

OPENING OUR MINDS AND HEARTS TO GOD

Ephesians 3:1–21

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I've called this message, "Opening Our Minds and Hearts to God." I used to not really like the apostle Paul all that much when I was a younger Christian, because he is difficult to understand at points. I liked the parables of Jesus much better, because they were so easy to get a hold of, I thought. Reading Paul, though, is to recognize that the Lord has used a gifted servant, a man whose life was really open to God, as well as his heart.

Jesus was once asked, at the close of His ministry, what the greatest commandment is. And He responded, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind and all your strength. And you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37–39). Isn't it interesting He never told us to love God as we love ourselves? Some of our love for ourselves isn't all that good. And even if our love for ourselves was great, we must reach out to God in a way that's past reaching out to ourselves. Our love for God cannot be defined simply as the way we love ourselves. It must be greater. If we love God, it's not simply a matter of affection, although it is that. It's not simply a matter of giving Him our will, although it is that too. Loving God is also involved with giving Him our mind—loving God with our mind.

Paul's letters continually put before us this matter of loving God with their mind; unfortunately, there have been various times in which there have been some in the church who have thought it was dangerous to grow in your mind. That somehow it was best to keep rather simple, not learn too much, lest there be great danger in learning; that you forsake God if you delve into deeper things in knowledge. That has happened to people, but it need not happen. Knowledge is important to us as Christians. It's important because it keeps us from adhering to false ideas and

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false doctrines. It's important because it keeps us away from naïveté and gullibility. Show me a Christian who isn't growing and teaching and really seeking after God with his mind, and I'll show you the chances of a naïve and gullible Christian, who simply goes for anything that might come down that has some enthusiasm or spirit to it.

Developing our mind is necessary, so we will be kept from immaturity—that we enlarge our awareness of God and His world, that we enlarge our own potential. The Lord has used persons with gifted minds and great spiritual renewal in the church. He uses the extraordinary giftedness of Paul to write here. We immediately see, by the way, in Ephesians, how much Paul has a theme in his mind and gets carried away and is unable to talk about it without gushing from his innermost being. Like when he prays in Ephesians 1, he starts off praying in verse 3. Eleven verses later, two hundred and five words later, he finally brings the one sentence to a close. He has been so caught up in worshipping God, not only with his heart but with his mind, that scarcely could the English language or the Greek language contain the kind of thing he wanted to put into his prayer, to the glory of God.

The same thing happens in today's Scripture. He starts out in chapter 3 by reflecting on what he has just said in chapter 2—how God has redeemed us and how he's brought us into this new creation, this temple that is being joined, where the middle wall of partition is down. He means to lead out in prayer, in thanksgiving to God, because it's true that seeking after God produces prayer in our lives. So he says, "For this reason..." (notice he says the same thing again in verse 14)—"for this reason." Actually, verse 14 is evidently what he started to write, after he had mentioned what God had done for us in chapter 2. But the minute he says, "For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles..." When he mentions that word "Gentiles," he just is off again and for a moment lays aside the prayer to comment on the wonder

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of what God has done in the world by bringing into existence this new thing called the “church.” So he opens our mind, in verses 2 through verse 13, to understand the mystery of God. Then he comes back to his prayer in verse 14 and he opens our hearts and our minds to understand what proper praying is all about. We read in verses 2–13, “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, as I have already written briefly. In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets. This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus. I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God’s grace given me through the working of His power. Although I am less than the least of all God’s people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory” (Ephesians 3:2–13, NIV).

In these few verses, the word “mystery” is important, isn’t it? If you are counting the word “mystery”—which is the central theme of these verses—you would have noted that Paul uses it five times. To us, the word “mystery” means a different thing than what Paul was writing as a

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first-century person. For us, “mystery” means a detective story. It’s sitting down and reading Sherlock Holmes. Mystery is a detective story.

But in the first century, “mystery” meant something else. It was the name of a whole group of religions that emerged as a protest against earlier Greek religions. Earlier Greek religions had the God camp on Mount Olympus. But the mystery religions tried to bring the gods down from Mount Olympus, and clothe them with some sort of flesh, in human form, so that they became somewhat larger than life, but related to life. All kinds of mystery religions grew in that period of history. Immortality and union with God were what the mystery religions talked about. You had to be initiated into their religion by some act of baptism. The mystery of the group was only known to those inside the group. It wasn’t known to the outsiders. If you wanted to know what a particular cult believed, you had to be a member of that cult to really know what it was. You couldn’t know it from the outside. It was secret knowledge. Therefore, it was called a “mystery.” There are a lot of cults and sects like that today—when you ask them, what do you believe? They say, “We can only tell you so much now, but if you come into our group, we’ll tell you more. If you get more advanced in our group, we’ll even tell you more than that.” Christianity is so totally different from all of that. Right from the outset, you don’t need to be a believer to know what all the doctrines of the Bible are about. You must be a believer to experience them. But we don’t say to you, if you are not a Christian, “There are some parts of the Bible that are off limits for you. You can’t know that until you come in, then we’ll show you what’s written there.”

That’s not Christianity.

Paul takes this word “mystery,” which in his day had stood for that which is hidden, and says, “God also has a mystery. This is the mystery. It’s not meant to be hidden from the world. It’s

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now meant to be given to the world. In the past it was hidden. The prophets didn't know. The people who lived in Old Testament times didn't know. But now the mystery is revealed."

I. And what is the mystery?

A. The mystery is that God has brought into human society a whole new thing called the "body of Christ," which does not divide according to racial lines. Which does not divide according to national citizenship. Which does not divide into the old categories of Jews and pagans or Gentiles. But a new body, which comprises all, and to which all who confess Christ belong. That is the mystery made known, that God has been working in the cross to unify the human race in the church.

This knowledge is important today even. It's not only important in the first century, where Paul had to deal with the fact that there were some who thought that if you were not Jewish, you had to first become Jewish in your practices before you became a Christian. He had to deal with that and the Early Church surmounted that issue. But we deal with other issues. Why is the knowledge of the mystery of the church important for us today? For one thing, it keeps us from too small a view of the church. We looked at that a little bit last week.

I've known times when little groups of believers would gather together and try to explain why there were so few of us in the group by saying "We're God's despised few." And "Our small group is proof that the way is narrow and nobody out there is paying the price." And there's some degree of truth to that. But we must be delivered from the too-small view of the church, that it only consists of people like us. For it's far greater. Jesus himself said, "The harvest is plentiful" (Matthew 9:37).

The mystery of what God is doing in the world today is to bring into existence a group of people from everywhere, from every tribe and language and group and background, to serve Him and to

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be a force for Him in the world. The mystery of the church keeps us away from the idea that the church is an afterthought of God. It always puzzles me that there have been Christian theologians that emerged in a style of theology called “the dispensational theology,” which have basically said that Jesus, when He came the first time, offered His kingdom to His own people. When they rejected it, He had a backup plan and said, “If My own people won’t accept the gospel, therefore, I must turn to the Gentiles. I prefer not to go to them, but since I’ve got to go to them, I’ll go to them and they’ll be My church for a while. But I can’t wait until they’re out of the way, so I can go back to My first love.” In some people’s thinking, the church sort of becomes the afterthought of God. He never really counted on it, but Jesus sort of had to have it, and we can’t wait to get back to the Tribulation, where God can really love the physical children of Abraham.

Make no mistake about it. God loves the physical children of Abraham. But make no mistake about it—God loves the spiritual children of Abraham. And the church of Jesus Christ is not some historical accident. It has been in the program and plan of God from eternity past. The Lamb has been slain from the foundation of the world and God has purposed to bring His church, His body, into existence of both the Jew and the Gentile and every other kind of division that you might think of.

B. Another thing that the mystery of the church does for us is that, recognizing how broad the church really is, it should, in this day, keep the church out of Middle Eastern sectarian partisan politics. What do I mean? I mean the kind of view that sometimes is present in the body of Christ, that looks at the Middle Eastern situation and begins to cheer for one country as opposed to another.

I was appalled in the 1967 and 1973 wars that there were believers, evangelical believers, fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, who were actually cheering over one side winning as opposed to

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the other. Whether it's an Israeli soldier who dies or an Egyptian or an Iranian, Saudi, or a Syrian, someone whom Jesus Christ has loved is being killed. Our stance as Christians in this crazy Middle Eastern situation, of which we know so little, our situation must be that we are pro-humanity. We are for the Jews and we are for the Arabs and we are against injustice when it is found on either side. We confess that the true answer to the Middle Eastern problem is the answer to every human problem, and that is the blood of Jesus Christ, which washes away every sin.

The mystery of the church is such that God wants to plant a church in the Middle East, a body of believers in which the Israeli, the Egyptian, the Saudi, the Jordanian, the Assyrian, all belong to one thing that is greater than their own nation. When we as a church begin to seriously look at what God wants to do, that He wants to save Palestinians, that He wants to save Jews—then we begin to see more wholly what God brings into existence. When we as a church can't be kept out of a position which winds up being partisan, the church ends up being rejected by a particular group, not because it represents the gospel, but it can't be heard because its politics are so loud. Opening our minds to the mystery of God. God has a very high view of His church. And He loves it and He has a noble purpose for it. In its ranks would be every kind of background, every kind of person, all made one. A mystery. A mystery revealed. There's no other society on earth like it.

Paul then turns to prayer in verses 14–21. He really wanted to start praying, and he had digressed with the subject of the mystery. Now he comes back to his prayer. In this prayer, we find ourselves opening our hearts and minds to God. He says, “For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so

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that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen” (Ephesians 3:14–21, NIV).

II. Let’s look at some of the requests Paul makes in this prayer.

He basically has two requests.

A. He prays first of all that we might be strengthened in our inward being through the Holy Spirit. I’ve lately, I think, come to know a lot more of what that means than I used to understand. Maybe it’s that now I’m using language that helps me understand what Paul meant—we’ve been dealing in our Sunday night series with things like lack of self-esteem, or low esteem, low sense of self-worth. Those, of course, are the problems behind an inferiority complex, the problems behind depression are often related with our self-esteem and our sense of worth. So frequently, because we’ve been down in our self-esteem, we have a poor sense of worth and we buy into things like, “God can never use me.” “I’m a worm.” “I’m nobody.” “I don’t have any talent.” “I don’t have anything to offer God.” We buy into things like, “I could never be a successful husband or successful wife or a successful parent.” We buy into things like, “I could never live the Christian life. I don’t have the power. I don’t have the ability. I tried it once, twice.” Or, “I can’t stick with the discipline.” All these kinds of things come at us and take away our confidence as believers. Paul’s saying, “There’s a cure for that.” That is, to begin praying that we

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would be strengthened in our inward being. Strengthened so that we could begin to get God's picture of our worth and God's picture of our identity.

Someone has said that we're often like Israel on the verge of entering the Promised Land. We're overly impressed with the "four Gs"—grapes, great cities, giants, and grasshoppers. We need instead to be impressed with the other Gs—God's greatness, God's glory and God's grace. We need, from time to time, to hear the words of David who, when confronted with enormous personal obstacles, would say to himself and to God, "With my God, I leap over a wall." From time to time, we need to hear again the apostle's prayer for us, that he realizes the danger in the body of Christ and the danger in the individual Christian's life might simply be that we are weakened in our inward being. And we need to be strengthened and undergirded by God himself, who can assure us of our worth and our identity as persons. We grow by God's grace out of the riches of His grace.

We also grow in our inward being through exercise. Just as in physical growth, spiritual growth works the same way. We gain an awful lot through exercise. If you try to take on a vast physical project when you've had no physical conditioning, prepare for it! You could be in great trouble. If you try to take on some vast spiritual project and there's no spiritual conditioning, you could be in great trouble as well. The key is to exercise with what God has given you to do now, and let your inner man be strengthened through that exercise.

People come to me sometimes and say, "I really felt like in the service I had a word of prophecy and I didn't know if it was appropriate to give it." My response is, "If there's a strong impulse from the Spirit, go with it!" Exercise. If it is bad, you can improve. I have a view that the gifts can be perfected. They may not come out perfect at first. They're developmental. If it's totally off the wall and wrong, we'll correct it with gentleness and go on. There's nothing to fear. We're

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a safe community here. If God is impressing on you and saying, “Here’s an area in your life I want you to develop,” “Here’s the role I want you to be involved in,” “Here’s the ministry I want you to have,” “Here are the children I want you to teach,” don’t say to God, like Moses, “I don’t have the talent,” “I don’t have the speech,” “I don’t have the mouth for this,” “I don’t have the ability.” If the Lord lays something upon your heart, He wants to strengthen you in the inner man. That’s what He wants to do, giving you that impulse and challenge. When it’s given to you, go with it. You will be developed and strengthened in your inner man. You will exercise the impulse that God is giving you. And to the degree that you will exercise it as He gives it to you, to that extent you will be strengthened in your inward being.

B. Paul prays that, not only we will be strengthened in our inward man, but he secondly prays that we may have the power to grasp the love of Christ. Power to grasp His love. That we might be strengthened in the inward man has to do with our self-esteem. That we might have power to grasp His love has to do with our self-worth. We’re loved by God and therefore, worthwhile. Paul says, “That you may have power to know or to grasp how wide, long, high, and deep is the love of Christ. How wide, how broad it is, the extent of it” (Ephesians 3:18).

“How long it is”—that is the duration, how long Christ will love you. The duration of God’s love, forever and ever. Think about that. Ponder what Paul says. When you get to feeling unloved and low on your sense of self-worth, know how long God loves you.

“How high He loves you.” The height of that love is the exhilaration of that love. Scriptures tell us that heaven is excited when we say yes to Jesus. The angels rejoice over a name written in the Lamb’s Book of Life. Our love, with the Lord, knows joy and knows exhilaration.

And “the depth of that love” is how far it will grow. The extremity. The chiefest of sinners—it will go all the way down. “Growth in this love,” Paul says, “even surpasses knowledge and fills

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us up with all the fullness of God” (see Ephesians 3:19). I cannot possibly understand how one human being could take all the fullness of God. To me, it’d be like trying to put the whole ocean into a toothpaste tube. God is the ocean, and I am the tube. But somehow, in God’s own way, He’s able to fill our consciousness up with the knowledge of His love for us.

This kind of praying leads to an exalted doxology or word of praise. The Lord is able to meet these prayer requests far beyond our own expectations. Paul has learned that God may not always grant a temporal request. He would love to be released from the bonds that he is in—the prison chains. But God will always work His liberation in the inward being if we will let Him. Regardless of whether we’re in a cooped up, constrained place or a wide open space of liberty, the fact is, God wants to work in our lives by always giving us strength in our inward being, and a knowledge of God’s love, which surpasses all knowledge itself.

Do you feel the apostle’s prayer for you today? Have you opened your mind to the Christian mystery? Have you opened your heart and mind to the apostle’s prayer?

Closing Prayer

Father, we again open our lives to You. I pray, Lord, if there are persons here—as there surely are—who have come wondering about Your love and about their worth. That You will take these quiet moments and You will brand an imprint upon their heart, the good news that God is love (1 John 4:16) and God loved us so much He gave His only Son, that when we believe on Him, we do not perish but have everlasting life (John 3:16). And in loving us, You also love the people that are around us. And You’ve brought us into something which, in Your eyes, is beautiful—Your body, the church. You’ve caused us, Lord, in that beautiful association of Your church, to walk carefully. This is Your house, these people of the Lord. We’re to care for one another, even more than we care for physical things. We are a mystery disclosed to the world. Your nature,

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Your love, is being shown to others through us. Show, Lord, Your love through us, even more greatly. Strengthen us in our inward being. And deepen our walk, in Your love. We ask, in the name of Jesus. Amen.