

YOU ARE AN INSIDER!

I. By God's gracious plan

II. With exclusive privileges

He sat at the corner table by himself, just waiting for someone, anyone, to join him. A few minutes later a group of people starting walking in his direction, only to sit down at a different table. They definitely noticed that he was sitting all alone, but they wouldn't be caught dead at a table with him. He simply had not reached a sufficient level of coolness to be part of their group. They were insiders; he was an outsider.

The people of Israel were the ultimate insiders. Out of all the nations in the world, the Lord chose them to be his special people. It wasn't because of their strength (*they were weak!*); it wasn't because of their size (*they were small!*). It was simply what he chose to do, making the children of Israel his special people. On those special people, the insiders, he poured out blessing after blessing. Even in the midst of oppressive slavery in Egypt, he turned them into a huge nation. He miraculously delivered them from Egypt by the plagues, defeated their every enemy, and gave them a land flowing with milk and honey. He made them into the most powerful nation in the world, the envy of all others.

All the other nations were like the boy sitting at the corner table. They stood on the outside, looking in. They did not have the protecting hand of the almighty God guarding them from danger. They did not have the Lord's prophets speaking the truth of God to them. The people of Israel were insiders; the Gentiles were outsiders.

In one respect, that was the Lord's intent. He set his people apart from the rest of the world by the laws that governed every aspect of their life. He specifically instructed them to remain separate from the idolatrous nations around them, in order to preserve the nation through whom he would send the Messiah. That Messiah, however, would not come just for the people of Israel. The Lord had said as much throughout the Old Testament. In Genesis 12 the Lord promised that through Abram (that is, through his descendant the Messiah) *all peoples* on earth would be blessed. In Isaiah 49, the Lord speaking to his Anointed One, said, *"It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you*

may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth." While it was always the Lord's plan to rescue all people through the life and death of his Anointed, the Gentiles didn't know that. (*Many of the people of Israel didn't even understand it!*)

The Festival of the Epiphany of our Lord teaches us a most glorious and comforting truth. The Messiah born of the line of David, born a Jew, was not born only for the Jews, but for the Gentiles as well. That means that the Gentiles, who could only stand on the outside looking in before, had become insiders. It's that truth on which we wish to focus this morning, through our study of Ephesians three: **YOU ARE AN INSIDER!**

The Christians in Ephesus to whom the Apostle addressed this letter held a special spot in Paul's heart. During what we call his third mission journey, the Apostle had spent three years in Ephesus (longer than anywhere else) gathering a congregation and preparing people to take the message elsewhere. He wrote this letter about five years later from Rome, where he was imprisoned, not to address any particularly pressing matter in the congregation, but to offer them encouragement. They were not second-class citizens because of their Gentile heritage; they were not outsiders, but insiders.

He reminded them of his time among them with these words: *"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."* The Apostle Paul, as you know, was not always a gospel spokesman. He was a faithful Jew, who not only rejected Jesus personally, but made a career out of persecuting Christians. As a faithful Jew, he viewed Gentiles as outsiders. He avoided them as ones who were unclean. But that all changed when the Lord Jesus brought him to faith and called him to be an apostle, specifically to proclaim the good news to Gentiles. Paul says in this opening verse, then, "You of all people would know that the Messiah came for all people, not just the Jews. You heard me proclaim that message; you watched me dedicate my time and energy to announcing it; you heard the mystery made known by revelation."

The mystery to which St. Paul refers, about which he said he had already written briefly, is mentioned in the previous chapter as well as this one. If you have your Bible open, you could look back at verse thirteen of chapter two: *“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.”* The Gentiles who had been on the outside looking in were now insiders. They had been brought near through the blood of Christ. He calls it a mystery because it’s something that none of the Gentiles would have known about had God not chosen to reveal it to them.

The Apostle talks about that revelation in verses four and five: *“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.”* While the Lord had, on the pages of the Old Testament, promised that the Messiah would come for all people, Jews and Gentiles alike, the Gentiles were not aware of it. Through his apostles and prophets (his spokesmen) the Lord let the Gentiles in on the plan. He caused them to hear the good news that his saving plan included them.

Throughout this letter the Apostle highlights the amazing grace of God that reaches out to undeserving sinners. That theme repeats in this section, too. The reason that the Ephesian Christians were insiders was only because of God’s grace. He begins tracing that out in verses seven and eight: *“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.”*

Note the way that Paul refers to his work as an apostle. Instead of adjectives like “painful, difficult, trying” (*words that might well come to our minds had we faced the trials he experienced*), he referred to it as a grace, a gift. Because he was so keenly aware of his sin and what his sin deserved, Paul had a heightened appreciation for the privilege granted him to serve. It was God’s grace that brought him to faith. It was God’s grace that made him an apostle. It was God’s grace that he had preached to the people in Ephesus the good news of forgiveness full and free in Christ Jesus. Had it not been for the Lord’s grace, the people in Ephesus would have been outsiders. They would not have known the Lord Jesus as their Savior. They would not have known the peace and joy that God grants through faith in Jesus.

Instead of being ignorant of the truth, they had heard the Apostle preach *“the unsearchable riches of*

Christ.” They knew that, in eternity, God had determined to rescue sinners by taking on flesh. They knew that God, who is outside of law, placed himself under law to obey in place of sinners. They knew that, though they deserved eternal death because of their sins, they had eternal life in Christ. They knew that, though they were by nature covered in sin and unable to please God, the Lord had covered them with the righteousness of Christ. They knew what they could never have known on their own, because God had been gracious to them. He had revealed the truth to them, and through that truth, had created faith in their hearts.

You and I entered this world as outsiders. Not because we were born of Gentile parents, but because we were born of sinful parents. That sin earned us an eternity of suffering, apart from God. But God stepped in. Through his Word and those who proclaimed it to you, the Lord revealed Jesus to you as the solution to your problem. He did more than provide the information and leave it up to you to decide. Because he knew that you couldn’t make that decision, he created faith in your heart. You have been the recipient of a miracle. The Lord raised you from the dead and gave you life. He made you a member of the family of God. You are an insider, because of God’s gracious plan.

Maybe, in searching the internet for information, you’ve had this happen. You come across the perfect article, one that will almost certainly answer the question you have. But, when you click on the link, you find out that you need to pay a membership fee. Some of the information on the site is free, but the information you want can only be accessed by insiders. When it comes to our relationship with God, a membership fee has to be paid. Only it’s a fee that you and I can’t afford. Someone else has to pay it for us. That’s exactly what God has done for us in the life and death of Jesus – he has made us insiders. Because, by the grace of God, we are insiders, we enjoy exclusive privileges. Let’s find in these verses the exclusive privileges the Lord has given us.

Go back to verse six, in which the Apostle identifies the mystery that the Lord has revealed: *“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.”* First, we are heirs. As children of God, we stand to inherit all of the blessings that Jesus won through his life, death, and resurrection. The forgiveness of sins. Life everlasting. Peace with God forever. A glorified body when Jesus returns. A new heavens and a new earth. All of these are ours already. We just wait for the day when we will have full enjoyment of them in his presence.

Second, we are *“members together of one body.”* God, in his kindness and grace, has given us fellow believers with whom we walk to the promised land. Through those fellow believers, the Lord encourages and comforts us. We might like to think that we can walk all by ourselves, but the Lord knows our need. Perhaps you’re at a stage of life where things are going fairly well and you don’t feel a particular need for help. If that’s the case, praise the Lord. Then this is the time to build up those relationships with your fellow believers, because the fact of the matter is that the time is coming when you will need your brothers and sisters in Christ. And don’t forget that your brothers and sisters need you. The Lord may be keeping struggles and trials away from you because he wants to free you up to serve your fellow believer. Or maybe it’s the exact opposite – he’s allowing you to face trials because he wants to use your example to encourage someone else.

A third privilege Paul mentions in verse 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, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* He has work for the church to do: to make known the manifold wisdom of God. The wisdom of God is the message that defies human logic: that eternal life is a gift of his grace, won in the life and death of Jesus Christ, God in the flesh. The wisdom of God is that righteousness covers all who trust in Christ, even as they fight against sin in their life. The wisdom of God is that Jesus’ blood covers over every sin, no matter how horrible that sin may appear in our eyes. What a privilege granted to sinners, to be the Lord’s instrument of revelation!

What’s particularly striking in the Apostle’s words is the group to whom the manifold wisdom of God is to be made known. *“To the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms.”* To the angels. So, as the church proclaims the gospel, as you and I and our fellow believers preach the good news of forgiveness, and the Lord works through that to bring people to faith, the angels learn of the depth of God’s grace.

Doesn’t that help us view the work of proclaiming the gospel properly? When we see it as just a duty or obligation, we see it all wrong. It’s rather a grace, a gift, just as St. Paul said. The Lord could find another way to bring his elect into his kingdom. But instead he uses us! If you do not participate, the loss is yours. If you do not bring offerings to support the spread of the gospel, if you do not open your mouth to tell

others of his grace, if you do not pray for others to come to know the truth, the loss is yours, not God’s. You could have the privilege of being the Lord’s instrument to bring more into the kingdom, so that more outsiders can become insiders and rejoice with you in the blessings of membership in the body of Christ.

In verse 12 the Apostle lists yet another blessing belonging exclusively to those who are insiders: *“In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.”* We have the ear of God himself. We don’t need to make an appointment; we have immediate and ready access. We don’t have to approach him in terror, shuddering at his power. We can speak freely with him, knowing him as our Father in heaven, the one who loves us and has the power to grant anything we ask.

Only believers in Christ can pray. Others may fold their hands and bow their heads and speak words addressed to God. But those prayers are not heard. It’s only in Christ and through faith in Christ that we can pray. What an exclusive privilege!

I know this guy who received a certificate for a free round of golf. There were no restrictions on the gift; it could be used any day, any time. It just needed to be used within a year. He says he loves to golf, but he didn’t use it. One rather wants to slap this guy upside the head and say, “You idiot! Why wouldn’t you take advantage of that gift?” Don’t let that be said about you and the gift of prayer. You have free access to God, through the sacrifice of Christ Jesus, 24/7. Pray. Bring your concerns. Bring your words of thanks and praise, too. You need not have mastered “the language of prayer.” You don’t have to pray as if you just swallowed a thesaurus. You’re talking to your Father. You’re talking to the One who loved you so much that he gave you his Son. He loves to hear your prayers, with whatever words you come to him. Enjoy the privilege!

A good and gracious God has given you the exact opposite of what you deserved. Instead of locking the door and throwing away the key, the Lord has opened the door and brought you in. He gave you, by the work of the Holy Spirit, faith to believe that Jesus is your Redeemer. Through that faith he has given you exclusive privileges: the blessings of forgiveness, peace, and joy; the honor of speaking his Word to others; and the gift of coming to him in prayer with boldness and confidence. Celebrate those gifts and your status in Christ. In him, you are an insider.