

The State of the Church 2016

Nothing Like a Good Mystery – Eph 3:1-13

Introduction – This is a fabulous passage of victorious hope written by a man in prison – and the only reason he is in prison is because he has this hope. Hope has ruined his life. But hope is also making sense of all of life. This was the state of Paul's life and the life of the church in Paul's day and there are some stark similarities, encouragements and admonishments that we should take away as we consider the state of the church in the modern world today as well as the state of our local body.

The Mystery – The great problem in the world is not the problem of evil. The great problem in the world is how evil, sinful men could be reconciled to a holy God. This mystery is unfolded to us by Paul in Ephesians 1-2 (see 1:9-10). The salvation of a single soul, the forgiveness of sins – that is the most profound problem that has ever arisen, the mystery that had to be revealed – a mystery even the principalities and powers are amazed to see answered by God (3:10, 1 Pet 1:10-12). How could God be both just and the One Who justifies (Rom 3:26)? How can mercy and truth meet; how can righteousness and peace kiss (Psalm 85:10)? Through and only through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

But the mystery continues to be unfolded, for through the gospel, not only is man reconciled to God, it is the way in which man is reconciled to man (Eph 2:14-22). And it was this part of the mystery (the bringing in of the Gentiles) that landed Paul in prison (Acts 22:1-5, 21). This is why Paul is a prisoner of Christ Jesus for the Gentiles (Eph 3:1) and why he told them not to lose heart in his tribulations which were their glory (Eph 3:13). Here we see so clearly the way this gospel goes forth: suffering and glory go together, like death and resurrection.

The Unfolding of Mystery Upon Mystery – And so the mystery of the salvation of sinners was a mystery solved. But it solved more than the Jews were expecting. Grace came in like a wrecking ball and the whole Jew-Gentile distinction was demolished. And this is what Grace does. Fleshly “community” is prone to create exclusive social clubs of all shapes and sizes. But the thing that makes a true transformed community are individuals reconciled to God who find themselves by definition part of a body reconciled to one another (again, Eph 2:21-22). The requirement for being here is your acknowledgment that you don't belong and you can't earn your way in.

As the Culture Implodes – 2015 may be a year remembered in history, like 1973, when the United States took another legal step further into darkness, a step that may be the beginning of the end of this country. It is important to note however that Obergefell and Roe-v-Wade are two decisions that represent longer standing cultural decisions made by our culture generally, as well as the abdication of the church and her responsibilities. The church has generally determined she is (a) impotent, or (b) not called, to change this world; she had built her own cultural ghetto away from all the “ick” in the world around, waiting for Jesus to return. In some ways, we have built our own prison.

Just Like a Good Mystery – You never know until you get to the end “whodunit” in a good mystery. The Jews didn't expect God to come in the flesh until He did. They didn't expect the Gentiles to be brought in until they were. And the church looks around and doesn't expect that God meant it when He told Abraham *“in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed”* (Gen 12:3). He must have just meant a smattering, a portion from here and there. God couldn't have meant that Abraham and his seed were to be the heir of the world (Rom 4:13) or that the meek would inherit the earth (Matt 5:5), or that the kingdom of heaven would be placed into the world like a peck of leaven (Matt 13:33).

What Mystery Do We Not Yet See? – We are the body of Christ, the transformed community. We are right here in time and space, no accident, with a particular calling and destiny. That destiny is neither primarily to legislate morality nor to back away into a cultural cul-de-sac. That destiny is to proclaim the crown rights of King Jesus, His death, burial, resurrection, and ascension and to call on every living creature to believe on His name for salvation, to receive the gift of a new heart by the Spirit of God. We do that individually as God grants opportunity and skills and gifts – and we do that as a community that manifests the love of Christ in a transformational way. And we are to do that with the hope of the gospel promises, just like Paul, in prison. This is why we emphasize our reformational heritage, the importance of godly families and covenant succession, the necessity of a Christian education, rich psalmody and regular Lord's Day worship.

Hope in the Midst of the Mystery – Of course, the final mystery to be unveiled is the resurrection from the dead (1 Cor 15:51-52). But in the meantime, Paul teaches us in his word and in his life that there is much hope to have and to work from now. The transformed community of life which is the church is potent, as potent as the smallest seed in a garden or a peck of leaven in a lump of dough. We are living in a mystery, and faith in the Author of this story drives us to press on into 2016 with great hope, cultivating the transformed community that is the kingdom of God in the midst of the world. Well done mysteries always have the most surprising twists and turns – just ahead.