

“SURPRISE!”

Studies in Ephesians – Living Worthy of Who We Are – 5

Ephesians 3:1-13 (p. 1134)

Imagine discovering that you had been wrong about something that you had always believed to be true. How would you react? Suppose it was revealed that a person you had trusted implicitly had been betraying that trust for years. (That shouldn't be too difficult for us to imagine.) Maybe it was learning that your spouse had been having an affair, and all along you didn't have a clue until it finally came out. Or perhaps you had always thought you were healthy, then suddenly learned that some disease had been festering inside you for years. When such things are pointed out to you for the first time, it can come as quite a disconcerting surprise. So how do you react?

Often people will react to surprising news in one of two extremes: acceptance or denial. You might accept this new information and allow it to change you in some ways, or you may choose to stay the way you are by simply rejecting the revelation as wrong. Each of us, I suspect, knows which of those options is our more likely first response. There is an old Scottish prayer that contains the petition, “*Grantest Thou, Lord, that I mayest always be right, for Thou knowest that I am hard to turn.*”

That prayer could have been coined by Paul to describe the earlier part of his life. Our lesson today captures the essence of the surprising message that Jesus brought to the world and then dropped on Paul in a startling way. And in fact, Paul makes it very clear that he never fully recovered from the shock he experienced when he first got the message.

And what is the content of this surprising message? Paul talks here about a great mystery that God had kept hidden for ages. And the only reason Paul ever found out about this was because of what he calls “*the administration of God's grace*” in verse 2 and “*the administration of this mystery*” in verse 9. Those phrases could be translated, “the economy of God's grace” and “the economy of this mystery.” I say that because the Greek word Paul uses here is *oikonomia*, from which we get our word “economics.” The word refers to the way in which things are managed and distributed. In financial terms, if the economy is good, it means that there's a decent amount of money flowing through the system and is getting distributed to consumers and producers alike.

Paul uses that same word here in reference to God's grace. So the question is: when we talk about the “economy of God's grace,” what is God's management style? How would Paul describe divine economics? Well, it can be summed up in

one word: “prodigal.” It turns out that God squanders his grace. In fact, God sometimes seems indiscriminate in the ways he freely distributes his love and acceptance in Christ.

The mystery (that is, truth that God had previously withheld from us, but has now revealed to us) the revelation that shattered Paul’s neatly ordered world when he first heard about it was simply this: getting saved has nothing to do with how we behave or what we accomplish on our own. To be set right with God, all anyone needs is God’s grace in Christ Jesus. Salvation is not a reward for proper living. Salvation is not “for Jews only” or for anyone else who has a certain religious or ethnic pedigree to show for himself. Salvation is a gift – disarmingly pure and disconcertingly simple.

This gracious gift of God may come to the most likely candidates, but it is also extended to the least likely people. It turns out that the kingdom of God includes folks you would expect to see there: ministers (a few at any rate), upstanding church members, sweet little old ladies. But the kingdom also belongs to strugglers and stragglers, to prodigals and sinners, to Samaritans and Greeks just as much as pious Jews.

The kingdom of God’s grace even managed to include Paul, who had spent a significant portion of his life with his stomach turning at the very mention of Jesus’ name. In his career as a young Pharisee he had done everything he could to wipe that ugly name from the face of the earth. So when, in verse 8, Paul refers to himself as “less than the least of all God’s people,” that wasn’t gratuitous humility. Paul never could outrun the memories of how he had once acted. Even so, God extended that same grace to him.

The mystery that was revealed to Paul is that, in the face of God’s grace, sin doesn’t matter and it will not prove to be an obstacle in the long run. And the real kicker for Paul was that divine grace did not wait for a Gentile to turn into a Jew. There were no strings attached to grace, no pre-requisites or fine-print clauses. If God’s grace were extended to a person, it didn’t matter if the individual in question had been a prostitute or a princess, a deeply religious person or a flippant hedonist whose lifestyle contained no hint of spirituality. None of that mattered because Jesus did it all for us. So if the Lord decides to deliver the unsearchable riches of his love to someone, nobody in heaven or on earth has any business saying, “*Hold on! Shouldn’t he have to do something first?*”

No one could say any such thing, even though the kinds of people who were getting saved left and right in the early days of the church certainly tempted Paul and Peter and the others to make just such objections. And in fact, they did raise these objections. The first major controversy in church history (which resulted in the first-ever meeting of a church judicatory replete with its own study committee)

centered on the question of whether a person needed to become a Jew before he or she could then become a Christian.

Paul insisted they didn't need to become observant Jews first. Others disagreed, and so they finally had to call a special meeting in Jerusalem to figure out what in the world God was doing and what their response to that divine activity needed to be. In the end, Paul's side won the day because of Paul's incontrovertible testimony that Gentiles were being anointed with the Holy Spirit merely by God's grace. So if God wasn't waiting for people to become Jews first, why should anyone else?

Nevertheless, it was quite a surprise to Paul that this was the case. Yet it is something of a shame that this was true, and Paul himself would no doubt agree. Because, in retrospect, God's desire to save the whole world had been rather evident all along. As far back as the book of Genesis God made it clear that although the program would start with just one nation, the goal would be to bless and to save all the nations of the earth. In fact, the Bible is replete with passages that convey God's love for all people and for the entire creation.

Even so, Peter and Paul and many others had failed to see it. They either ignored or re-interpreted those Scripture passages that pointed to a salvation that reached beyond Israel. So when it finally got hammered through Paul's thick skull that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free, it came as a life-changing shock. But at least Paul had the courage to admit it. At least Paul allowed God's grace to change him instead of rejecting this revelation.

A seminary professor once listed what he believed to be the marks of a good theologian. The list contained what you'd probably guess: a good biblical scholar should know Greek and Hebrew, should be well-versed in various types of biblical literature, should have a solid grounding in systematic and historical theology. But there was one requirement you likely would not guess: a good biblical interpreter, this professor claimed, also needs a willingness to be surprised.

Are you willing to be surprised? Are you willing to let God's Word challenge the way you've always thought, and thus require you to re-orient certain things in your heart? For instance, if you were to discover that God was quite clearly at work in the life of someone whom you would likely consider to be beyond the orthodox pale, would you be willing to at least check out whether you had been wrong all along?

One way to address that question is to ask yourself yet another question. Can you remember the last time you read a part of the Bible or heard a sermon that didn't confirm everything you've thought all along, but actually startled you? Can you recall the last time you felt genuinely convicted by something you had perhaps never known, or had known about but had actively resisted for years? Does that ever happen to you? Or do you skip those parts of the Bible that may affect you

that way? When a sermon gives you some startling new thing to think about, do you prayerfully ponder it, or simply shake your head on the way out of church, thinking, “*Well, he sure got it wrong today!*”

Now, if it’s wrong never to be surprised by a new way of thinking, it is equally wrong to be so mushy-headed that you change your mind about important subjects every other day. We live in a society that loves to adopt new ideas by trashing traditional ones. That being the case, part of our strength lies precisely in the fact that we are anchored to the faith of our forebears, grounded on foundational truths that do not change. No one should leave today thinking that what this sermon means is that everything is up for grabs. If that’s what you think, then it really would be true that the preacher got it wrong today.

Still, even though you may be grounded in the foundational truths of our faith, you have to admit that God’s creation is vast and supple and bursting with variety. Likewise it is simply beyond our ability to fully comprehend the depth and scope of God’s saving grace. In our text today Paul underscores a part of the mystery of God’s plan when he says that it includes Gentiles freely and fully in ways that people like Paul had frankly never before suspected would be the case. But Paul does not claim that this is the totality of the mystery. That’s why in verse 8 he refers to the “*unsearchable riches of Christ.*” The word Paul uses there refers to something high and wide and deep in ways that we can only dimly begin to suspect. In this life we will never come anywhere near plumbing the depths of God, his grace, or his ways of salvation.

But for now, one of the results of being engulfed by this divine mystery is that our church should be a transparent witness to the fact that God saves people in quite startling ways – ways that go beyond the neat, tidy predictable patterns with which we have become comfortable. Somehow we need to be surprised that even we are in the church, even as we hope and pray that, as a church, we can occasionally offer others a glimpse of the startling fact that in God’s economy, his grace is extended to all kinds of people.

I pray we do reveal something of that surprising mystery because in verse 10 Paul says something that is, itself, another huge surprise. He says that God’s plan for the church is that we will become a showcase of God’s wisdom. But that’s not the startling part. The big surprise comes when Paul tells us who is watching us for evidence of this divine wisdom. It is “*the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms.*” God apparently expects you and me to catch the attention of angels and archangels and maybe even Satan and his hosts. No one knows exactly what Paul had in mind here; but the idea that the church is supposed to influence any spiritual beings is enough to stop you in your tracks.

As Christians we spend a lot of time fixing our attention on the revelation of God’s very character in the life of Jesus, as well we should. There is much about

the Bible, and especially about the story of Jesus and his love that properly absorbs us. But Paul reminds us here that we are not the only ones who are paying attention. We ourselves are being gazed down upon, and by none other than “*the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms.*” What do those beings see in us? God expects them to look at us and be just as surprised as we are at the mystery of God’s grace. They are supposed to see in us the mystery of God’s manifold wisdom. God wants them to see you and me celebrating a grace we cannot grasp, but that we nevertheless extend to everyone we meet.

If we are to be the church God intends us to be; if we are, as Paul will say at the beginning of chapter 4, to “*live a life worthy of the calling we have received,*” we had better be willing to be surprised as we follow God’s lead. Brothers and sisters, the adventure of God’s mystery and grace has just begun. “*Surely you have heard about the economy of God’s grace,*” Paul wrote. Yes, we have. And so our job now is to do what Paul went on to say in verse 18, and that is to keep on exploring the width and length and height and depth and to know of the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge. If we’re willing to do that, trust me – there will be plenty more surprises along the way.

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Grateful for the inspiration of Scott Hoezee.