

“In Christ”: The Power of Our New Identity
(Studies in Ephesians)

Today: *In Christ, we understand the mystery of God’s will.*

Passages: Ephesians 1:7-10, 3:2-11
Mark 4:10-12

The Apostle Paul uses the word “mystery” 7 times in the book of Ephesians. By definition, a **mystery** is “*something that is difficult to understand or explain.*” What “mystery” is Paul referring to when he uses this word 7 times?

My introduction to the idea of ‘mystery’ came when I started reading the Hardy Boy detective books when I was 8 or 9 years old. Written by Franklin W. Dixon in the 1950’s, I think my favourite book of the series was “*The secret of the old mill*”.

Frank and Joe Hardy are the teenage sons of Fenton Hardy, a police detective. (Of course, they want to be like their dad!) Counterfeit \$20 bills have been found circulating in their hometown of Bayport. While out on their bicycles one day, the boys notice something suspicious is going on at the old mill. Could it be that the mill is the secret location of this counterfeit operation? The boys sneak into the mill to get evidence. In a secret room, they find the tools used to make the fake money, but before they can get away the villains return to the mill. Frank and Joe try to escape through a tunnel but are captured. For some reason, the villains explain to the boys that they are foreign agents, using the fake money to stop the United States from developing its missile program (Remember, it was the cold war era!) Frank and Joe take advantage of an opportunity and overtake the villains. And so, the book ends with the police (and dad) congratulating the boys for their fine detective work, even inviting them to help solve their next mystery!

As you can see, the Hardy Boys worked hard to make sense of the ‘mystery’. Indeed, the underlying assumption of these books was that *every mystery can be solved...* if you put your mind to it.

But is that always true? I mean, **are there mysteries which the human mind, by itself, can never solve?**

Let’s pray.

As far as *mysteriēs* are concerned, it's important to remember that, back in Paul's day, there were numerous cult groups known, generically, as 'mystery' religions—that's because they kept many secrets! (The English word 'mystery' comes from the Greek verb *myein* – “to close” or “to keep secret”?) To protect their secrets, no one could become a member of these cult groups except by 'invitation only'. Once you were accepted, you would then undergo a series of secret “initiations” rites and ceremonies which could never be divulged to anyone outside the group. (Interestingly, the initiate was called a *mystēs*, while the person introducing the initiate into the cult was called the *mystagōgos*.)

Initiation took place in several stages:

1. An initial purification rite (ceremonial washing)
2. A time of mystical union/communication with the god which involved learning a sacred story—and perhaps drinking blood.
3. The viewing of holy objects.
4. Participating in certain rituals--everything from castration to temple prostitution--tearing animals apart with hands.
5. A final crowning of the initiate with garlands and their welcome into an exclusive community.

Most initiates who underwent these rituals told of their experiences of intense happiness and enlightenment. They felt assured of an after-life of bliss reserved only for initiates. They also felt excited to be part of a very exclusive club offering special status and social connections. (The only modern equivalent I know of is *the Masonic Lodge*.)

It's very helpful to keep these things in mind as we read the book of Ephesians. You see, Ephesus was one of the most prosperous cities of the Mediterranean world, located in what we now call Western Turkey. Not only was Ephesus prosperous because of its sea-trade but also because it was a major centre of religious pilgrimage. The shrine of Artemis, also known as Diana (the virgin goddess) was located in Ephesus.

Acts 19 tells the story of how, when Paul began to successfully preach the Gospel in Ephesus, a growing church was formed. This, however, threatened the pilgrimage trade. Demetrius, a local silversmith, stirred up anti-Christian sentiment amongst his fellow craftsmen by arguing; ***“There is danger not only that our trade will lose its good name, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be discredited; and the goddess herself, who is***

worshiped throughout the province of Asia and the world, will be robbed of her divine majesty.”

Although Paul escaped, the church in Ephesus would regularly have to fight against the **external pressure** that came from these cults. But perhaps the greater problem for the church of Ephesus was the **internal temptation** for these new Christians to be pulled into syncretism—mixing Christianity with these mystery religions.

How does Paul combat this tendency? Paul presents Christianity as **the ‘mystery religion’ par excellence!** But, of course, he does this with *‘tongue in cheek’*. You can almost hear him saying:

- “So, you want to be blessed with spiritual blessings? Did you know that, in Christ, you have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms?”
- “And you want to become part of an elect group? Did you know that, in Christ, you have been chosen from before the foundation of the world?”
- “Do you also want a purifying ritual? Did you know that, in Christ, you have purification of your sins by His blood?”
- “Are you also looking for happiness and enlightenment? Did you know that, in Christ, you now have the joy of the Holy Spirit?”
- “Do you want victory over death and the assurance of eternal life? Did you know that, in Christ, death has already been overturned by His resurrection, and eternal life is His free gift?”
- “Oh, and do you also want some special insight into the *mysteries* of God’s will for the cosmos? Did you know that, in Christ (and in His Gospel), **three critical mysteries of God’s will have already been revealed?**

Mystery #1—What is God’s will for this broken universe? I mean, with sickness and death on the increase, and with earthquakes and natural disasters happening all around us, can we ever know God’s will for this broken universe we live in? Will it ever be fixed?

The answer? **Yes! In Christ, God’s will is to gradually re-unite all the broken bits of heaven and earth together again under one head.**

Let’s read Ephesians 1:8b-10.

“With all wisdom and understanding, ⁹ he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in

Christ,¹⁰ to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.”

As FF Bruce says, these verses imply “*the restored harmony of the universe, which shall no longer contain alien and discordant elements, but of which all the parts shall find their centre and bond of union in Christ.*” In other words, Jesus has unveiled the mystery of our planet’s future: Unlike Humpty-Dumpty, this broken universe will be put back together again!

Now, let’s ask ourselves what this revelation of God’s will in Christ might mean for us today? What is the application for us as our eyes are opened to the mystery of God’s will for this broken universe? I think there are two things for us to consider:

1. **Don’t worry!** When we see natural disasters and the effects of sin on the world around us, we must remember that God has a plan! Even climate change is not outside of His purposes and plans for this universe. Why is that? Because God’s will for the universe (clearly revealed to us in Christ) is to bring all broken things in the world back together again. His will is to restore unity to this fractured world. And not even the sins of humankind can derail God’s will for the universe...so, don’t worry. God will succeed in bringing all things together again under one Head, Jesus Christ.
2. **Get involved!** We (the church) must ask ourselves, “*What part are we being called to play in bringing about God’s revealed will for the universe?*” If, as we’ve seen, God’s will is for “*all things in heaven and earth*” to be unified under Christ’s headship, what does God want us to do to make this happen? In my personal opinion, I think this means that the church is called to fight against the degradation of our planet. We are called to fight for the preservation of beauty and nature and creativity and good health. We are called to be Christ’s agents of unification of heaven and earth. I think this also involves being truly *spiritual* people in a very material world. How? By keeping our eyes fixed on that which gives life to our spirits, as well as our souls and bodies. In other words, we are called to fight against the decaying, deadly effects of sin.

That, I believe is why God has... “***made known to us the mystery of his will ... to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.***” To know the mystery means we can, now, live in alignment with God’s revealed answers to that mystery.

Mystery #2— What is God’s will for our divided humanity? I mean, with all the wars and divisions between people groups, will God ever restore unity to this broken human race?

The answer? **Yes! In Christ, God’s will is to gradually re-unite our divided humanity** under one head.

Listen to the way Paul puts it in Ephesians 3:2-6.

² Surely you have heard about the administration of God’s grace that was given to me for you, ³ that is, the **mystery** made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. ⁴ In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into 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 God’s holy apostles and prophets. ⁶ 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.

It may be hard for us to understand the full significance of these verses, so let me explain. In Paul’s day, Jews and Gentiles absolutely hated each other. Not only were the Jews fed up with Roman occupation of their holy land, but the Gentiles were fed up with the way the Jews (wherever they were found—and many were living in Ephesus) always thought that they were better than everyone else. There was, in other words, an irreparable division between these groups.

This had huge ramifications in the church. Why? Because the church was made up of both groups of people. That’s why the question about unity was so important to church members. To them, this ongoing feud between Jews and Gentiles was a mystery that no one could solve!

But Paul has inside information. He knows God’s will on the matter. And God’s will is for the two people groups to become one ‘in Christ’.

⁶ 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.

Now, what practical application is there, here, for us today? Let me read to you from a book by Jarvis Williams entitled “One New Man”.

“That so many churches are segregated because of racism absolutely disgraces the gospel and Jesus’ death. Many pastors and parishioners attempt to appease their racist tendencies and to justify their segregated congregations by appealing to the various cultural differences between, for example, African-Americans, Caucasians, Hispanics, and Koreans, as an excuse for segregation. Thus, the preceding excuse, they think, justifies the presence of an entirely African-American congregation across the street from an entirely Anglo congregation or an entirely Korean congregation down the street from a Hispanic congregation. Paul would quickly reject this notion.”

“If pastors and parishioners truly grasped the mystery of the gospel, churches composed of a single ethnicity in close proximity to a church from a different ethnicity would merge and become one congregation...to ensure that the membership of their church looks like the people who live in the community where the church is located...”

I’m proud to say that our church has been working hard on this very idea! Here, in Peshurst, is a living testimony to the fact that **the solution** to the **mystery** of the age-long divisions between people has been found... in Christ.

Mystery #3— What is God’s will for the church? As godlessness and futility increase over the earth, **how will the church survive?** Is there even a future for the church?

The answer? Yes! In fact, in Christ, God’s will is not only that His church *survive*, but that it *grow and expand*, and gradually **fill the whole universe...** until godlessness is overcome by godliness and futility is replaced with purpose and meaning.

The essence of this third mystery is hinted at by Paul in Ephesians 1:22-23.

²² And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church,²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

Paul hints at it again in Ephesians 4:10. In speaking about God’s gift of spiritual gifts to the church through Christ, Paul writes;

¹⁰ He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.

Why does God give gifts to His church? In order that it may grow and expand and eventually fill the whole universe!

But, of course, another way that the church will grow and fill the earth is through evangelism. In other words, **this mystery** concerning Christ's church, His body, must be proclaimed in ever-widening circles. This, in fact, is **the mystery** of the Gospel—that the crucified Messiah cannot be ignored or crushed or destroyed. To the contrary, He is now raised to the highest heaven and His body is filling the earth.

It's no wonder why Paul asks the Ephesians to pray for him, in Eph. 6:19-20.

¹⁹ Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, ²⁰ for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.

What's the application for us today? I think it's obvious—we are called, with Paul, to share the mysteries of the gospel with the people around us... to draw them to Christ, in order that the church might keep growing to fill the whole earth. For **the mystery of the church** is that, in the end, a godly and life-giving church (one that is growing and incorporating more and more people into it) is God's answer to the world's problems.

You know, it might sound funny to say this, but **once a mystery is revealed, there is no longer any mystery!** (One day, when MH360 is found, there will no longer be any mystery. And whenever the Hardy Boys uncovered the truth, the mystery suddenly disappeared!) That's why Christianity is not a mystery religion. We are not initiated into secret rituals and handshakes, and then told to keep these secrets from others! Quite the opposite! Once we have come to know the **mystery** of God's will, it becomes our **duty** to make it known to everyone else, so that no one lives in the dark anymore.

Christianity is about **revelation**. In Christ and in His Gospel, all the mysteries of the universe...all the questions we've ever wanted solved... are finally being explained.

In Christ, we understand the mystery of God's will.

Let's pray.