
The Grace of God in New Covenant Mystery

Ephesians 3

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Now here 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.

In its Unfolding Disclosure (3:1-13)

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. 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. 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.

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*. 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 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.

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.

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.¹ 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. 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

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.

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:

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

It should be taught with **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.

It will be proclaimed with **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.

It will be preached with *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. 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 be become disheartened, discouraged and depressed.

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.

In its Prayer for Spiritual Power (3:14-21)

The book opens with Paul's prayer for spiritual perception. Now he turns to praying for spiritual power. How does this prayer align with our own praying?

¹⁴ For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, ¹⁶ that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

²⁰ Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

How is this prayer connected to what went before? We are going to need God's power for all that we have just discussed. Why this text here? Why is this a concern of Paul's?

We need spiritual strength in the inner person, our souls, the same way we need physical strength in the outer person, our bodies. We use spiritual strength, not to accomplish great spiritual feats, but to grow in faith, in believing truth in practically obedient ways. We grow in spiritual strength in the context of union with God and community with believers. God has primarily designed to give us all we need in Him and through others.

Its Posture - Bowing before God (v.14-15)

More than just a statement that he is praying. Paul shows us his inward approach when he prays.

Outward physical position indicates inward spiritual bent. Prayer is meant to be a conversation with God. But we are not coming to an equal. He is not our buddy. He is in fact the God of the universe. So we come with humbleness.

That God as our Father means He is the object of our prayer - We pray to God, the Father. The primary emphasis for our praying is to speak to God, the Father. It is also the pattern in our families. God is actually a family and we are reflections and images of the great Divine reality. Prayer then is a way of expressing and experiencing our relationship with God.

Its Petition - Enabling by God (v.16)

Paul has a fundamental difference in his thinking about how to pray and what to pray for people.

¹⁴ For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, ¹⁶ that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being,

The Measure of its Giving

Granted according to His glory__ - what an amazing phrase this is. Paul is effectively saying, "May God grant to you what I am asking in proportion to the vast riches and wealth of His glory, his supreme magnificence."

The Means of its Enabling

Grant you power to be strengthened by the Holy Spirit.

Do we expect or think we need this for our own growing up in knowing Christ? In other words, are we actually aware that we are really weak in ourselves, desperately in need of the Spirit's strengthening power? Do we value it so much that it takes precedence in our praying for others? Does our faith cling to the glory of God as the measure by which God will grant this to us and to others?

The Manifestation of its Working

This strengthening work of the Holy Spirit is in the inner man, the inner person. You are made of a physical part, the body. You are also made of an immaterial part, the soul. This is your inner person, the spiritual part of you. God designed you to be a body-soul complex. Your body is not alien to you – it is a part of God's design. Your soul is a part of you. To deny the existence of a spiritual, inner person is to live in a lie, a myth, a fantasy.

Again, the analogy of food giving strength in and to the body helps us. The Holy Spirit who indwells us as believers sustains the inner person as we believe what God's Word says. We take in food. We have bodily mechanisms which convert food to energy. Our body uses that energy to do what it does. We take in truth. We believe the truth we take in. The Spirit uses it to strengthen us so that we will see be sustained and will grow spiritually.

What do we need this strengthening for?

Its Purpose - Experiencing of God (v.17-19)

This might seem like a strange way to put it. But I find that most Christians are trying to experience God without knowledge. And those who learn the error of this, soon are merely gaining knowledge without pursuing God Himself.

¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

He prays that Christ would settle down and be at home in our hearts by faith. He is not talking about "Christ in you" as a matter of salvation; rather, that our inner selves would be the kind of dwelling God is comfortable in.

Comprehending the greatness of the surpassing love of Christ requires that we have deep roots in love. It requires that, in love, we work together and make corporate efforts together to grow in this knowledge. This apprehension, this understanding is more than just a knowledge about Him. It is an intimate involvement with Christ.

"The fullness of God..." What are we to make of these words? What does Paul mean? It seems to me that "being filled up to all the fullness of God" means that the standard of knowing God personally and intimately and truly is set by God; in fact, it is that fullness that God has in Himself. God's self-knowledge is a person, the Lord Jesus. The more that we are enabled by the Spirit to know God and His love, that knowledge will be the Lord Jesus.

Its Praise: Exalting God (v.20-21)

Maybe the reason we do not pray like this is because we do not praise like this. I am utterly convinced that there is a transforming power in God exalting praise.

²⁰ Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever.
Amen.

God is more than able to do what verses 16-19 are asking and expecting from God. Be careful not to lift this sentence out of its context. God is able to do more in us than we ever ask or think. We cannot limit the power of God. *Even when we don't understand or don't ask, God is able to do what He has aimed to do.*

Here is the reason God exists; here is His chief end - to glorify and enjoy Himself. Since that is so, it is also our chief end. Does the way you think about salvation, sanctification, the church and prayer all inevitably drive you to magnifying God's glory?

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.

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.

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!?

For those of you who are not believers, there is sentence here for you. God dwells in your heart by faith. Believe what He says and He will take up residence in you through the Holy Spirit. Believe today.

Christians, pray this prayer. Pray it for yourself. Pray it for others. Pray it for the glory of God.

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