



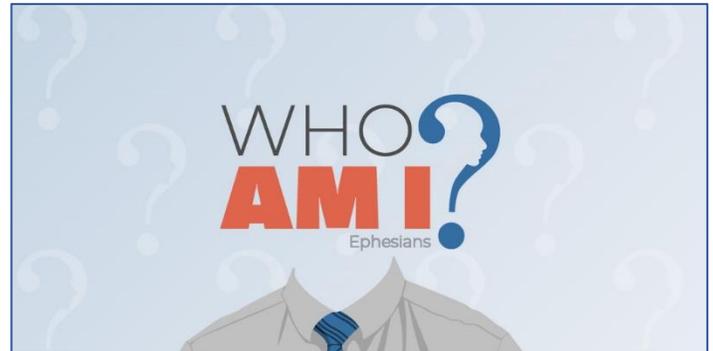
VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

A Mystery Revealed

WHO AM I?

Ephesians 3:1–13

Cisco Cotto | February 19, 2023



One of my favorite shows as a kid was *The A-Team*. Maybe some of you watched this too. There was a movie that came out about ten years ago about *The A-Team*.

For those of you who are not familiar with *The A-Team*, there were four guys in the military who were court martialed for a crime they did not commit, so they dedicated their lives to clearing their names. While working on that, they also defeated a bunch of bad guys together. It was a great show. Week after week, bad guys getting beat up.

There were several characters who were part of the A-Team. The big strong guy was B.A. Baracas, aka Mr. T. He was the real tough one. He was the muscles of the group. Hannibal Smith was the leader and the one who put all the plans together. He's the one who laid out the scheme and told the guys exactly how this was going to be done, then they executed his plans. For those of you who know the show or the movie, what did Hannibal Smith say when everything got worked out and the bad guys got defeated? "I love it when a plan comes together!" There was this look of satisfaction on his face every time the plan came together.

This was a plan for TV and a movie, yet it wasn't real life. If we go back several hundred years to the first century, we see in our Bibles that the apostle Paul was essentially saying, "I love it when a plan comes together." It wasn't a plan devised by humans. It wasn't a plan with flaws. It wasn't a plan designed for TV or movies. Instead, it was a heavenly plan, a divine plan, a perfectly orchestrated plan. As he is writing to these Ephesian Christians, the apostle Paul is celebrating the plan of God. He calls it a "mystery." We see this over and over again in Ephesians 3, this mystery, mystery, mystery—a mystery that was revealed.

He's not talking about a mystery like we sometimes think of it, like in a work of fiction or a novel, solving the "Whodunit." Who committed the crime? At the end, the mystery is revealed; it's over, so you now know who did it. That's not what Paul means. He also doesn't mean a mystery like a modern medical mystery. Why can't we come up with a cure for Alzheimer's or cancer? These things are mysteries, head-scratchers. He's not talking about that either.

When Paul uses the word "mystery," he is referring to the fact that before time began, almighty God created a plan and He is working it out perfectly through history. His plan involved sending Jesus Christ, His Son, to live, die and be raised from the dead, all so that people could be saved. It's an amazing plan, a glorious plan.

God has revealed His eternal plan to Paul and us.

Paul is saying in this portion of Ephesians 3, "This mystery, this eternal plan of God, has now been revealed," first to the apostle Paul, but also to us. This plan God has worked out from the beginning is coming to completion and it's glorious. It's perfect because it is God's plan. Paul is basically saying, "I love it when God's plan comes together." There's so much packed in here that we'll cover this morning.

One of the glorious things Paul is getting at is the fact that if it is God's plan that is being worked out—if God from the beginning has known exactly what's going to happen because He planned it, He's perfect and wise, and He's making the plan happen—then Paul wants to make sure we don't ever believe that somehow God is a haphazard God. It's not as though God is reacting to what

is going on in the world around us. It's not like He's trying to keep several plates spinning at the same time, then when one of them wobbles, He runs over to straighten it; if one of them falls, He grabs it just in time. He's not a God Who's not in charge. He's not a God Who is simply looking around and going, "Oh, that didn't go the way it should. I'm going to fix that and while I'm at it, will fix this, too."

No, the glorious part of God's plan is it's His plan and He is working it out perfectly. Paul owns the fact that for many generations, God's people did not understand this plan fully. They knew there was going to be some kind of a Savior, a Messiah. They knew God was going to send someone but they didn't quite understand what it was going to be like. They didn't understand exactly what He was going to do.

So now that it's been revealed to Paul, and Paul is revealing it to the Ephesians and now to us, Paul is celebrating God's revealed mystery, His eternal plan that is being worked out. Turn now to Ephesians 3. As I read this, you'll see Paul using this word over and over again—mystery, mystery, mystery. He's celebrating the revealed plan of God. God always knew what He was doing, but now He has let us know what He's doing—and Paul says it is glorious. As I begin reading, I want to point out one of the really exciting things about this. In his excitement about this revealed eternal plan, Paul sort of pivots a little. Earlier in Ephesians he had already talked about the fact that he's prayed for the Christians in Ephesus, which is in modern-day Turkey. He sent this letter to let them know he was praying for them. But then in this chapter, he wanted to remind them of his prayer. He begins with, "*For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles...*" Then there's a digression until verse 14. That's when he picks up with, "*For this reason I bow my knees before the Father...*" So what do we need to understand about what Paul is saying?

He's getting ready to again say, "I'm praying for you guys. I've been praying for you and will continue praying for you." The language is very specific. "I bow my knees before the Father, all for you people." But he's so excited about this plan, this revealed mystery, that there's a digression before he gets back to telling them he's praying for them, declaring, "Let's celebrate what God is doing!"

I want you to feel Paul's excitement as I read this, then we'll talk more about it later. I want you to feel how he's overwhelmed by the fact that a mystery—a plan that had been hidden—is now being revealed. We know about this good news. So here's Paul, beginning in verse one:

¹ For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles— ² assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, ³ how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. ⁴ When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, ⁵ 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.

Paul is saying, "This has not been known before. It's a brand-new insight that God has given me, and I am giving to you." Something new is going on. God's plan is being worked out. What is that plan?

⁶ 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.

⁷ Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power. ⁸ To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, ⁹ and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, ¹⁰ so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. ¹¹ This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, ¹² in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him. ¹³ So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory.

Paul is celebrating the revealed plan of God, hidden for ages and now made known, not only to him, but also to us. He details a little bit about this eternal plan. What's going on? What is God doing?

God's eternal plan involves creating a church for everyone.

Paul begins with the fact that God's eternal plan involves creating a church for everyone. Pastor Tim talked about this a little bit last week; now Paul repeats it here in this passage. There was a time when there was nothing but division in the land of Israel concerning who were God's people and who were not God's people. Who's part of this group and who's not? There was a Jew

and Gentile divide—Jew and non-Jew—and it was a serious divide. It wasn't just a disagreement. "You like this team; I like that team. You like the Cubs; I like the Ducks." This was no mere personal opinion; this was weighty. There were literally walls of division between these groups of people.

In the ancient temple in Jerusalem, which is where people would have gone to worship in the time of Paul, there were different courts, various areas where certain people could worship. You had a court where Jewish men could worship. You had a court where Jewish women could worship. You had a court where the priests who were serving would take the sacrifices from the people and would offer them to God. Only priests could be in that area. Then way deep inside the temple there was a chamber called the Holy of Holies. Only one person—the high priest—could go into that room, and only one day a year, in order to offer sacrifices on behalf of the people. To give you some insight into how seriously God took those divisions, anyone other than that high priest coming in any more than that one day a year would die. It was serious stuff.

Outside of all this was a wall around the temple called "The Court of the Gentiles." If you were not a Jew, don't you dare go past that wall. Don't you dare get near the Jewish temple. You are not a worshiper of their God. How seriously did they take this? Archeologists have discovered a stone that was put into this wall separating the Gentiles—the non-Jews—from the Jews. On this stone is a warning that essentially says, "Anyone who is not a Jew who crosses this wall will be responsible for their own death." That's a serious division. "If you're not a Jew and you go beyond this wall, you're going to die and it's your own fault. Consider yourself warned."

So for generations upon generations, there was that level of division and hostility. Jews and non-Jews; you're over there, you're shameful, you're not part of God's people, you're less than us. This was really, really challenging for the fighting between these two groups of people. Then Paul comes on the scene, meets Jesus, then has God's eternal plan revealed to him. Paul finds out something that is absolutely earth-shattering, given the level of hostility between these groups of people. Paul learns that what has happened in Jesus' death and resurrection and the ability for people to come to Christ for forgiveness is that Jesus is building one church for everyone, a church anyone can belong to.

Look at verse six. Paul says, "*This mystery*"—the eternal plan that has been revealed—"*is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.*" This is all one sentence. Paul described it a little bit in chapter two. Gentiles are now part of the club. They can be part of the family too. For those of us who are not living in that level of hostility, we sort of gloss over that when we read it. "Ah, okay, Gentiles are part of the family too. Good, because I'm a Gentile. Glad I can be part of the family." We just sort of gloss over that, not getting how groundbreaking this was. This was rocking people's worlds. "What do you mean, the Gentiles can be in? What do you mean, they can be part of the family? What do you mean, Jesus our Messiah died for them too? What are you talking about, Paul?" The walls of hostility had been there for hundreds of years and they were not going to break down easily.

Let's look at the excitement in Paul's voice as he's writing this. He's explaining that this is the best news ever. There is now one family of God and anyone can belong to it. It doesn't matter what your background is; you're all welcome in God's family. This is the message he wants to spread far and wide. This is the message he was willing to be imprisoned for and even die for. It's the message that everyone can come to Jesus.

It's the message we need to be reminded of as well, both for people in our lives and for ourselves. We need to be reminded that this isn't an exclusive club, in the sense that certain people must stay out and others come in. Anyone who places their faith in Jesus Christ as their Savior for the forgiveness of their sins are part of God's family. No racial distinction. No ethnic distinction. No socio-economic distinction. It doesn't matter how much you make or how much you don't make. It doesn't matter whether you're blue-collar or white-collar or no longer collar (that's what they call retirees) None of that matters. We're free! Oh, to be free. It doesn't matter whether you're married or not, have kids or not. It doesn't matter what you've done; doesn't matter what's in your background. Everyone is invited to be part of God's family. It's glorious good news! It was revealed to Paul and it has now been revealed to us.

Now, we need to know this and be reminded of this, because subtly there are times when we look at people around us and there's something inside of us that says, "I'm not quite sure that I want that person in the family. I'm not quite sure I want that person to

be a part of the body of Christ. I'm not quite sure they deserve it. I'm not quite sure that heaven would be heaven if that person was there.

There are people I have conflicts with and yes, Jesus died for everyone, but I don't know about that one."

We need to be reminded of the truth Paul is saying here: Jesus died for all. We should be begging God to do something in the lives of the people around us, so that they too can respond to the good news of Jesus, just like we did; so they can become a part of His family. Instead of putting up barriers—dividing walls that Jesus came to break down—we should be begging, "God, break down any walls in my mind and in my heart. Allow me to remember and celebrate the fact that Jesus is for all." We need this reminder about how we treat other people.

We know that we are followers of Jesus. "I am a sinner who needs a Savior, and Jesus, in His death and resurrection, is my Savior. I've placed my faith in Him. I've repented of my sins. I've been forgiven and am promised heaven for eternity with God." We know this in our head, but in our hearts is where we struggle with this. We come to church, read our Bibles and do what Christians do, yet we're not totally sure that God really loves us. We're not totally sure that He's willing to forgive someone like us. "You don't know what I've done. You don't know where I've been. You don't know where I came from." Because of our sins, because of our mistakes, because of the shame and regret we carry, we push ourselves down and say, "I think maybe Jesus is for all those other people, but I'm just not sure He's for me."

What God is saying through Paul is, "Jesus is for everyone who comes to Him in faith for the forgiveness of their sins, even you." There are no distinctions anymore. That's good news. That's the greatest news. That's why Paul is so excited here. It doesn't matter where you came from. It doesn't matter what you've done. It doesn't matter what your background is. Jesus is for you. All you have to do is acknowledge your need for Him and repent of your sin; He is faithful to forgive you. It's all you have to do. Paul is celebrating this. It's one of the reasons he's so excited about this revealed mystery, this plan of God that is now being told, not only to Paul, but to all of us.

God's plan involves creating a church for everyone. If you're visiting, you are welcome here in the family of God. Please understand this. When you see someone on the street, they are people who are invited to be part of the family of God. People you struggle to get along with are invited to be a part of the family of God. We need to beg God to do something in their lives, just like He did in ours.

When there's a group of people worshiping together, studying God's Word together, praying for each other, serving each other, encouraging each other, there is something beautiful going on here. That's what Jesus died for. He didn't do it just to save individuals. Okay, He did that. But He also wanted to save a group of people that would gather together here at Village Bible Church and in other churches all around the world. These are people who come together, unified, not allowing any walls of hostility to go up, but saying, "We are all saved by Jesus. We are all sisters and brothers in Him. We are all united in Christ. We are one family of God."

There's something beautiful about those walls being torn down and God's people being gathered together to worship Him, to care for one another, to grow in Christ. It's beautiful and it's all part of God's eternal plan. Paul celebrates the fact that the plan has been revealed to him, and now it's been revealed to us. But there's something else. There's something being revealed to this other group of beings that is a real head-scratcher.

God has revealed His eternal plan in the heavenly realms.

Paul says not only is the eternal plan revealed to him and to us, but it is also being revealed in the heavenly realms. I've talked to several of you about your small group studies this week and each one has said, "What is going on in the heavenly realms?" What is this? This is the headscratcher.

Here's what Paul explains, in this passage and in later passages in Ephesians that Pastor Tim will go through. What we're finding is there is a physical world that you and I are living in; we can see things, we can breathe, we can eat, we can interact with one another and have relationships. This is a physical world that we're all a part of. But Paul is also letting us know that there is a spiritual realm, a heavenly realm. There are heavenly beings, good and bad, God's side and Satan's side. They are in this spiritual,

heavenly realm and they're duking it out. Paul will say later in Ephesians that there is a battle going on in the heavenly realm. We're a part of it in our prayers, in our obedience. It's difficult to understand. It's mysterious.

Paul says there is this battle going on; you're a part of it and these heavenly beings are a part of it. That's what we really need to stay focused on. What this battle looks like exactly, I don't know. Part of me wishes God told me more. Part of me wishes God had explained exactly what was going on with angels and demons and their battling and what they look like and all that. Part of me wishes that, but I have a feeling if God showed me, I would run like a scared little boy. Right? There is battling of heavenly creatures and fighting and duking it out? What in the world is going on?

So here's what Paul wants us to know. It's not exactly what is going on in that spiritual world we can't see, no matter how hard we look. He doesn't want us to know exactly what's going on, exactly what it looks like, but he wants us to know that it's happening. There is a spiritual battle, God's team versus Satan's team. The great news is we've read the end of the story and we know God wins. Right? We know this. This isn't a battle of equals that we're watching with popcorn, wondering how the whole thing is going to end. No, we know how it's going to end. We've read the end of the Book. Jesus wins! However, in the meantime, before Christ returns for His people, what we know is that this battle continues in the heavenly realms.

What Paul is saying is that when we unite here at Village Bible Church and other churches all around the world—when we unite together to worship the risen Christ without any walls of distinction, without saying there are certain people who are out and certain people who are in, coming together to love each other and care for one another and grow together—that picture is not only being displayed in the physical world. We see it, the people around us see it, but it's not just being displayed in the physical world; it's also being displayed in the heavenly realms. These creatures who are duking it out in the spirit world are seeing a beautiful, united, loving, worshipful church, and it is bringing God glory. It is displaying the wisdom of His eternal plan that is being worked out perfectly.

Here's how Paul says it in verse ten: *"Through the church"*—that is, through the united body of Christ all around the world, with no distinctions, this unified body— *"the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places."* There is something about us gathering together that displays God's wisdom in working out His plan, not just here, not just for people to see, but in the heavenly realms.

How does this work? I don't totally know. What does it look like in the spiritual realm? I don't know. Here is my guess and I'm probably way off. In the first service I said, "This isn't in the Bible," then I realized I would get fired if I'm up here saying things that are not in the Bible. So what I will say is I'm trying to picture what this looks, this battle in the heavenly realm, with God's wisdom being displayed to these heavenly creatures.

So we have angels and demons and we don't even know what they look like. They're up there battling. Then we come here and gather together, with no distinctions, no one left out, everyone a part of it. We start singing these songs of worship to the risen Jesus, lifting our voices higher and higher. I have this picture that these angels and demons are sort of battling it out, wrestling; I don't know if they have swords or what, but they're going back and forth, back and forth, then the voices of God's people get louder and louder and louder from His gathered, unified church. Those heavenly beings pause for a moment and look over and ask, "What's going on? What is that?" They see the wisdom of God being worked out, as His plan is coming together for everyone to be unified in their worship of Him. They look over and say, "Look at that. That's amazing. What is that?" That's God's wisdom.

They go back to battling because that's all they can do. They battle and battle and battle and battle, then God's Word begins to be preached and proclaimed, His people are listening, God is using it to change them, to make them more like Jesus. So they stop again and observe, "What's going on? Ah, they're in that Book again. We know how that Book ends too. It doesn't end very well for us." They listen for a little while, then they go back to doing the only thing they can do. They get back to their wrestling, fighting, arguing; they're going back and forth—whatever that spiritual battle looks like.

What Paul is telling us, sisters and brothers, is when we gather together to worship the risen Jesus—not keeping anyone on the outside, not saying, "You're welcome here, but you're not welcome here" —we're a beautiful family together. When we worship the risen Jesus in song and word and prayer, in caring for one another, when we worship the risen Jesus, the message about God's perfect unfolding plan coming together is not only heard here, it's not only heard in our families, neighborhoods and workplaces,

it is heard all the way in the heavenly realm. Even demons who know this is not going to end well for them have the glorious message of God's saving plan proclaimed to them.

So when you come here to worship, what do you know? You're not here just for yourself, to be fed and to grow; you're here for your sisters and brothers, to help them be fed and to grow. In some way, not only are you serving yourself and others, not only are you building into each, but some of God's glory is being displayed in the heavenly realms. It's beautiful to think about, even if we don't have a lot of details. It's what has Paul so excited here. He wants to tell the Ephesians he's going to pray for them, but then he pauses and goes, "Wait a minute. I've got to talk about this mystery, this eternal plan that's being rolled out. Jews and non-Jews together, worshipping God. It's being declared here and it's being declared there as well."

This coming together to worship the risen Christ is wonderful. God's plan is being declared to Paul and to us, but also it's being declared in places we can't even see. Paul is unbelievably excited about this, partly because he understands the goodness of God's plan as it is being revealed. He also understands the goodness of the gospel which is for everyone. All can be saved.

God's eternal plan should lead us to savor Jesus.

Paul is feeling the weight of this mystery being revealed, this eternal plan being shown to us. What we see in Paul's writings is that this guy savors Jesus. He's having the plan revealed to him, he's declaring the plan to other people, he's seeing it worked out. Jews and non-Jews, race, ethnicity, money—none of it matters. Everybody can come to Christ. He's seeing it worked out. He is stunned by it, which makes him savor Jesus even more. Just think about the fact that this plan was in place at all, the fact that it was revealed to him, the fact that he gets to declare it to God's people, the fact that everyone's coming together, united, declaring God's wisdom, goodness and glory to the people around them, including to beings in the heavenly realms. God is being proclaimed. We see in Paul a man who loves Jesus deeply.

The fact that this plan is being worked out takes it to yet another level. This a written letter so we can't hear Paul's voice, so I'm going to read a few of these verses and think that as you hear them and read them, you will get a sense of the gratitude and love Paul has for Jesus, and how unbelievable this is. Almighty God has been working this out and it's perfect; it's awesome. Paul and you and I get to be a part of this. It's incredible. Just listen to how Paul says this in these next few verses, starting at verse seven:

⁷Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power. ⁸To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, ⁹and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, ¹⁰so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. ¹¹This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, ¹²in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him.

Can you get a sense of what's going on with Paul here? This plan is being worked out by God. It was planned before time began; it's not a human plan. It's being worked out perfectly and now we get this great blessing that people in the generations before Paul did not get. We have the full plan revealed to us and have the ability to tell others about it. Paul is amazed at this. He loves Christ. He is savoring everything that comes about because of this good news. He's savoring the forgiveness, savoring the promise of eternity, savoring the love of a God Who would come to earth to save His rebellious people. He makes us, we rebel, then He saves us! It's extraordinary. Paul loves Jesus. He's savoring Jesus. This is not a sort of religious ritual on Paul's part. He doesn't just go through the motions here. Paul loves Christ.

Do we go through the religious rituals? Are we here today because this is what Christians do? You know, we wake up, get ready, have breakfast and go to church. Are we in a small group because that's what we're supposed to do? Do we pray, read the Bible and serve because that's what we're supposed to do? Or do we do it because we savor Jesus? When we sing these songs, are we really praising our great God? Or are we singing because that's what we're supposed to do? We don't want the people around us to see us not singing. Are we worshipping because we savor Jesus? There are a lot of things in our lives that we savor, but do we savor Christ?

I was just at the Chicago Auto Show and saw all these people sitting in these nice cars, eyes wide open. They love these cars. I saw them looking at the Lamborghinis and the Bentleys—from a safe distance, of course; you don't get close to those cars. They're looking at them longingly, probably thinking, "Oh, if only I could have that car." They were savoring the moment.

I don't really care about the cars; I care about the food. They have a booth that sells delicious fudge, so I bought this little quarter-pound thing of peanut butter fudge. I brought it home and it's on my kitchen counter right now; don't you dare go to my house and take any of it.

How do you think I eat this peanut butter fudge? You think I throw it all in my mouth, quickly chew and swallow it. It's here and gone, just like that, like medicine or something? You think that's how I eat it? No way. You know what I do? I've had a few little shavings of this peanut butter fudge. I put it and just let it sit there. Why? Because I want every taste bud in my mouth to enjoy it, every single one. I want to savor it. It's delicious! I love it.

There are many things in our lives that we treasure, that we savor—enjoying every moment of it. The question for us, though, is do we savor Jesus in the same way? Or are we going through the motions in our religious life? The only way to truly appreciate Jesus is, like Paul, to reflect on the unfolding of God's eternal plan. God invited you into His family! He invites everyone into His family. What kind of an amazingly good, kind, loving, merciful, gracious God does that? It's a God Who deserves worship, Who deserves to be loved and savored. And that's what Paul does.

God's eternal plan may involve our suffering.

Now, amazingly, Paul does this even as he is in prison, which shows us that there are times when God's eternal plan may involve suffering. There's a chance that things may not go the way we want them to go, all because of our relationship with Jesus. I'm not talking about suffering because you're getting older and things hurt, even though that's rough, right? I'm not talking about suffering because there's a financial struggle or because there's a relationship problem, maybe a marriage or with your parents or your kids or whatever.

I'm not talking about that kind of suffering. That is suffering, but that's not what Paul is talking about here. He's talking about suffering because of his relationship with Christ specifically. Paul writes from prison. You can see this in verse one. *"For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles."* He says down at the end, verse 13, *"I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory."*

Paul is in prison because of his faith in Christ. He's in prison because he's been telling other people about Jesus, getting churches started, spreading the gospel. He is in prison for Christ. This would have been, in his day, one of the most shameful things that could happen to someone. You go to prison, you're shunned by family and friends, no one talks to you ever again, you have no way to make money if you ever get out. It's shameful.

And yet what does Paul say? Because he understands God's unfolding plan, he doesn't say, "I'm a prisoner of the government. I'm a prisoner of Rome. I'm a prisoner of the Roman governor." No. He says, "I am a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you people." Paul understands that his suffering is not for nothing. He understands that his suffering is all for Christ. God is using it as part of His plan.

We, I hope, will not suffer like Paul, will not be imprisoned for our faith, will not risk death for our faith. I don't know what the future holds, but I hope that's not what we have to deal with. And yet there are ways we suffer for our faith. There are Thanksgiving dinners and birthday parties that are tense because we follow Jesus and family members don't. They know we love Him, and they know we will defend Him, and they know we want them to follow Him. So there is this tension in our families, and they can push you out—and that's a form of suffering for Christ. Again, it's not death. It's not prison. But it's giving something up for Jesus.

You young people who are in school, if you talk about Jesus to the people in the hallways, some may be interested, but others may mock you. They might push you out of the friendship circle. They may talk about you behind your back. There is a price to be paid, suffering to be had, all because of the cause of Christ.

What Paul says to encourage us is, "It's all part of God's plan. Stay strong. He's good. He's faithful. He's with you." Paul sees it's all part of that mystery that is being revealed. God never promises us a cakewalk in this life. Sometimes I wish He did, but He doesn't. He says, "It may be rough, all because of Christ." There are people who hate Jesus, and that means they hate us.

So what's going on here, sisters and brothers? The apostle Paul invites us to understand God's plan. It has always been in place. God is working it out perfectly we. We know it—it's been revealed to us. It's revealed to beings in the heavenly realm that are battling it out. The plan is for a beautiful, diverse, unified church to be worshiping the risen Jesus every time they gather.

And through that we're all growing into a deeper love for Christ, a better relationship with Christ, and we're being made more like Christ. So we savor Christ, even if we have to suffer for Him. My prayer for you is that each of you—myself included—that we would be drawn into that kind of relationship with Jesus because of the knowledge of God's perfect unfolding plan that's for our good, and that we would truly savor Christ, no matter what comes our way.

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All Scriptures quoted directly from English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

Note: This transcription has been provided by Sermon Transcribers (www.sermontranscribers.com).