
The Unfolding Disclosure of Christ's Mystery

Ephesians 3:1-13

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Some things in the Bible are straightforward and easy to understand. Some things are a bit more difficult. We are committed to not skipping over the harder bits. We want to teach the harder bits so that you can understand them. We are at a harder portion here in Ephesians 3:1-13.

Some think that chapter three is one of Paul's famous parenthesis. Look at how 3:1 and 4:1 both begin: "Therefore [For this reason], I Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus [of the Lord]." Here is what triggered the glorious discursion of chapter 3: "for the sake of you Gentiles." What he really wants them to grasp is verse 13. "Don't lose heart on my account: *my suffering is for your glory.*"

Now this is a hard word. *I suffer-you glory.* How are we going to not only accept this to be true, but to embrace it as a very important principle of Biblical ministry? How does this fit into our theology of ministry? In fact, do you even have room for it at all?

But we don't get there directly. We get there by the way of the argument Paul makes.

The Greatness of the Mystery (v.1-6)

Reason #1: Ministry is a stewardship from God.

¹ For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner for 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.

Through Whom it Came (v.1-2)

Paul is writing this book from a Roman prison. He is there because of Jewish opposition that had led to his incarceration. This Jewish opposition came because his bold, uncompromising defense of the Gentile place in God's redemptive plan. He not only preached and wrote of his vision of the new and undivided humanity in Christ; he was at that moment suffering for the very truths he was expounding. [Adapted]ⁱ

Yet he sees himself ultimately as the prisoner of Christ. This is similar to the way Paul thought of himself as the servant or the slave of God. He was totally committed to the sovereign providence, purposes and plans of God. While the Jews accused him and the Romans imprisoned, him he was the prisoner for or of Christ.

The ministry Paul had was unique. To no other apostle and no other believer was given this apostolic administration and revelation of the grace of God to the Gentiles. In the preceding paragraphs, Paul had just clearly declared that the Jew and Gentile were one in Christ. The Law has been abolished through the cross. What distinguished and divided Jew from Gentile has now been removed, annulled, and rendered powerless.

How it Came (v.3-5)

These great truths of Christ, the church and the New Covenant were largely hidden in the old covenant age and now were being full disclosed through Paul. This is what he means by these truths being a *mystery*. It is not that they were mysterious or that they were esoteric religious keys unlocking inner secrets. They were a mystery in the same way a story may be a mystery. As it is unfolding, what was hidden in the first part of the story is finally revealed by the end.

God made the disclosure. It is important for us to realize that what Paul has taught in chapter 2 on personal redemption and corporate reconciliation in one Body is not merely his perspective on things. We do not have a "Pauline theology" here that is distinct from a "Petrine theology". It is God's special disclosure of truths that were not revealed in the Old Covenant as they were then being revealed to the prophets and apostles.

There is a huge implication here for the way we interpret our Bibles: The Old Testament is to be understood in the light of the New. The Old Testament is about people, promises, prophecies and pictures that point us to Christ and the church. The New Testament is about how Jesus fulfills them with the amazing fullness of the New Covenant realities. We read the story from the front to the back. But we understand the whole story because we know that last chapters and how it ends. Once God tells us what He is doing and is going to do, now we can understand all the clues better.

What it Is

Paul summarizes its content (v.6). The Jews and Gentiles, in Christ have three essential unities.

There is a family unity.

We are joint-heirs with Christ and the Jews. The families in the Old Testament are understood in the light of the one family of God in the New Covenant.

There is a corporate unity.

We are one in the Body of Christ. The tribe and nation motif of the Old Testament is understood in the light of the new humanity, new nation, new body in Christ.

There is a covenantal unity.

We are all partakers of the promise in Christ.ⁱⁱ All the covenants in the Old are fulfilled in Christ who brings us all as one into the New Covenant.

All of this is "through the gospel." Understand this: part of the good news is not only redemption, but reconciliation. The gospel brings Jew and Gentile into one. Jesus' work on the cross has done it all.

The Grace for the Ministry (v.7-10)

Reason #2: Ministry is by the enabling grace of God to unfold the glory of God.

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.

We have this great mystery, which makes up part of the gospel, that is to be served by grace.

Its Inward Power (v.7)

Paul is made a servant of the gospel by grace's gifting. Some of our translations are interpreting when they use the word minister here. Paul is not using this in the specialized way in which some might refer to a preacher as a minister, meaning someone who is a full-time preacher. The word here is simply a servant. He is given a ministry in which he serves.

This service in the New Covenant truths is given him by the grace of God. He has been enabled by grace through his giftedness to serve the gospel. This gift was given him. It is a part of his ministry equipping. And it provided an inward power to carry on the outward work.

It is no different with us. Whatever we serve in should be by the power of grace and in the scope of our gifts, abilities, and experience. Believers, each one and all of us, have grace enable, Spirit given ways to engage other believers and the corporate church to serve in ministry. Paul's apostleship is unique. His revelatory gifting is not repeatable. But His obligation to His grace and gifts is just like ours and ours like his.

Its Outward Preaching (v.8-9)

God is enabling by grace men to serve the gospel by:

Preaching unsearchable riches - God has ordained the corporate proclamation of the greatness and supremacy of God for the good the church and the glory of Christ.

Making plain New Covenant truth - God had called Paul to a special ministry. We have inherited and we are obligated in that ministry as we preach the Word.

Note the characteristics of a grace-enabled service of the gospel:

Authority

What is being declared has God's authority. Therefore, it is not to be discounted nor denied.

Clarity

Its objective is to make all know what cannot be fully traced out (unsearchable riches). New Covenant preaching must be marked by simplicity and clarity so as to trace out for people the connections between the old and new as understood in the light of Christ and the cross.

Humility

Those declaring these truths must have a low estimation of one's personal self-worth and worthiness. Lowliness and meekness are qualifying virtues for serving in the preaching of the Word.

Ability

There is being exhibited the power of the Spirit in the preaching of the Word. It is the power of God, not just the ability of the man, which is at work.

Its Upward Purpose (v.10)

This is huge for me in preaching: I preach unsearchable riches. I do so to make plain to all God's New Covenant promises. The purpose and the product is that the multi-faceted wisdom of God might NOW be made known in the church on earth and among the beings in the heavenlies.

The Glory in the Manifestation (v.11-13)

Reason #3: Present ministry is shaped and strengthened by eternal purposes.

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.

The word "this" connects to the sentence before: there is a *present revelation* in the light of an *eternal purpose*.

Its Eternal Purpose (v.11)

This open disclosure of the multifaceted wisdom of God was to be shown to all through the church. The Old Testament was meant to be a part of that revelation. But it was done in way that both concealed and revealed. The types, pictures, and prophecies of the Old Testament *are no longer hidden*. Now that Christ has come, the church is to understand and proclaim the Old Testament. We are no longer trying to uncover its mysteries. We now have full and complete access to what the Old Testament was showing us. Now that Jesus has come, now that the church exists, now that the apostles and particularly Paul, have explained all this to us, now we can grow as Christians even through the clear, New Covenant, Christ-centered realities pointed to in the Old Testament.

This was God's purpose all along. The purpose of God is centered on Christ. Those unsearchable riches that we are to proclaim and make clear to all, God has carried them out in Christ Jesus our Lord. He has brought those purposes, hidden in the past, to present and eternal reality.

Its Present Privilege (v.12)

The Christ centered purpose of God gives us, in Christ, courage and confidence in coming to God by faith. If we have a Bible-informed faith in Christ in all that God brought to reality through Him, then we should not be hesitant or fearful or insecure in our relationship with God.

Why does he say this? Because for many, the hardships of the Christian life and the suffering attendant to Christian ministry often undermine their confidence. Sometimes

that is good. What appeared to be confidence was simply pride, brashness, fleshly assertiveness, and reliance on the self rather than the Spirit. It needed to be knocked down. But for others, there comes a loss of confidence in Christ. The pressing problems, the attacks by people, and the physical suffering all raise questions, hesitations, second-guessing, and loss of courage. We begin to doubt God's Word. The suffering causes us to lose heart, to become disheartened, discouraged and depressed.

This sentence you should commit to memory. It is a vaccination against this infection and it is a great prescription if you have succumbed to it.

"God's eternal purpose was carried out in Jesus. Faith in Him imparts courage and confidence in our coming to God."

Now, what are the connections between those two sentences?

Its Encouraging Principle (v.13)

In the light of God's Christ-centered purpose and our bold and confident access to God, don't lose heart over the suffering of God's servants because affliction in us yields glory in you. So Paul's being prisoner should not dishearten. It should encourage prayer and enable deeper insight into the glories of Christ.

You know, a lot of people want to be the servants of God. But how many are willing to embrace the suffering that goes with it?

Reflect and Respond

Since Christ has come, we live in the age of the New Covenant where God has revealed what was hidden in the Old Covenant.

All service for Christ is a gift from God given by the Holy Spirit's enablement. And no one is exempt.

I want to elevate preaching to its New Testament standing: no more of this demeaning it. Let us acknowledge that God has given special place and power to the corporate proclamation of the Word of God-- what we call preaching.

What is unfolding in our lives, down to the very suffering we endure, is to bring Christ and His people, glory. This should hearten all of us: those who are suffering and those who are benefiting.

- Reason #1: Ministry is a stewardship from God.
- Reason #2: Ministry is by the enabling grace of God to unfold the glory of God.
- Reason #3: Present ministry is shaped and strengthened by eternal purposes.

So, with all this grace, with all this glory; with all this unimaginable greatness; with all this responsibility and opportunity; with all potential for hardship and suffering, will you follow Christ? Will you follow the pattern of Paul? And will you do it, for the good of others and the glory of Jesus? WILL YOU?!?

ⁱ Stott, John R. W. *God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians*. The Bible Speaks Today. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979.

ⁱⁱ See Acts 26:6; Romans 9:8; 15:8-9; Galatians 3:18; Ephesians 1:13; 2:12.