from the rooftops. So, really, from a literary standpoint, Paul (the ever clever thinker and writer) uses the term "mystery" as a synonym for "the Gospel" ...i.e. Good News!

But there is an important wrinkle we need to notice in verse 10. *“His [God’s] intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms...”* Did you catch it? This task of making the mystery known (though in this verse he calls it the “manifold wisdom of God”) wasn’t simply a personal quest of Paul’s. It was part of the original design, intent, goal of the Church. WE are to make it known!

The Gospel (or the secret/mystery) is so good, so sweet, so beautiful, so powerful, so incredible that even being cooped up in prison wasn’t going to get Paul down, nor did he want it to get anyone else down. This is why Paul told them not to be discouraged due to his sufferings (vs. 13). This has a similar flavor to another of Paul’s “prison epistles” (i.e. Ephesian, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon...which all have an amazing sense of joy despite the circumstances) as Paul writes in Philippians, *“But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish that I may gain Christ and be found in Him...”* (Philippians 3:7-9a NIV)

Another word Paul used twice in this passage is “administration” (vs 2 & 9 NIV) which can also be translated (and usually is elsewhere) as overseeing, management or stewardship (usually over the affairs of a household or estate). Management/stewardship of God’s good creation was the original task and calling of humankind. Paul understood what God was/is up to...restoring everything to His original intent. So, Paul also, then, understood his ministry as a gift to be managed well. He also understood that this was being done in and through Christ...and Christ’s body, the Church. This was staggeringly amazing to Paul, which is why he gushed about it as he did. Paul’s gift and task, and his management of it, is the same as ours (at least generally speaking). How do you feel about it? How are you/we doing at it? What are you/we doing with it?

- Q. Please take some time to notice and dwell on verse 12 (which is conveniently our memory verse for this chapter): “In Him and through faith in Him we may approach God with freedom and confidence”. How does that make you feel? How do you want to respond to that? How do you/we take advantage of you/our opportunity to approach God? Does “freedom and confidence” describe your relationship with God? Explain.**
- Q. What are you discouraged about today (or in this particular season/stage of life)?**
- Q. Paul was accustomed to pain and suffering, yet even in the midst of it he kept his focus on Christ and others. How are you encouraged by that? How are you challenged by that?**
- Q. Paul saw a bigger picture beyond his circumstances. What do you do to help keep your focus on the bigger picture? What tends to cause you to lose sight of the bigger picture? How can we as a Home Group encourage one another in this area?**

Q. Some specific and practical pointers were offered in the sermon to help us when we face challenging times:

-Be honest about our situation.

-Be open about our situation and share with trusted people.

-Avoid false hope and clichés.

-Always remember that God is with us.

Ideally, a Home Group is a community in which this is lived out, where we share life together (even and especially the tough parts), and where we find encouragement and support. How are we doing as a Home Group toward that end?

Q Paul's greatest desire was to make Christ known. How does that relate/compare to what drives your life?

Q. Paul—well, more importantly, God—wanted Jews and Gentiles to enjoy Kingdom Life together. While we have sets of “us & them” then Paul was working with, the onus is always on those who are already “in” to help those who are new or not yet in to feel comfortable and wanted. With that in mind, as you think about our Sunday gatherings and our Home Group gatherings, who might feel uncomfortable/awkward if they were to visit or want to join?