

Oct 20, 2018

Ephesians 3:1-13

We Need Grace:
A Grace Riddle

Jonathan M. Romig
CornerstoneWestford.com

I like **riddles**. Do you like riddles? I like riddles but I'm **incredibly bad** at them. Here's one I found on **Reddit**, which was in an **advertisement** (don't shout out the answer).

I am the destroyer of mountains, the killer of kings. I always fly by, yet I don't have wings. I can end basketball games or marriages with similar ease. And though I flow like a stream, only water can freeze. I've murdered parents and children and houseplants galore. Yet despite all this you always want more. Who am I?

Now I know some of you are thinking "**Nicholas Cage...**" But that's actually not the correct answer. Someone guessed that on Reddit. What's the real answer?... **Time**. How about this one?

A horse jumps over a tall building and onto a priest who is immediately taken away but only for a short while. What am I talking about?

Why do we like riddles? It's because they cause us to **pause and think**, and if we can figure out the answer, we feel **intelligent** and **smart**. Of course if we can't figure out the answer and have to **ask** for it, we feel a little dumb. But there's still that "**ah-ha**" **moment**. So what is this riddle talking about? **Chess**.

The **Apostle Paul** tells us about a riddle in our text today. He tells us about one of the **oldest riddles** of all time that has finally been **solved**. Let me **summarize** Paul's riddle in my **own words**.

What is unknown now known? Two now one? Weak yet strong?

Why **should** you care about this **riddle**? Because the **answer** to this riddle can **change your life**. This riddle is so **profound** that when we finally understand the answer, we will want to **share** it with others.

In Ephesians chapter 3 Paul is about to say a **prayer** for the believers but he **interrupts** himself to marvel at this **mystery**. In verse 1 Paul says this.

Eph 3:1 For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles— (NIV®)

But notice the **dash** at the end of the verse? That tells us Paul takes a **detour**. His **train of thought returns** in verse 14, "For this reason I kneel before the Father..." But before he prays, which we'll look at **next week**, he speaks of a **mystery revealed**, which is the first part of our riddle.

What is unknown now known? (Eph 3:2-5)

2 Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, 3 that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. 4 In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, 5 which was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. (NIV®)

Paul is writing to the believers at **Ephesus** and he begins in verse 2 by **explaining his job description**. He is an administrator. At **Cornerstone** we have an **Office Administrator**. She does things like order **supplies**, prepare the **bulletin**, and tell me **what to do**. My **only complaint** is that she is just **too perfect**. An office administrator helps **run a church**. Paul is an **administrator of grace**. The Greek word for administration (**oikonomia**) means to “**manage a household**.” Most of us don’t have enough **money** to **pay someone** to manage our **houses**. We do it ourselves. But Paul is the one God has **called** to **manage the household of grace**—to share grace with those lost in sin.

Our **sermon series**, “We Need Grace” **ties nicely** into this **theme**. Paul is saying that this riddle is a **riddle of grace**. That’s a **hint**, a **clue**. When God has made what was **unknown known** it **clearly shows** his **amazing grace**. When God reveals the mystery through Christ Jesus, we say, wow that’s grace! That’s amazing!

Paul actually tells us that God has withheld this mystery from **previous generations**. That means the **believers** who came before Paul and the people of the **Old Testament** didn’t fully understand. **God hinted** at this mystery throughout the Old Testament. When God promised to bless the **father of the Israelite people Abraham** in one of the **first chapters** of the Bible he hinted at it.

Genesis 12:3

I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.” (NIV®)

When the **prophet Isaiah** said **Egypt, Assyria, and Israel** will **become one** God was hinting at it.

Isaiah 19:23-25 In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria. The Assyrians will go to Egypt and the Egyptians to Assyria. The Egyptians and Assyrians will worship together. 24 In that day Israel will be the third, along with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing on the earth. 25 The Lord Almighty will bless them, saying, “Blessed be Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork, and Israel my inheritance.” (NIV®)

When the **prophet Zechariah** prophesied to **Jerusalem** after the **exile** God was hinting at it once more.

Zechariah 2:11 “Many nations will be joined with the Lord in that day and will become my people. I will live among you and you will know that the Lord Almighty has sent me to you. (NIV®)

God is going to work through the Israelites to bless the whole world. It’s through **Christ Jesus** and the New Testament **apostles** and **prophets** that we receive the answer (Rom 11). “What is unknown now known” is another way of saying, “What was a **mystery** God has now revealed.” God has told us the answer to the mystery and the answer shows us his **grace**.

I picked up my **parents** from the **airport** on Wednesday and I took a **different route** home. Although they had a **vague** idea of where we were—they knew the **highway** and saw **landmarks**—it wasn’t until we pulled onto one of our **final streets** that the mystery was revealed and I heard my dad say, “**Ah, I know where we are**.” We had driven in the **back roads** to our house. That’s what Paul is doing. He’s **driving** the Ephesians and all believers home, but it’s taken them and maybe us too a while to **figure out** where we are. Do you want to **go home**? Where are you on **your spiritual journey**?

Does God seem **unknown** or **unknowable** to you? He has made himself known by being **born** into this world. God took on **human flesh** as the baby Jesus, lived an **innocent** life, and died in our places on the **cross** to make **salvation** known. If you repent of your sins and put your faith in Christ Jesus you receive the

holiness God himself has. That's a mystery too! When we come to Jesus, it feels like we're **finally coming home**. Let's continue with our riddle, our mystery. *What is unknown now known?*

What is two now one? (Eph 3:6)

Do you want to know the answer to Paul's mystery? Paul **reveals** the **answer** in the **next verse**.

6 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. (NIV®)

The Jews and Gentiles are **becoming one**, a **new people**. Paul told us about this mystery in **chapter 1**.

Ephesians 1:18 I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, (NIV®)

Paul is saying you Gentiles (the non-Jews) get to **share** in the **riches of God's holy people**, the **people of Israel**. Paul spoke again of this in **chapter 2**.

Ephesians 2:13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. (NIV®)

You non-Jews who once who were far away because of holiness laws, can now be brought near through the holiness of Christ Jesus. Paul speaks of the answer more in **Romans 11** and **Galatians 3**.¹

Romans 11:25-26a I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers and sisters, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in, 26 and in this way all Israel will be saved... (NIV®)

Galatians 3:28-29 There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. (NIV®)

Are you finally ready for the answer to **our riddle**? Can **anyone guess it**? *What is unknown now known? What is two now one? What is weak yet strong? **The Church!*** God promised the church in the Old Testament and revealed it in the New Testament. The church is made up of **Jews and Gentiles** who believe in Christ Jesus. Instead of Jewish people being saved one way, by **keeping the law and commandments** which they **could not do**, they are saved through **faith in Christ Jesus**. Instead of us Gentile people being saved by doing **good works** or living **moral lives**, which we could not do, we are saved by **faith in Christ Jesus**. Together, we become **one new people**, the Church.

There are **lots of blessings** we receive when we **confess** our sins and put our **faith** in Jesus Christ. We receive **eternal life**. We get to share in the **new heavens and new earth** when Christ returns. We will **dwell** with Jesus forever. We will have **never-ending joy**. But one of these blessings is more **tangible** and **immediate**. It is the blessing of becoming a **member** of the Church. When I say "Church" I first mean "**big-C Church**"—as in the **universal** or **invisible** church, which includes **all believers from all times and places**. Only God truly knows who is a part of the big-C Church. The little-c church is a **local congregation** like Cornerstone, which is **limited** in size. The **way we receive** the blessing of being a member of the big-C church is by **being a member** of a little-c church. Membership **down here** demonstrates membership **up there**. **Richard Coekin** writes in *Ephesians For You*, "... church is meant to be a **team game**. A church is **never** about **one person** or **one kind** of people."

In verse 6 Paul uses the **illustration of a body**. Our bodies have lots of **different parts**. We have **eyes** and **ears** and **livers** and **kidneys** and those of us who do **CrossFit** have **biceps**... If a body is a picture of the church then it makes sense that the church should be full of **middle eastern** people, and **Asian** people, **white** people, **black** people, **tall**, **small**, **young**, **old**, **mature**, **immature**, **rich**, **poor**, all kinds of people. We as a church should make sure we're trying to not just reach people that look like us but **all peoples of all ages**.

*What is unknown now known? What is two now one? **The Church**.* In our last part, Paul tells us what God is doing **through** the church. The last part of our riddle is this.

What is weak yet strong? (Eph 3:7-13)

7 I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. 8 Although I am less than the least of all the Lord's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ, 9 and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. 10 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, 11 according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. 12 In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. 13 I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory. (NIV®)

Paul's job has been to make this **mystery known**—that God's grace is not just for the Jewish people but the **Gentile** (non-Jewish) **people** as well. Back in **verse 1** Paul said he is a **prisoner**, and then here in **verse 8** he calls himself "**the least** of all the Lord's people" and then in **verse 13** he says he is "**suffering**." Paul is **weak** and **broken**, but he is also **strong** in Christ. Paul is a **model** for us the church. Let's **zero-in** on **verse 10**.

10 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, (NIV®)

I like reading **fantasy books**, and I just finished listening to one where the **antagonist** has the **most power** and calls himself **divine**. It seems like he is **impossible** to defeat. He has the **greatest** power. He's **invincible**. But the character with the **least useful** power uses her **gift to defeat him**. That makes **her glory** and **his shame** all the **greater**. God is using us, the church, the most **broken**, **sad**, **dis-unified**, **sinful** and **weak institution** in the **world**—to take down the **supernaturally powerful Satan** and all his **forces** (Eph 6:10-12). You know **why** we love the local church, our local church, even though we're messed up? Because God loves **us** and is working through **small**, **young**, **stumbling about Cornerstone** to defeat the evil one. Christ uses our weakness to **overcome** Satan.

Before I get to my **conclusion** I want to point out that we're called to a **similar ministry** as Paul. As the church, we're called to make the **mystery known** as well. When we hear a **good riddle** what do you do? We tell it. I can think of **several friends** that I just want to sit down with and share the gospel with, but I haven't yet because **I'm weak** and **scared**. Do any of **you feel that way**? Is there someone Christ would like us to share Jesus with but we haven't yet? Christ wants to **empower** us as the church in our weakness to make known his mystery. Usually, we tell ourselves, "When I get **stronger** I'll talk to that person. When our **relationship** is stronger or when I know my **Bible** stronger or when the **timing** is stronger, then I'll do it. What if Jesus wants to use us in our **weakness**? What if he wants us to **fast** and **pray** and **go** talk to them? I'd love to talk to you more if you want to hold each other **accountable**. This is **why we are the church**.

So what's my **big idea**?

What is unknown now known? Two now one? Weak yet strong? Our Church.

Before time began **God** wrote a riddle (Eph 1:4). As **history unfolded** God whispered hints through his **prophets** and **Scriptures**. God sent his **Son Jesus** to make this riddle possible by his **death** and **resurrection**. The **Apostle Paul** preached this riddle to the **Gentiles** and **Jews** and to us today. You know **the answer** is the **church**. But do you know **who** the answer is? The answer is **you!** It's **us!** **We're** the church! We're the answer to the **mystery!** As we close in song let's **marvel** at God's mystery. *What is unknown now known? Two now one? Weak yet strong? Our Church.*

Pastor Jonathan Romig preached this message at Cornerstone Congregational Church. You can download a PDF copy of this sermon above, which includes further endnotes and references. Click to listen to sermons or to read our story.

¹ See also Romans 4; 12:4-5; Galatians 3:14