

Ephesians: *The Mystery of Christ and the Church*
Ephesians 3:1-13

As we return to our journey through Ephesians, our text is Ephesians 3:1-13. Please stand and let us join together in reading the Word of the Lord:

3 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. 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.

My message will fall under three subheadings: 1) A Prisoner of Jesus; 2) The Mystery Revealed; and 3) Grace to Serve.

I. A Prisoner of Jesus

I love my wife Christy...I truly do. When I say that I love my wife, I mean I love her with all my heart, adore her, respect her and believe that she is the most beautiful, intelligent, interesting, and admirable woman on the planet...truly.

However, my beautiful, near-perfect wife has a tendency to “digress” when she is telling me a story. Here’s an example. I’ll ask her how her meeting went last night, and she’ll begin her report by telling me who was there. But before we even get down the list of who was there, she will digress into reminding me of everything she knows about one of the people who was there, and quite likely go into a different story about a time that person said or did something that really touched her heart. Now, for Christy, those details and stories are at least as important as what happened at the meeting last night...so what *appears* to be a digression is actually a necessary *detour* in order to establish meaningful context for her report. I get that now. Took me 25 years of marriage, but I get that now!

So, it turns out that Christy is not the only person who digresses and takes necessary detours in the middle of a sentence...the Apostle Paul did exactly the same thing here in Ephesians 3! Paul has just finished unpacking how Christ destroyed the wall of hostility between Jew and Gentile, creating a new man...a new race...a new humanity in His Church there at the end of chapter 2. So Paul writes in 3:1, “For this reason, I...bow my knees before the Father”...at least that was what he intended to write...and eventually he will write exactly those words thirteen verses later in 3:14. But here in 3:1 Paul writes, “For this reasons I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles...” and then he never finishes that thought. He doesn’t go on to say, “bow my knees before the Father” because he immediately realizes

something. Paul realizes that his imprisonment in Rome may very well distract and upset the young believers in Ephesus. Remember that Paul was bound in chains and under house arrest in Rome for the better part of three years. To be imprisoned by the pagan occupiers was shameful in the honor culture of the ancient Middle East. It was also horrifying to imagine what Paul might suffer at the hands of the Roman Emperor, Nero. If you remember any of your ancient history, Nero was among the most ruthless of the Roman emperors, particularly in his treatment of Christians.

So, before Paul even finishes his sentence, he interrupts himself to address the tension of his imprisonment with a long, parenthetical sentence in vs. 2-12 that eventually ends with vs. 13, “So, I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you which is your glory.” Vss. 2-12, then...the lion’s share of our passage this morning, provides the reasons that the young believers should be encouraged and not lose heart over Paul’s imprisonment.

Now, even before we look at vs. 2, we should note that Paul does not identify himself as a “prisoner of Nero,” but rather as “the prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles...” Paul doesn’t even recognize the authority of Rome. Paul knows that he is bound first and foremost to the Lord Jesus Christ, and he knows that suffering was always to be part of his assignment. Remember the message that Jesus commanded Ananias to convey to Saul immediately after his encounter with the Risen Lord on the road to Damascus. In Acts 9:15 Christ said to Ananias, “Go, for he (Paul) is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”

Paul is at peace with being a prisoner of Christ Jesus. It is part of his assignment...it is a necessary suffering that comes with his call to bring the gospel to the Gentiles¹; and, as we will see, Paul sees even his imprisonment as an expression of God’s grace! So, Paul doesn’t see himself as a prisoner of Nero...he is content to be a “prisoner” of Christ Jesus!

Now, in addition to qualifying his imprisonment, Paul goes on to encourage the Ephesian church by reminding them of his testimony. In vs. 2-5 he writes, “...assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God’s grace that was given to me for you, how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. 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.”

Paul begins with his testimony. He knows that though many of the people hearing this letter never met Paul in person, they were all familiar with his story. He is reminding them that Jesus chose to reveal Himself to Paul, and in so doing, Jesus entrusted Paul with an assignment: to

¹ In Acts 21 Luke records that Paul was arrested after being falsely accused of bringing a Gentile believer from Ephesus into the Jewish temple. His accusers were Asian Jews, but the hostility towards Paul was already brimming over in Jerusalem. A mob quickly formed and began beating Paul. Had it not been for the Roman officers intervening, Paul would have likely been beaten to death.

steward the mystery of Christ and the Church, and specifically to steward this mystery on behalf of the Gentiles.

Paul then appeals to that which he has already written as evidence that his message was not discovered or created or contrived...it was REVEALED. In other words, when they (and we!) read Ephesians 1-2, it should be more than obvious that no mere human could ever make that up! The brilliance of God's sovereign plan of salvation is evident in what Paul has written, so Paul states, "When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ...as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit."

Allow me to digress for just a minute...but don't tell my wife.

Do you want to know why so many modern thinkers and popular voices in our culture hate Christianity? This is it...right here in Ephesians 3. Many modern thinkers are hostile to the Gospel because, unlike so many other 'facts' that can be learned through observation and the analysis of the natural world, the Gospel is only knowable through revelation. In other words, you will never "discover" Jesus and the forgiveness of sins. The good news of God's saving work in history is something that you must read or be taught...and that is because our only way of knowing Jesus and His saving work on the cross is through God's specific revelation in the Old and New Testament. The scriptures bear witness that God specifically revealed Himself through Jesus, and then God specifically revealed the mystery of what Christ accomplished to His apostles and prophets, of whom Paul is one. Note that Paul is not the only one who received the revelation of Christ and the Church. We know Peter also received this revelation, as did John and others.

Now, to believe something that is knowable only through revelation requires a degree of faith, right? In other words, it takes faith to believe something that we cannot see or observe. We can't reproduce Jesus on the cross. We can't generalize what we learn in scripture as though it's common knowledge available from other sources. Read the Bible and you will have to agree that there is NOTHING remotely similar to the scriptures anywhere in the world. This is exactly the appeal that Paul is making. Read Ephesians 1-2, and you know that didn't come from the imagination of men.

And so it comes to this: To believe that Christianity is true requires us to acknowledge that God specifically spoke, that God specifically acted in history, and that the specific nature of God's saving work happened ONCE in Jesus Christ of Nazareth as REVEALED in scripture. Our faith requires us to submit to that specific revelation. It is that submission to the specific revelation that we call the Bible which offends so many in our culture, but that part is not optional. If Jesus of Nazareth rose from the dead on the third day, He is the Son of God, and we must submit to the Word of God that was revealed to the apostles and the prophets.

Now, returning to our text, Paul's point here is that because Jesus chose to reveal the mystery of the Gospel to Paul, the church in Asia Minor should be encouraged that even Paul's

imprisonment is working to make that mystery known to a watching world. In other words, Paul understands that his imprisonment is still part of his “stewardship of grace.”

Church, how different would we see our lives and our circumstances if we understood our lives as a “stewardship of grace”? Once Paul placed his faith in Jesus, he interpreted every event, every challenge, every circumstance in his life as a “stewardship of grace”...as part of his assignment as one who belonged to Jesus.

I want you to take a minute and reflect upon your life. Think of where you live...think of your people...think of your work...think of your blessings...think of your pain and your challenges...and consider for a moment that all of it...every bit of it...has been *entrusted* to you by Jesus...and that you have been called to “steward” His grace via your particular assignment.

In other words, every part of your current circumstances can be and should be a means of revealing the light of Christ in the midst of this hurting culture. That includes your struggling marriage...that includes your health condition...that includes your battle with depression...that includes your painful losses...that includes every tiny bit of your world.

When you became a Christian, Christ took possession of your life and declared it “MINE!” How different would we see our lives if we, like Paul, quit attributing our circumstances to “us” or to “others” and instead began to see everything through the perspective of “HIS”? This is exactly what Paul wants the young believers in Asia Minor to understand: God chose Paul for this assignment, so “I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering...”

Now, Paul just mentioned “the mystery that was made known to me by revelation.” What is this “mystery” that he is referring to? That leads us to my second subheading...

II. The Mystery Revealed

How many of you love a good mystery? The mere word conjures up books, movies, and supernatural phenomena that we have read or heard about, right? For those of us who are married, the word “mystery” may lead us to think of our spouse! However, in the NT, the Greek word *musterion* means “something that is beyond natural knowledge but has been opened to us by divine revelation through the Holy Spirit.”²

Three times in our passage Paul refers to “the mystery”...so what is this mystery? Paul addresses that question plainly in vs. 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.”

Now, for those of us in the church some 2000 years later, this mystery is not so mysterious, right? We get that the Jews and the Gentiles kiss and make up in Jesus, and that doesn’t seem all that big of deal.

² R. Kent Hughes, *Ephesians*: p 103.

But listen: you have to first hear Paul through the ears of the first century readers. No one in the first century...or any century before that...would have ever imagined that the Gentiles would be “fellow heirs”...members of the same body...and partakers of the promises of God along with the Jews! That would be the equivalent of going back a few hundred years in American history and declaring that black slaves would inherit the riches of the white family they served...that they would be counted as equals with the white families...and that they would be partakers of the same privileges as the white families. Within the historical context, that was not only unthinkable...it was also offensive, scandalous, and incomprehensible. In every age, in every culture, there are those who are in and those who are out...those who are near and those who are far away...those who are deemed “desirable” and those looked upon as “undesirable.” That tendency is both evil and inevitable, and you don’t have to look hard to find the in group and the out group anywhere in the world. So, the great mystery that was revealed to Paul was this: in Jesus Christ...because of the Gospel...the dividing wall of hostility between those who are in and those who are out has been abolished! All who are in Christ BELONG to the same body...there is no distinction based upon ethnicity, language, culture, gender, wealth, education, or any other external factor. All in Christ BELONG to Him and to one another...we are the Body of Christ! All who belong to Jesus will inherit ETERNAL LIFE...we are all heirs...we are all children of God...we are all part of God’s household...we are truly brothers and sisters in Christ! And all who are in Christ are partakers of the promises of God! Every promise of God in the scriptures apply to all who are in Christ...no one is excluded. Church, this is the mystery of the Gospel that was accomplished in Christ and revealed to the apostles and prophets. No one would have thought to make this up because this kind of Oneness is so scandalous, so brilliant, and so counter-intuitive that only God could have come up with it!

Paul goes on to write in vss. 7-10: 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.

Paul understands his assignment of sharing the good news of the Gospel as “the gift of God’s grace, which was given by the working of His power.” Paul also knows that the gift was not given as a result of Paul’s outstanding resume...in fact, it was quite the opposite. Paul writes, “To me, though I am the very least of all saints, this grace was given.” You can’t see this in the English translation, but Paul actually makes up a word here in the Greek. He takes the word “least” and makes it into a superlative. He is literally saying, “I am ‘leaster’ of all the saints.” This is no false humility by Paul...he remembers who he was before Christ. He remembers how he persecuted the Church. He remembers how he stood by watching as Stephen was stoned to death. Not a day goes by that Paul doesn’t remember how unworthy he is of God’s grace in Christ...he is Paul the Small...he is the “leaster” of all the saints...and yet this grace was given “to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ...”

Again, the English translation does a poor job of capturing this adjective “unsearchable.” The root of this word was sometimes used to convey “tracking a footprint.” The picture here is that

apart from divine revelation...apart from the work of the Holy Spirit...we could not even begin to imagine the riches of Christ. Think about it: who could ever even imagine that Jesus was with the Father before the creation of the world; that Jesus was the divinely preordained center point of God's plan of redemption; that Jesus was the promised and beloved Son of God; that God sacrificed Jesus to provide redemption for sinful humanity; that God brought the redeemed into a close relationship with Himself...including unlimited access to His presence...through Christ; that the redeemed in Christ would include both Jew and Gentile; and that Jesus would come again to restore all things and to introduce a new age with a new heaven and a new earth! These riches are unsearchable...they are unattainable by any other means...and yet these are the very riches that Paul has been entrusted by grace, through the Holy Spirit, to share with the Gentiles...and not just the Gentiles. Paul goes on in vs. 9, "and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things..."

Paul's stewardship of grace is not just for the Gentiles, but also for all the believers...to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery...

Church, God's plan of redemption was not an afterthought. Jesus was always the plan. The inclusion of the Gentiles was always the plan. Our Oneness in Christ, brilliantly presenting Jesus to the lost world as His Church...this was always the plan. But that plan remained hidden for much of human history. Why?

Because the plan would require the death of Jesus...the Lamb of God. God's plan anticipated Satan's attack upon God's only Son. God's plan anticipated the powers and principalities in the heavenly places conspiring to kill Jesus and attack His Church. Had the powers and principalities known of God's plan, they would not have killed God's Son. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 2:6-8, "We speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory."

So, says Paul, the mystery has now been revealed in Christ AND the Church! Listen to vs. 10: 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.

How will the world come to know the manifest wisdom of God? Through the Church! How will the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places come to know the manifold wisdom of God? Through the Church! The Church...the New Humanity...the New Race...the Household of God...bears witness to God's brilliant plan to save and reconcile sinful humanity through His only Son, Jesus Christ our Lord! We are God's witnesses on earth, and even in heaven! Jesus did not die simply to rescue us from perishing...He died and rose again to create His Church...much to the chagrin of Satan!

Let me tell you something: the evil powers and principalities are hating it! They thought they had squashed God's long-awaited Messiah when they nailed Him to a Roman cross. They cackled and crowed over his dying body. They mocked Him and assured themselves of a victory over God. They reveled at the thought of human souls languishing forever in the fires of hell. How profoundly they underestimated the wisdom of God, the maker of heaven and earth! God's eternal purpose was always to rescue His creation from the curse of their sin...and that purpose was realized once and for all in Christ Jesus our Lord...in whom we have access to the Father with confidence through our faith in Him! Paul wants the believers in Ephesus to remember God's plan. He wants the believers to remember His brilliance...to remember how God transformed the death of Jesus into the hope of the world...to remember how God is still at work reconciling the world through the witness of His Church...even when His Church suffers! Therefore, says Paul, "I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory." The glory of God's redemptive work in the Church is worth the suffering...it's all part of God's gift of grace. There is so much more we could say here, but let me wrap up now with one very brief thought...

III. Grace to Serve

I hope you can hear Paul's heart here. In spite of, and even because of his circumstances, Paul understands himself to be a servant of God by the grace of God...that's literally what he said in vs. 7, "Of this gospel I was made a servant (minister) according to the gift of God's grace which was given to me..."

Did you hear that? The gift of God's grace, in addition to our forgiveness and salvation...is service to the Gospel. I need that reminder...and I suspect you do as well. It is my gift...given to me by God's grace...that I GET to preach the gospel to you, my beloved congregation. It is a gift of God's grace that I GET to endure hardships and loss for the sake of the Gospel...though I am leaster of all the believers. It is a gift of God's grace that you get to teach a Sunday School class, or operate the sound board, or visit those who are sick and in prison. It is a gift of God's grace that you get to share the unsearchable riches of Christ with an unbeliever. It is a gift of God's grace that we get to open our homes to the fatherless. It is a gift of God's grace that we get to stand for His truth in our schools, even if it makes us unpopular with our friends. It is a gift of God's grace to endure, to overcome, to shine brightly as the light of Christ in this present darkness. It is a gift of God's grace that each of us have been given assignments to serve...and it is still a gift of grace when our assignments require us to endure suffering.

Church, you are the plan. As Pastor Greg said last week, there is no plan B. You are the plan...you are the Mystery Revealed for all the world to see...even the powers and principalities gaze upon the unified Body of Christ with amazement! You are the Light of the World now...so go, and count it grace to shine brightly as witnesses to Jesus Christ, our Lord and our Savior, come what may. Let us pray.