



*16 If the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, so is the whole lump, and if the root is holy, so are the branches. 17 But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree, 18 do not be arrogant toward the branches. If you are, remember it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you. 19 Then you will say, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." 20 That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but fear. 21 For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. 22 Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off. 23 And even they, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. 24 For if you were cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, the natural branches, be grafted back into their own olive tree.*

*25 Lest you be wise in your own sight, I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. 26 And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written,  
"The Deliverer will come from Zion,  
he will banish ungodliness from Jacob";  
27 "and this will be my covenant with them  
when I take away their sins." (Isaiah 59:20-21)*

*28 As regards the gospel, they are enemies for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. 29 For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. 30 For just as you were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, 31 so they too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy. 32 For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all.*

Introduction--Perform a card trick.



Thanks to Ethan for teaching me this trick. he's got about 20 more of those. Why would I start a sermon with a card trick? Well for one, I bent all of the spoons in my house, so I had to try something different!<sup>1</sup> You know how I know that young people actually listen to my sermons? A few weeks ago I received this photo and this email from a parent in our church. "We were listening to it in the kitchen last night and this is what I found when clearing the table...the boys were playing 'pastor Rich.'" I forgot to

say "Don't try this at home."

After you see a card trick, everyone wants to know how you did it, so I'll quickly tell you. Ethan assured me this was his easiest card trick, and he was right. I put the 8 of clubs on the bottom of the deck but facing the opposite direction. She did put the right card on top of the deck, but when I asked where the "magic box" was, I quickly turned the deck over, which moved the 8 of clubs to the top of the deck. Obviously, I prearranged for the oversized 8 of clubs to be in the box. It's as simple as that.

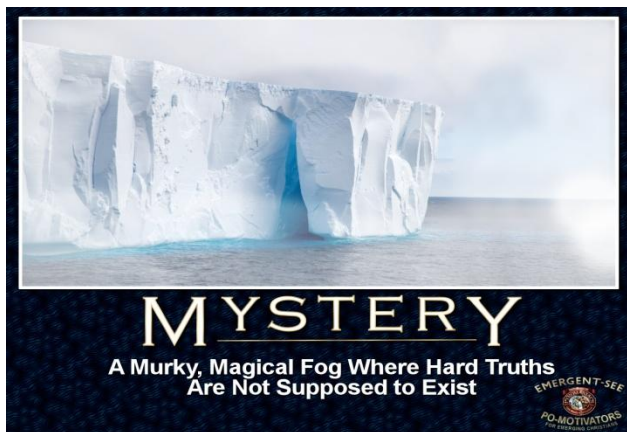
I share this trick and its explanation as a lead-in to the first point in our outline. Remember, we are answering the question why has God treated the two groups--Jews and Gentiles--so vastly different since the beginning of time? last week we covered these first three points of our outline.

1. To show that he is faithful in his promises and steadfast in love.
2. So that he would get the glory and not us.
3. So that the gospel would spread to the entire world through the Gentiles.

This morning we start with the word mystery.

#### **4. To reveal some mysteries and keep some hidden.**

Card tricks, like all of what is called "magic tricks" are a sort of a mystery. We know they aren't real. I didn't actually read her mind to know which card she was going to choose and then place an oversized 8 of clubs in the box. We know there's a solution but until the trick is revealed to us, the mystery remains.



Paul uses the word mystery in verse 25 and I think it's a really important word to understand, both for this text and for the rest of Scripture. *Lest you be wise in your own sight, I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.*

A lot of Christians struggle with this word mystery. This poster typifies our understanding. This is poking fun at the

<sup>1</sup> A few months back, I used the illustration of bending a spoon.

Emergent Church who reject absolute truth at every turn. So you probably do believe that hard truths exist but a mystery is still foggy to you. Also, mysteries are sometimes used as an excuse for biblical laziness. If something appears difficult, some will say, "Why should we spend our time digging into mysteries that we will never understand?" So does that mean we cannot understand verse, because of that mysterious word "mystery?" Let's be honest. When we see the word mystery, our minds tend to disengage because we assume it is unknowable. Mysteries are enigmas. Let me paint you a more Biblical idea of the word. See if you can detect the mystery in this passage.

*When you read this, you can perceive my insight into 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 (Ephesians 3:4-6).*

Did you uncover the mystery? There's really nothing mysterious at all about this. The "mystery" is spelled out as plain as day. *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.* The word mystery simply means hidden, something that is hidden. So in this case, the idea that Gentiles were fellow heirs with the Jews was not hidden from previous generations. There were hints of it, of course, but it was not fully revealed. But when Paul wrote Ephesians, the truth was now fully revealed. It was no longer hidden. It was a mystery but it is no longer.

Let's try another passage.

*As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches (Revelation 1:20).* We see the same formula again. The mystery is spelled out for us, therefore, it is no longer a mystery, right?

Not every time the word *mystery* is used in Scripture is it defined so clearly. But from these passages we begin to see the meaning of the word. A mystery is simply something that was hidden. Unless you had seen the card trick I did and knew how it was done, until I revealed the trick, it was a mystery to you. That is all the Bible is trying to say. The mystery in Ephesians 3 is *is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.* Even the apostles had a hard time with this one, didn't they? It took God lowering a sheet of unclean animals in a vision to Peter 3 times in a row and saying to him, "Peter, get up and eat." It took Cornelius the Gentile centurion asking Peter to come to his house and share the gospel with his whole family before he understood. This was his conclusion after a series of miracles and visions.

*If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?" When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life." (Acts 11:17-18)*

So up until this point, the fact that Gentiles were fellow heirs of the gospel was hidden from Peter and the other apostles. It was hidden. It was a mystery and then it was revealed. There is the same pattern of a truth being hidden and then revealed in verse 25.

*I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers:  
a partial hardening has come upon Israel,  
until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.*

Now which part of this was the mystery part, the hidden part? is it the fact that a partial hardening had come upon the Jews or the fact that the hardening was present until the fullness of Gentiles had come in? It's probably some of both but mostly the second half. As I showed you 2 Sundays ago, from the time of Moses onward, God sent a spirit of stupor upon the Jews. He hardened their hearts--do you remember how Isaiah put it? God hardened them...

*lest they see with their eyes,  
and hear with their ears,  
and understand with their hearts,  
and turn and be healed."*

It is interesting that Isaiah also put a timeframe on this hardening. Paul's timeframe is "until the fullness of Gentiles has come in" but Isaiah has something else in mind.

*11 Then I said, "How long, O Lord?"*

*And he said:*

*"Until cities lie waste  
without inhabitant,  
and houses without people,  
and the land is a desolate waste,  
12 and the LORD removes people far away,  
and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land.*

This is probably describing the Babylonian captivity. Jerusalem was laid waste and the people were removed far away. Furthermore, just as Paul did, Isaiah described a remnant of true believers.

*13 And though a tenth remain in it,  
it will be burned again,  
like a terebinth or an oak,  
whose stump remains  
when it is felled."  
The holy seed is its stump.*

"The holy seed is its stump." The "holy seed" or holy offspring is the remnant of believing Jews. As Paul wrote in verse seven-"the elect obtained it, the rest were hardened."

So back to verse 25: *I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.* Though you could argue that both parts of this were a mystery, based on the fact that God's hardening is all throughout the Old Testament and based on the fact that even the apostles did not understand that

the gospel was to be given so freely to the Gentiles, I think that the second phrase was the true mystery.

And just think about the wonder of this. Not only did God plan to pour out his grace on the Gentiles, he planned to do it in a flood of grace. He is waiting until the "fullness of the Gentiles has come in." do you realize what that looks like? That looks like tens of millions of converts in China in the past 40 years. China went from pure God-hating Communism to countless believers and churches spread all over the nation. Did you know that in 1900 South Korea was less than 1% Christian and 100 years later they are fifth on the list for countries who send the most missionaries?

#### **Most Missionaries Sent Per Million Church Members<sup>1</sup>**

<b>COUNTRY</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>
1. Palestine	3,401
2. Ireland	2,131
3. Malta	1994
4. Samoa	1802
5. South Korea	1014
6. Belgium	872
7. Singapore	815
8. Tonga	619
9. Unites States	614

What better picture can you have than to the fulfillment of this revealed mystery--"until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in." So it's a blessing for the Gentiles, but is this fair for the Jews? We are back to the idea from the previous two weeks that God does not seem to be equally "sharing" his mercy. All throughout this chapter you see descriptions of what the Jews have done and God's role in all of this.

What the Jews did:

- their trespass (11,12)
- their failure (12)
- their rejection (15)
- their unbelief (20)
- those who have fallen (22)

What God did:

- the rest were hardened (7)
- partial hardening (25)
- consigned to disobedience (32)

However you divide this up, it is clear that everyone who rejects God has done so freely and repeatedly. But it is also clear that God actively hardens unbelievers. So by nature and by work, God is infinitely fair to all. Moreover, the question about fairness is answered in our next point.

**5. To pour out his salvation on the Jews at a later time.** Look back at verse 11-*through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous*. So follow the logic here. God hardened the Jews so that salvation could come to the Gentiles. But in turn, God wanted to make the Jews jealous by seeing the relationship that we have with God. That's a strange concept, isn't it--that God would make someone jealous? Like we saw last week with God's glory, there are things that God is allowed to do that we are not.

- God is allowed to make people jealous but we are not.
- God is allowed to boast about himself but that would be sin if we did it.
- God is allowed to be angry, but with very few exceptions, this too is a sin for us.

But will it work? Will making the Jews jealous lead them to saving faith? We are guaranteed that it will work.

*And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written,  
"The Deliverer will come from Zion,  
he will banish ungodliness from Jacob";  
27 "and this will be my covenant with them  
when I take away their sins."*

Note that Paul is not saying that every Jew will be saved. What if I said "The whole town came out to watch the Twinkle Fest Parade." Would you think I meant that every last person in town showed up to watch the parade? No, you would understand that I meant that there was a great crowd, probably a lot more than typically show up. So saying "all Israel" is similar to saying the "whole town." And don't forget that the reason they did not believe before was due to God's hardening. It was a "partial hardening" that was not meant to harden every Jew and it was not meant to last forever. And what happens when God removes his hardening? People believe! This is summarized in verses 30-31.

*30 For just as you were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, 31 so they too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy. 32 For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all.*

Did God harden every Jew and every Gentile? No, so when Paul wrote "God has consigned all to disobedience" he meant that *most* Gentiles, not *every last* Gentile, were consigned to disobedience until after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Now the fullness of the Gentiles is coming in. And God has hardened "all" Jews, meaning *most* of them, until he removes the partial hardening. *And in this way all Israel will be saved*, meaning that there will be a tremendous outpouring of salvation upon the Jews like has never been seen before. All of them will not be saved but maybe we could say most or a majority? Whatever that number will be, the point is that is that huge numbers of Jews will be saved.

## **6. To prevent pride.**

The Gentiles knew that salvation had come to them and they could see that the Jews were largely rejecting salvation. So getting into their hearts and minds, Paul wrote:

*19 Then you will say, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in."*

Here is the toddler-like behavior of the Gentiles. It is like a little boy saying, "Did you see what dad did? He grabbed the toy from my sister and gave it to me. Dad likes me better." Paul handed them several strict warnings.

- *20 So do not become proud, but fear.*
- *22 Note then the kindness and the severity of God*
- *25 Lest you be wise in your own sight*

How dare we ever view God's mercy as something we deserve. The big idea here is that God distributes his mercy as he wills. Whose mercy is it? We have absolutely no claim on His mercy. It is after all, mercy. Sovereign mercy. What part of mercy do we not understand? There is never a place for even a hint of feeling we deserved God's mercy instead of someone else. Think about your greatest enemy. Maybe you know them personally and they have caused you great harm. maybe you have never met them but you know they have committed great acts of evil. Bring that person to mind. Now answer this question. Do you deserve God's mercy more than they do? If you even hesitate at answering "no" to that question, then you have failed to grasp the concept of God's mercy. Mercy is never deserved or else it ceases to be mercy. Or as Paul put it in verse six, "But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace." Mercy required humility because only then can you understand true mercy. And humility is necessary for our final point.

### **7. To promote worship.**

After contemplating the revealing of mysteries and wonder of God's mercy, Paul broke into a hymn of praise at the close of this chapter.

*33 Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!*

*34 "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?" (Isaiah 40:13)*

*35 "Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?" (Job 41:11)*

*36 For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.*

Verse 34 is a quote from Isaiah 40:13-*Who has measured the Spirit of the LORD, or what man shows him his counsel?* And verse 35 is a quote from Job 41:11-*Who has first given to me, that I should repay him?* The quote from Job comes at the end of that book when God is questioning Job. After listening to Job's complaints for almost 38 chapters, God responded like this.

Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind and said,

2 "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?"

3 "Now gird up your loins like a man, and I will ask you, and you instruct Me!"

This is the spirit of worship that Paul is trying to capture here. Both quotes come from the mouth of the Lord and both are establishing his majesty and sovereignty over all things. If we can gird up our loins and correctly answer the Lord's questions, then we are his equal and do not need to bow down to him. But if we rightly realize that his ways are higher than our ways, that he is the revealer of mysteries, the Lord of creation, the giver of mercy and hardener of hearts--then we must come to him in utter humility. Worship kills all pride. Hebrews says we can approach the

throne of grace with confidence but that confidence is not a boastful confidence but a humble confidence that God can do and will do what he says.

This brings us full circle back to mystery. God chose to reveal a mystery that had been hidden/ The mystery is partially revealed but some of it is still hidden from us. I have given you seven reasons why God chose to treat the Jews and the Gentiles differently. These are reasons lifted right out of this chapter that helps us understand some of God's inner workings, if you will. He thought we needed to know this so he revealed it to us. But understand this-God is not under any obligation to explain himself to us. He does give us sufficient reasons but never complete reasons. If we need to know something, he will tell us. The rest will remain a mystery. It will be hidden and not revealed. This is why he is God and we are not and all that remains for us is to stand back in awe of him. To really feel what Paul has written here. *Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.*

Rich Maurer  
October 19, 2014

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.gordonconwell.com/netcommunity/CSGCResources/ChristianityinitsGlobalContext.pdf>, p. 76.