



God's Open Secret

Ephesians 3:1-13

In our passage, we read about a “mystery” that has been revealed. As English-speakers, we usually associate “mystery” with an unsolved murder case or the question of how the Egyptians built the pyramids. The meaning of the word in Greek, however, doesn’t refer to something discoverable by diligent sleuthing. Instead, it refers to something that you’d never know unless someone told you.

Since God has made this mystery known, it might be more helpful to think of it as “God’s open secret.” We may summarize this passage as teaching us the following truths about God’s open secret:

1. What it is
2. How it is known
3. What it does

I. What God’s Open Secret Is - 3:6

Paul says that this open secret—unknown until the 1st century A. D.— is “that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.”

It is important to note first what past generations *already knew*. Ever since the days of Abraham (around 2000 B. C.), it was known that God intended to include non-Jewish people in his great plan of salvation (Genesis 12:3). This was a theme of many of the Jewish prophets. Zechariah, for example, foretold that “many nations shall join themselves to the Lord in that day, and shall be my people. And I will dwell in your midst, and you shall know that the Lord of hosts has sent me to you” (Zechariah 2:11).

So the secret was not *what* God would do: it was *how* he would do it. This did not come to light until Jesus of Nazareth lived, died, and rose from the dead. When this happened, it became evident to many that Jesus was the divine King who would gather people from every nation, incorporating both Jews and non-Jews into God’s family. This is what Paul is talking about in Colossians 1:26-27, when he declares that “Christ [is] in you [Gentiles], the hope of glory.”

II. How God’s Secret Is Known - 3:2-5, 7-8

Paul makes it clear that this secret could not be discovered by clever investigation. No one could know it unless God told him: “the mystery was made known to me *by revelation*,” and “it has now been *revealed* to his holy apostles and prophets” (3:5).

How was it revealed? By God’s Spirit. Only God’s Spirit can open a person’s heart to understand that Jesus is the King who brings peace to God and men by his death and resurrection. This is not to say that someone can’t have a mental grasp of certain facts—for example, “Jesus is Lord,” or “Jesus rose from the dead.” It means, rather, in order for those facts to fundamentally change a person’s life and outlook, God’s Spirit must make Jesus real to that person. (For example, think about God opening

Lydia's heart [Acts 16:14], or revealing to Peter who Jesus really is [Matthew 16:15-17]. This is also what Paul is talking about in 1 Corinthians 2:14-16.)

III. What God's Open Secret Does - 3:9-13

What effect does God's open secret have? It puts his multi-faceted wisdom on display, not only to us human beings, but also to "rulers and authorities in the heavenly places." In other words, God's plan to unite all things in Christ redounds to his glory and praise!

It is good for us to remember that our salvation is not ultimately all about us, although it is our joy and privilege to have a part. We, the church, became the prism through which God's jaw-dropping glory is refracted in countless directions throughout the entire universe.

Discussion

1. How can pride hinder a person from understanding God's message, and what steps can we take to cultivate child-like dependence on God in our spiritual lives?
2. How can we guard against divisions in the church when the message of the gospel is meant to unite all people?
3. How does the unity of believers across cultural and social lines serve as a witness to the world of God's wisdom and grace?
4. What role does suffering (like Paul's imprisonment) play in revealing God's plan and wisdom?
5. One important outcome of God's wisdom is that it evokes a sense of awe, wonder, and worship. What aspects of our lives make such awe, wonder, and worship a rare thing, and what can we do to make space for this?

For Children

1. How do you think it made the Ephesians feel when they learned that everyone, not just Jews, could be part of God's family?
2. How does knowing that God's plan is for everyone change the way we think about other people?
3. What is one thing you can do to make someone feel included, just like God includes us in His family?