

## **Ephesians 3:1-10, An Unexpected Party**

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*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart  
be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.*

If you know well your *Lord of the Rings* Universe, perhaps the title of my sermon will sound familiar to you. It is, of course, the title of the very first chapter of *The Hobbit*. There the ‘unexpected party’ that is referenced happens at the house of one Bilbo Baggins, who likes to keep to himself and therefore does not very much like unexpected parties. Nevertheless, the great wizard Gandalf who roams the world and has plans far higher and sorrows far deeper than any of the Hobbits, instructs a series of dwarves to arrive at Bilbo’s house to eat and drink and party, and then steel themselves for a great adventure: to go reclaim the Hall of the Dwarves and its vast stores of gold from the murderous dragon who now unjustly possesses them.

*Far over the misty mountains cold  
To dungeons deep and caverns old  
We must away ere break of day  
To seek the pale enchanted gold.*

This dwarf song it was that kindled in Bilbo the desire for a great adventure, or rather, the desire to participate in a great adventure that was already taking place, and which would go on with or without him:

“As they sang, the hobbit felt the love of beautiful things made by hands, and by cunning, and by magic moving through him, a fierce and jealous love, the desire of the hearts of dwarves. Then something Tookish woke up inside him, and he wished to go and see the great mountains, and hear the pine-tree and the waterfalls, and explore the caves, and wear a sword instead of a walking stick.”<sup>1</sup>

The elements of this story: the arrival of a powerful visitor to a quiet backwater, that powerful visitor inviting to that small house a rowdy bunch of unexpected – and perhaps even rather unwelcome – guests, and the inauguration of a great adventure out of that little meeting – all of these elements are precisely the same as the elements we see in our text for this morning, Ephesians 3:1-10. In our text, Paul unveils the mystery of a great unexpected party – that the Gentiles, that is, non-Jews, are somehow included in the covenant that God made with Israel through their father Abraham, and that those Gentiles and those Jews are engaged together on the great adventure of being renewed and of renewing the world in full view of some cosmic, heavenly witnesses. Today we will look at three piece of this text together: (1) the Mystery, (2) the Apostle, (3) the Adventure. And as well look at these three themes together, my hope this morning is that we will understand and find our place in the great *unexpected party* that God has been organizing since the foundation of the world.



So let us look first at the Mystery. In our text, the description of this mystery comes before the description of the Apostle, and as I hope to make clear, Paul’s entire life is lived *responsively* – that is, in response to the gospel of God that goes before him. Therefore it makes sense for us to describe first the Mystery, and only then the Apostle. Notice that not

<sup>1</sup> J.R.R. Tolkein, *The Hobbit* (New York: Del Ray Books, 2012), p.15.

even Paul can make sense of his life anymore without reference to this great scheme of God that is now unfolding in history. There in v.1, he interrupts his own train of logic which he will not be able to pick up again until v.14, *for this reason*. This man Paul was likely the most educated man alive at this time, and throughout his writings we can see genius at almost every turn. But then occasionally, there are these moments, as here, where he loses his train of thought by something so glorious that he cannot forebear from talking about it one moment longer. And so he cuts in on his own logic out of excitement.

Have you ever been at a small child's birthday party, and witnessed one child presenting a gift to his brother, or sister, or friend, and that one giving the gift is so excited that he interrupts the unwrapping and just blurts out: "it's a tractor!" Paul is like that. Where that child has a tiny mystery – what lays hidden under the gift wrap – which is nevertheless so beautiful that he cannot wait to exclaim it to the recipient, Paul does the same here: he blurts in on his own train of logic: "The Gentiles are in the Covenant too!" Or, in the language that Paul himself uses, vv.4-6, "...the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel."

And this mystery is most unexpected. Reading through your Bible beginning with the Old Testament, you will only occasionally see signs that *all nations* are going to be blessed through the story of this strange wanderer Abraham, and then his band of followers and family, and then the small slave people who come from him, and then the small warring tribes constantly pitched back and forth between empires. But while this mystery is entirely unexpected, is it not also tremendously fitting? For as Augustine says:

"It would not be enough to assign him one lone nation as his subjects; he paid so heavy a price from his pierced side because he meant to buy the whole world. He is a *great king over all the earth*."<sup>2</sup>

If the Messiah is to be king over all, then it makes sense that people from all over the world are to be his subjects. And once you see this theme beginning to be developed in the NT, you see it everywhere in the Old Testament. It is embedded in the promise to Abraham: "And in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed" (Gen. 22:18). And in Isaiah we read of this strange little hillside in the Middle East becoming the crossroads of the entire world (Isaiah 60:1-4):

Arise, shine, for your light has come,  
And the glory of the Lord has risen upon you!  
For behold, darkness shall cover the earth,  
And thick darkness the peoples;  
But the Lord will arise upon you,  
And his glory will be seen upon you.  
And nations shall come to your light  
And kings to the brightness of your rising  
Lift up your eyes all around, and see;  
They all gather together, they come to you.

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<sup>2</sup> Augustine, *Exposition of Psalm 47:2*.

Undoubtedly this passage has one horizon of interpretation that looks forward to the reign of God, but we can see pieces of fulfillment even now. In this room is a white man from Pennsylvania and Chinese people from the East, who all come together to worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – that is to say, of a very small, very obscure family who lived in tents and would never, in their wildest dreams, imagine that they shall have offspring from around the world. This is the mystery of God unveiled to Paul, that the Gentiles are to be heirs of God *as well as the Jews!* Do you see, then, what it might mean to say that God's plans are higher than ours? In our story of the Bible, Abraham is a central figure. But you should think of him as a nomad, on the outskirts between Great Power nations capable of dispatching armies and fleets against each other, and God picks that one man and says: your children are going to be the lynchpin of all history.

The Holy Spirit is constantly going before the church in history in unexpected ways. In Acts 10, for the very first time, the Holy Spirit falls upon the Gentiles as he did on the Apostles at Pentecost. Peter, in explaining why he now eats with Gentiles which was for so long unlawful, says this (Acts 11:15): “as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them *just as on us at the beginning!*” God is taking the initiative in this great adventure here, so that even the apostles are surprised by what happens here! Imagine with me the delight of God the Holy Spirit, as he sits upon the throne of glory in heaven, just waiting to indwell these Gentile believers *for the first time in history*. It is like cosmic, celestial, surprise birthday party. Only this surprise birthday party was a surprise for *all* of the guests. Only this surprise birthday party was planned before the foundation of the world. Only this surprise birthday party does not culminate in a cake, but in the heart being stirred and awakened to new beauty, new life, new creation. God the Holy Spirit is blissful now as he waits with patience to indwell all those around the world who will be his; “God is patient toward you,” says Peter, “not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).<sup>1</sup>

This mystery is the occasion for worship for all of us who are not Jews. We Gentiles have received a double grace – the first is that God chose to look upon humanity at all, when it was so clear we would not look upon him. The second is that we have been grafted into the story of a people not our own, to be saved in a covenant that was not between God and us Gentiles at all. “It is not fitting,” says Jesus, in a parable about the primacy of the Jews in salvation, “that the children’s food should be taken from the children and given to the dogs” (Matt. 15:26). And yet he did not just give us crumbs; he gave us the entire banqueting table. God is hospitable to all. This is the great mystery, and it is an occasion for great rejoicing. This is the mystery, now revealed.



Second, let us look at the Apostle. Paul here uses two nouns to describe himself: v.1, “prisoner,” and v.7, “minister,” which is a word that could just as easily – and I think more helpfully, be translated “servant.” Let us look first at ‘servant,’ and then at ‘prisoner.’

The fact that Paul is a servant of this gospel flows rather logically from the fact that this gospel goes before Paul, and he reacts to it. He cannot predict its workings. And so deep is this fact ingrained in his mind that it permeates his writings in the Bible. For Paul, the gospel has a life of its own, and because it is the gospel of Christ, we his servants are also its servants. Paul often speaks of the gospel as if it has its own power, energy, and agency: “I am not ashamed of the gospel,” he says in Romans 1, “for it is *power*.” And again in Colossians 1 he speaks of “the gospel, which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing.”

This fact that Christians follow the gospel as it goes before us throughout the world is the logic of evangelism and missionary work. The 20<sup>th</sup> century missiologist Leslie Newbigin: “The deepest motive for mission is simply the desire to be with Jesus where he is, on the frontier between the reign of God and the usurped dominion of the devil.” Paul, the greatest evangelist in the history of the church, knew this well, because the Lord arrested him before he himself willed it. And again in Acts 18, we read that Paul, after being refused in one city, heard from God in a dream: “do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people” (Acts 18:9-10). “Many in this city who are my people,” says the Lord, before even a single one of them was converted. The gospel goes before us, and we are its servants. This is the logic of Christian evangelism. This is all what it means to be a ‘servant’ of the deep schemes of God.

That was the first description that Paul gives of himself: that he is a *servant*. The second is that he is a *prisoner*. The fact that the gospel goes before us, and we are its servants, is also the logic of Christian martyrdom. Later in this book, he will describe himself as an “ambassador in chains” (Eph. 6:20). What is easy to miss is that this letter is written from prison, and Paul wants us to know why he is there. Not because he is a lawbreaker, but because it is good first to obey God, rather than man. Why, then does Paul spend a surprising amount of his life in prison? And why are there, even now, around the world, tens and hundreds of thousands of Christians in prisons and in graves for their faith? Because the gospel of Jesus Christ is true. And because those women and men are servants, prisoners, of that truth. At some point, some governmental official or member of some lawless band, told them not to believe and proclaim the truth. But those Christians did it anyway. Because we already have a king whose word alone we must hear and obey, and we are now in search no longer of any other king. Because the gospel is true, and they are its servants and its prisoners. To tell a Christian not to believe and proclaim the gospel is as fruitless a task as to force a man to believe the sun has not risen this day, or that the laws of algebra exist only in our imaginations, or that good is evil or that beauty is ugliness or that truth is falsehood. Against these claims, the Christian responds as we always have: “whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:19-20). Lovers of truth cannot suddenly cling to lies and falsehoods because someone threatens them with imprisonment. In Greek, the word for ‘martyr’ just means ‘witness.’ A martyr is one who testifies to the truth that she has seen. The truth that every Christian has seen is this: the gospel of Jesus Christ is true. It goes out into the world and bears fruit. It has power. It has

made us, and we did not make it. And the gates of hell shall not prevail against it, no matter how many prisons the gatekeepers of hell can fill with Christians.

It is strange for Paul to revel in this fact of being a prisoner for Christ, for he was one who once took Christ's people as prisoners. He alludes to that here in this text, v.8, *though I am the very least of all the saints*. Whenever Paul talks like that, it is clear that he has his former life in mind before Jesus, when he was a persecutor of the church. In 1 Corinthians 15:8 he makes that explicit: *I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, for I persecuted the church of God*. There are still those today who persecute the church of God. And from among those, there are many that God will call to a higher loyalty. Pray that God does so all over the world, and that he does it close to this church as well.

Paul found himself a prisoner of the Romans because he was first a prisoner of Jesus Christ. He found his life's story in the story of God's deep schemes. May I say a few words directly to the very young people in the congregation here today? When you read Paul, you read a man possessed, a man on a mission, a man who is driven all over the world by something other than himself; you see a man who is *for* something, who is the servant of something. In these years, you will begin to hook yourself to objects of love; a person, a place, a career, a method of art. Those things you may choose now, but very soon what will begin to happen is they will begin to draw you. The spouse you marry will draw you into his or her family, desires, problems – you will be drawn out of yourself. The artistic method you choose. You choose your loves and then your loves pull you, and the shape of love's pull is the shape of your life. God makes a call on your life as well. He has taken me to countries, to books and ideas, to adventures so glorious that thinking about them even now makes my adrenaline flow, and to heartbreak so devastating that I cannot go one day without thinking it. The gospel has begun to make its claims on me, and to pull me. And today I call you: follow Paul in this way of the gospel. When that Unexpected Party begins in the opening pages of *The Hobbit*, the dwarfs and hobbits can little imagine the adventures that are in front of them. But I do know this: if you follow this gospel on the move, your life will take the shape of a story worth telling. How do I know this? It is right there in the text, and that takes me to my third point today.



Third and finally, we turn our attention very briefly to the Adventure. There is an adventure in this text, in v.10, *so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places*. We have already been given many of the marks of the church, from David's previous sermon, on the text that Paul gave us in the previous chapter:

*...the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit" (Eph. 2:20-22).*

You Gentiles – you who once could not enter into the Temple at all, but were kept far off. You Gentiles now need no Temple to visit the dwelling place of God, because you yourselves

are a dwelling place for God. You Gentiles – who could not read the language of the prophets and apostles. You Gentiles are now in the story of those apostles and prophets. This is the manifold wisdom of God. This is the occasion for God's vindication over every ground of hostility and division in the world. We do not know who these "ruler and authorities in the heavenly places" are. Sometimes 'rulers' seems to refer to demonic powers, as in Romans 8, when they are placed among the list of things that cannot keep us out of the love of God. And 'authorities' sometimes seems to mean 'political powers', as it does in Romans 13 and Titus 3. So perhaps these are rival powers to the power of God. Or perhaps these are angelic rulers and powers who are watching the deep schemes of God unfold across the face of history. Either way it seems that the logic is the same: God is vindicating his wisdom against his enemies and to the rejoicing of our allies, and God is doing this *in the church*. In the life of this body. At this moment. Angels and demons conspire to look at this church and see in it either the great vindication of God, or his great mockery.

I would like to conclude with an exhortation that may sound scandalous, but which I believe is permitted to me from this text. If it is true that through the Church, God is displaying his manifold wisdom to demons and angels and political rulers; and if it is true that the vindication of God's wisdom is that Jews and Gentiles, men and women, slave and free in the church are living harmoniously with each other as "fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God" (Eph. 2:19), then the conclusion seems to me to be something like this: God has staked his reputation on the Church acting like the Church. God's good name can therefore be either slandered or vindicated by how you treat the people next to you. By your lack of forgiveness of the sins your brother confesses, you give demons the authority to rejoice over God. When the church acts like any other political interest group and sells its moral clarity for political influence, we give political authorities the power to gloat over God, saying as they do: "there is nothing special about these people. They can be bought and manipulated and played just like any other constituency." Or, in more Biblical language: "God's name is blasphemed among the Gentile because of you" (Rom.2:24), which is the condemnation that Paul issues toward the Jews in Romans 2. As you therefore meditate on this text in the week before you, consider how you may defend and commend the reputation of God to angels and demons and political rulers by acting like the church.

God has set before us an unexpected party, where Jew and Gentile, slave and free, man and woman, white and Chinese may all commune at God's table. Therefore, let us keep the feast.