

**God's New Community**  
**God's Secret Plan – Revealed!**  
**Ephesians chapter 3:1-13**  
**October 31<sup>st</sup> 2021**  
**Preacher – Pastor Roy Summers**

**Introduction**

We continue our journey through Paul's spiritual letter to the Ephesians this morning, chapter 3, verses 1-13 where we learn:

- God had a Secret Plan
- God revealed his Secret Plan to Paul
- God wants the heavenly power to see his wisdom through this Secret Plan
- God wants every believer to understand the importance of the Secret Plan Church

This sermon is about the church, about how important the church is to God, and how important the church must be to us.

**(1) God had a secret Plan**

Paul is just about to write a second prayer for the Ephesians (remember the spiritual requests he prayed in chapter 1?) "For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles....." (3:1)

But as he mentions his imprisonment, his mind goes off on a tangent. Some of the Christians reading this letter may be wondering why an apostle was in prison. Had he done something wrong? Paul feels obliged to explain the reason he is in prison and that diversion naturally leads to talk about God's secret Plan.

The reason Paul was in prison was not because he had done anything wrong. He was in prison because fanatical Jews who believed that they alone were God's special people were horrified to hear him explaining his call by God: "Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles. The crowds listened to Paul until he said this. Then they raised their voices and shouted, "Rid the earth of him! He's not fit to live!" (Acts 22:21-22)

These Jews did not think that non-Jews could also belong to God's people. So they had him put in prison. Paul was in prison because he went around preaching that there is hope for everyone in the world, not just the Jews! The Good News is for Japanese people and Jamaican people. It's for French people and Filipinos. For people from Nepal and Namibia. From Scotland and Syria. It's for you whoever you are and from wherever you come! This is why Paul was in prison "for the sake of the Gentiles" (verse 1). Therefore, he does not want his friends to be discouraged by the news of his

imprisonment, “I ask you therefore not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory” (verse 13). “It is for you that I am suffering, so you should feel honoured and encouraged”. (NLT)

But there was more Paul wants to explain about himself! Not only was Paul in prison for preaching a Global Good News—any apostle could have been imprisoned for doing that—Paul wants his friends to know that he had been chosen to play a very special role in revealing God’s once-secret plan! “Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, that is the mystery made known to me by revelation” (verse 3)

That word, “Mystery.” Our translation of the Bible calls it a mystery, but when we use that word “mystery” we might think of something hard to understand—“it’s mystery how four dogs can have disappeared from a compound surrounded by lava on the island of La Palma.” Did you hear that story? Their disappearance is a mystery. Or perhaps “mystery” conjures up something spooky, “a mystery tour of York!” But a mystery in the Bible, is simply something that was not revealed in the past, but has suddenly been revealed by God, one day. A plan that God kept secret and then one day God told everyone. So we’re going to use the words “God’s secret Plan” rather than the word “mystery” this morning.

Paul says that God had a Secret Plan, which no-one knew until God revealed it to Paul and his fellow apostles, but especially through Paul. God kept the secret from Adam and Eve, from Noah, from Abraham, from Moses, from all the great prophets of the OT, from Isiah and Jeremiah, from Daniel and Micah. God did not even reveal this secret through the words of his own Son, which you can read in Matthew, Mark, Luke & John!

God kept his plan a secret for hundreds and thousands of years! What was that Secret Plan?

“This mystery,” verse 6, “this secret plan”, “is that through the Good News the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.” In summary, this Secret Plan is that through the Gospel of Jesus Christ, Gentiles who were rank outsiders, without the Old Testament, and Jews, who were “insiders” are both welcomed into God’s kingdom as total equals! To make this equality point, Paul uses three words in the original Greek and all of them start with the prefix “with.”

*Sun (with) kleronomos— Jews and Gentiles are co-heirs of all God’s riches!*

*Sus (with) soma— Jews and Gentiles belong to one body, the church!*

*Sum (with) metochos— Jews and Gentiles are co-sharers of God’s promises!*

The “cat’s out of the bag” now, says Paul! It is God’s will to create one new people called the church, made up of Jews and Gentiles, equal to one another in every way! In the Old Testament, there are many hints that God would bless we Gentiles through the Jews. “I will make you into a great nation (Israel) and I will bless you ...and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” (Genesis 12)

Anyone who reads the OT knows that God has always wanted to bless the whole world through Israel! But no-one reading the OT would have a clue that God's Secret Plan was to unite Jew and Gentile through Jesus Christ into one new community, called the church, where they would be equally blessed. That truth is not in the OT, that truth was God's secret Plan which he held back until he revealed it the days of the apostles, and especially through Paul's ministry of planting churches made up of both Jews and Gentiles. Let me quote John Stott;

*“what neither the OT nor Jesus revealed of God's plan, which was that the theocracy (the Jewish nation under God's rule) would be terminated, and replaced by a new international community, the church; and that this church would be “the body of Christ” organically connected to him; and that Jews and Gentiles would be incorporated into Christ and his church on equal terms without any distinction. It was this complete and equal union of Jews, Gentiles and Christ which was radically new.”*

Don't worry, if you haven't got everything thus far! The most important thing to grasp is that God's Secret Plan was to create through Jesus Christ (not through Israel or the OT law) one single new community, the church, the body of Christ, made up of Jews and Gentiles!

And what that means in practise, is that Jew and Gentile are equal in Christ! If you meet a believing Jew do not let him look down on you as a second class believer! And don't look up to him as a first class Christian! “In Christ and through faith in him (verse 12) we [Jews and Gentiles] may approach God with freedom and confidence.”

## **(2) God revealed his Secret Plan to Paul**

“The mystery (God's secret Plan) was not made known (verse 5) to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets.” All of a sudden, God revealed that Secret plan to the apostles and prophets of the NT, but most of all through Paul, “Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace, that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery (the Secret Plan) made known to me by revelation.” (Verses 2-3)

As the Apostle to the Gentiles, the one who planted churches made up of Jew and Gentile, Paul, above all the apostles of the NT was the one entrusted by God to reveal this Secret Plan.

We should pause for a moment and note a couple things here about Paul:

Paul was confident of his call even though he knew he was an unworthy sinner! Paul was totally confident about God's call on his life, even though he knew he was an unworthy sinner: “Although I am less than least of all God's people, this grace was given to me: to preach to the Gentiles, the unsearchable riches of Christ and to make plain the administration of this mystery..” (8-9)

Paul did not allow his undeservedness to impact his confidence in God's call! He never doubted God's call because he was unworthy! How come? Because he understood grace! He understood

that God not only gives salvation to those who don't deserve it, he also gives out his spiritual gifts to people who don't deserve them! If God has given you a work to do, deacon, elder, pastor, youth worker, encourager, home group leader, whatever! He's given that gift to you, not because you are worthy of it, but as a gift of grace. And so you must serve, and continue to serve whether you feel worthy or not!

Is there someone here, held back from serving the Lord by a sense of unworthiness? If you wait until you are "worthy" you'll be waiting 'til heaven! God has given you that gift in spite of, not because of! Get on with it!

And that's the other thing we should note about Paul.

Paul knew that spiritual gifts must be used. He calls God's Plan revealed to him as "An Administration", verse 2 and verse 9. Paul is a steward of a gift. One day God is going to ask Paul, "What did you do with the gift I gave to you?" And Paul will be able to say that he faithfully uses it!

God has done the same with all of us! We all have spiritual gifts which the Lord wants us to use for his glory! And one day he is going to ask us what we did with those gifts! Are you using your spiritual gift, here in the church? Or perhaps you are reluctant because you know it might be costly—perhaps you won't go to prison like Paul!—but in terms of time and energy and money?!

### **(3) God wants the invisible powers to see his wisdom through his Secret Plan**

All week long I have been pondering why God waited so long to reveal his secret plan. I think the answer is in verse 10: "God's intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms."

God could have revealed his secret plan long before Paul was born, but it would be bones without flesh, words without actions, just a hollow Idea. Ah, but as Paul went around the Mediterranean planting one church after another, filled with people who once hated each other, birds of different feathers who would never flock together, the invisible powers could see the incredibly wisdom of God!

Are you and I aware that there are invisible powers who influence people and events in the world today? You cannot see these powers, there are good powers—the angelic hosts, and evil powers—such as Satan and his demonic hordes!

And as the church is built stone by stone, made up of different people and nationalities and personalities and people groups, who would never otherwise be seen together, let alone love one another, these invisible beings are being given a masterclass in the many-coloured wisdom of God.

When the angels see the church made up of such awesome diversity they rejoice and sing

And when the demonic powers see it grow at the cost of Satan's kingdom, they must grind their teeth in frustration and wrath, realise they're on the wrong side, and that their doom is writ.

The vast diversity of the church and especially the Gospel's power to mix "oil and water" is testimony to the wisdom and power of God!

The angelic powers are watching MPC. What do they see? By the grace of God, they see a diverse band of people, rich and poor, middle class and working class (don't you hate these distinctions?), old and young, black and white, male and female, gathered together in one body united to Jesus Christ!

#### **(4) God wants every believer to grasp the importance of the church**

What is God doing in the world today? What is his big project, his big plan? Upholding galaxies? Preventing creation from imploding? That's child's play! He can do that without even looking!

Is it saving the planet from global warming? Is that God's great project today? We are called to be stewards of God's world, but no, saving the planet is not God's big project!

No, the one great priority of God is to build a kingdom made up of people from around the world which will outlast history and be his people for all eternity. Listen to John Stott again,

*"If the church is central to God's purpose, it must surely also be central to our lives. How can we take lightly what God takes so seriously? How dare we push to the circumference what God has place at the centre. No, we shall seek to become responsible church members, active in our local churches..."*

The challenge to you and I is this: Where does the church—which in the New Testament is always expressed locally— so if Manor Park Church is your church the question is: Where does the community of saints in this room and its Gospel expansion come in your order of life priorities?