

The Mystery of the Church Part 4

Eph.3:1-8a

“The Joy of Ministry”

Does your calling seem unimportant? Is it failing to give you exuberant joy like Paul had in his? Starting at the 22-minute mark, this message will help you see the importance of your gifts and ministry and how to derive great joy from them.

Excerpt 1:

Of all the things God calls people to do, Paul got about as bad a calling as you can get from a natural point of view. People constantly disappointed him in ministry. Nowhere did he pour himself into a church more than in Ephesus, and just a few years later they have unqualified leadership so he has to send Timothy to clean it up. The churches he founded, after he left, embraced all kinds of sin and error, divided into factions, and turned against Paul in many cases. He describes his work in the churches in Galatia as being like giving birth, it was so agonizing. Finally they accepted the Gospel. Then after he left they embraced a false gospel of legalism. Even in what seems the godliest church of all (Philippi) prominent women were fighting and he had to pull in a third party to calm that down. The new, young, popular preachers were out there preaching out of envy and rivalry and selfish ambition, not sincerely, trying to stir up trouble for Paul while he was in chains. (Php.4:17) And how did it all end up? It ends with Paul getting unjustly slammed into prison once again, wasting away as an old man on death row. From a human perspective, Paul’s ministry was a gigantic disappointment.

And what was his attitude? Did he say, “I’ll willingly bear this heavy burden. Sure it’s a terrible trial, but I’ll just have a godly attitude toward suffering”? Look what he says. **7 I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace... 8 Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me!**

Paul knew God was good and loving and kind and gracious, but still, he was astonished that God would be so gracious as to give this ministry to him. It just seemed too good to be true. He never got over it. He never referred to his task as his cross or his burden. He referred to it over and over as an unspeakable grace from God.

Excerpt 2:

When Paul thought about those trying to stir up trouble for him in their preaching, he said, “But even though their motives are bad, they are preaching the Gospel and because of this I rejoice! Yes, and I will continue to rejoice” (Php.1:18)

Php.2:17 **I am glad and rejoice with all of you.**

Col.1:24 **I rejoice in what was suffered for you**

To the Romans he said **I am full of joy over you** (Ro.16:19)

To the Thessalonians he said **you are our glory and joy.** 1 Thes.2:20

To Philemon he said **Your love has given me great joy and encouragement** (Phlm.7)

Even to the Corinthians he said **I had confidence in all of you, that you would all share my joy.** (2 Cor.2:3)

And a few chapters later he said **I am greatly encouraged; in all our troubles my joy knows no bounds.**
7 ...my joy was greater than ever. (2 Cor.7:4-7)

To the Philippians he said, **In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy** (Php.1:4-5)

In 1 Thes.3:9 he said **How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you?**

He wasn't lying in any of those verses. He really was full of so much happiness and joy that he could hardly contain it. If you interviewed him on his deathbed, and asked him to assess his life, he would say, "I'll have to wait for judgment Day before I'll know for sure about the quality of my service, but one thing I can say for sure – it sure was a happy life."

How could Paul be that happy about getting such a hard, painful task?

When he talks about his joy in his ministry, you don't see him writing back to his financial supporters in Philippi and saying, "Here's my missions report. We have ___ converts, ___ baptisms, ordained ___ pastors, planted ___ churches in ___ cities, wrote 13 books of the Bible..." You never see him do that. Those aren't the things he pointed to as bringing him joy.

What brought him joy was the fact that he was graciously given his own, personal task by God Himself. The reason Paul had such overflowing joy wasn't because of the high status of his ministry or because of the number of converts or number of anything. It was because he understood what he deserved, and he understood how much grace was involved in instead of getting what he deserved, he gets called into the service of the King. He didn't judge the value of his ministry by the fruits he could observe, or by the impressiveness of his gifts, or by how enjoyable the work was. He judged the value of his calling by the supremacy of the One who called him.

Excerpt 3:

7 ... the grace given me in accordance with the working of his power.

The reason Paul had so much joy in such a hard and seemingly fruitless ministry was because he understood that regardless of how things looked and all the apparent failure, the working of God's power was being unleashed through his ministry.

For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles-

Paul's Stewardship

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.

The Importance of Understanding

4 In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight

The Mystery

into the mystery of Christ, 5 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. 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.

Ministry graciously given

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 God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable 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 which 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.
- 14 For this reason I kneel before the Father...

Introduction:

Before time began God conceived in His infinitely perfect mind a plan of indescribable, unreachable, unfathomable riches and glory. He conceived of this plan, but then kept it a secret. He didn't tell anyone. He kept it inside His heart. Not even the most astute theologian could possibly have figured it out in a billion years of study. He wanted it kept secret until just the right time.

Then one day, in the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, 27 to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 The angel went to her and said...

Is the going to finally be the revealing of the secret God had kept for so long? Look what He announces:
31 You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, 33 and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end." (Luke 1:26-33)

That's great news, but it's still not the secret. Everyone knew from the OT that the Messiah would come and be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, 33 and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."

At this point the secret is still a secret. God didn't leak any of it until later. He wanted His Son to be the one to announce it personally. - Although, there is a hint of it a little later in Lk.2. When they brought the baby Jesus to the Temple in v.25:

Luke 2:25-32

there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. 26 It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. 27 Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, 28 Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: 29 "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. 30 For my eyes have seen your salvation, 31 which you have prepared in the sight of all people, 32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." 33 The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. 34 Then

Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, 35 so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

That's not the secret, but it hints at it. What is the secret? It wouldn't be announced until Jesus became an adult, and then He would announce it to the world. And the way He would announce it to the world is by gathering 12 men, whisper this secret into their ears over the course of a year or two... Then actually put into place the secret plan, and then have those men proclaim it from the rooftops.

When there is a secret that God has kept in the past but now revealed, the Greek word for that is *mysterion* (translated "mystery"). In Eph.3:3 Paul spills the beans on this mystery – this secret that is now revealed:

3 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 men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. 6 This mystery is...

Then he goes on to tell us what it is. In fact, he's been telling us all along.

We are studying through the book of Ephesians, and last week we finished chapter 2. So this morning we begin ch.3. Chapter 2 was all about how we were afar off, separated from God and His promises of salvation and His people. And He brought us near. Theologically speaking, he did that through the death of Christ. But humanly speaking he did it by picking out a man from the Jews and sending him to come get us and bring us near to God. What was made possible through the cross in ch.2 is implemented on earth through this man. In order for you and I to know God, that man had to suffer – big time. For you and I to be able to come to God and have access to forgiveness of sins, that man had to give up his career and everything he had. He had to devote his whole life to the task, and it was pain, suffering, heartache sorrow and loss until the day he died. He spent 4 years in prison for us. He endured beatings for us. Three times he was willing to be flogged so that you and I could be brought into the family of God. And in ch.3, that man – the man God used as the tool to implement this grand master plan of the Church – the one who sacrificed so much for you and I... That man is going to pray for us. The tool the Master used to bring us near is going to address the Master on our behalf.

For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles-

The dash at the end of the verse in the NIV indicates the grammatical break in the sentence. Paul digresses for 12 vv. before he finally finishes this sentence in v.14. He started to say, **For this reason I, Paul, kneel before the Father...** But instead he says **For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles-**

And as soon as he says that, he's off into a digression about his role in all this. So you could put a big "anyway" at the beginning of v.14. He starts the chapter by saying "For this reason, I (Paul – a prisoner for your sake – you've heard about all my role in all this, blah, blah, blah), ANYWAY, as I was saying, for this reason I bow before the Father..." But in-between comes 12 verses about Paul and his ministry. He starts to pray, gets a couple words out, and then says, "Wait – I can't pray yet. First I have to make sure you understand this..."

2 Surely

lit "If indeed"

The NIV doesn't translate that, because English doesn't tolerate long sentences as well as Greek. When you have an "if," it's followed by a "then". But in this sentence the "then" doesn't come until v.13. **If indeed you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you...** then don't be discouraged about my being in prison (v.13). But in the middle of that sentence are vv.3-12. So he starts to pray in v.1, but interrupts himself in v.2 to urge them not to be discouraged about his imprisonment... But

then in v.3 he interrupts his interruption to talk about his ministry that landed him in prison. And that's what we are going to look at this morning.

2 If indeed 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

The Mystery of Christ is the work that He came to do in establishing the Church.
as I have already written briefly.

He has referred to this mystery in bits and pieces so far, but now he's going to spell it out directly.

Understanding the Mystery

4 In reading this, then,

(referring to what he had written previously up to this point in the book)
you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ,

If you re-read what I've written, you will be able to gain insight into my insight. It is always so important to Paul that we understand. In ch.1 he explains about salvation, and then he just can't go any further, because he's so concerned that they may not fully understand. So he stops and prays for them to be able to understand.

17 I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. 18 I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you...

He gets 16 verses into his book and then stops and says, "Please God, let them understand this." Then he writes another 22 verses, and then has to stop again to pray for them that they would be able to understand the magnitude of God's love in what he is revealing in the Gospel.

But then he interrupts his prayer to explain it again. And not even that is enough. Even with the two prayers and the detailed explanation and the repetition... Still, he's concerned they may not fully understand, so in v.4 he directs them to re-read the first 2 ½ chapters. He says, "You will understand (future) when you read what I've you've already read." That means he expected them to re-read it. Then, now that they have re-read his whole argument, he repeats it all again anyway in vv.5,6.

It's hard to overstate the importance of knowledge and understanding in the Christian life. In our day that is downplayed. People are afraid of dry intellectualism, or what they call "head knowledge" and so they think the solution is less knowledge.

The church we attended in Canon City had this view. They believe if your knowledge ever surpasses your practice so that you know more than you are living out, that's hypocrisy. And the solution is less knowledge. So they really downplayed teaching and preaching in that church. That is the opposite of what God wants. You cannot have too much knowledge of God.

Hypocrisy is not having too much knowledge. Hypocrisy has nothing to do with knowledge. Hypocrisy is an issue of the will. It's when you pretend to be something you refuse to be in your heart. But the solution to every spiritual problem is always more insight, never less. If you know something you should do, but you aren't doing it, what you need is more knowledge and more teaching. You need more understanding of the folly of what you are doing, and more understanding of the goodness of God and His way. Knowledge alone doesn't make you godly. But without knowledge of God you can never be godly. The result of this anti-intellectualism in the church over the past 100 years has been a dumbing down of the Gospel.

Rick Warren’s book, *The Purpose-Driven Life*, which came out just over a year ago, was on The New York Times bestseller list for 43 consecutive weeks, hitting the #1 spot five times. He sold over 10 million copies in 13 months. Over 1 million copies sold through Sam’s Club alone -- the first book ever in Sam’s Club history to do that. And the Evangelical Christian Publisher’s Association named it the 2003 Christian Book of the Year. One reason it’s so popular is because Rick Warren claims to have won tens of thousands of lost people to the Lord in his church. Not only that, but he teaches that if you follow the right techniques, you can win *anyone* to the Lord. And so people are very eager to discover his techniques. And his technique is to dumb down the Gospel to just a few sentences. If you just make a few real positive, non-threatening sentences about Jesus, and then invite people not to repent, but just to “receive.” Then he assures them if they pray a prayer about expressing a willingness to receive Jesus, and they mean it, they are saved. But when Paul explains the Gospel, he goes on for chapter after chapter, and then keeps stopping and explaining and repeating and reviewing and praying that we will understand... If the Gospel were as simple as some today are making it, it wouldn’t require all this thought and understanding. If the message is “admit you’re not perfect, and receive salvation from God,” that’s hardly a secret that was not revealed in the OT.

The Mystery

But Paul says the Gospel

5 was not made known to men in other generations

Lit to **sons of men** (meaning human beings). It wasn’t revealed to mankind at all.

as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets.

Mt.13:17

I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.

They knew *something* was hidden. And they longed to know what it was. One example of this is in 1 Peter 1:10-11 **the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, 11 trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow.**

It was clear in the OT that the Messiah would come and reign victoriously forever. And it was clear that He would come and suffer and die. What wasn’t clear was how both of those could be true.

The OT prophecies made it clear that Gentiles would be included in the people of God in the last days, but how that would happen was not revealed. The saints in OT times understood all those passages, but when they tried to put it all together, they scratched their heads. And Jesus says they longed to know what we now know, and they longed to see it. But they weren’t given that privilege – except for people like Simeon or Anna.

Revealed once

Notice also that he doesn’t say “now it’s beginning to be revealed.” He says that it’s revealed now. The revelation of the New Testament is always described as a single event – a point in time. During that brief time of the Apostles (the latter half of the 1st Century), one, single message was revealed to the Apostles, and the Apostles taught it and wrote it down. There is not continuing revelation ongoing throughout.

6 This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are (3 “togethers”)

- **heirs together with Israel,**
- **members together of one body, and**
- **sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.**

That’s not to say those three things are all there is to the mystery. The mystery is the whole Gospel – the entire NT. But here Paul focuses on the portion of the Gospel that he has been discussing – the uniting of Jews and Gentiles in the formation of the Church. **The Gentiles** refers to the Gentile Christians. He gives three phrases that describe the unity in the Church:

1. heirs together with Israel,

All that Israel was set to inherit, plus all the new inheritance that has been promised in NT times – believing Jews and Gentiles together are the heirs to all of it.

2. members together of one body

There is no such thing as a foreign part of the body. If something foreign enters the body, the white blood cells attack it and kill it. My lungs are every bit as much a part of me as my stomach. And the two most different people in the Church are joined with that kind of unity. The person in the Church who bugs you the most, or who is the most different from you culturally or ethnically... Christ has joined you to that person with a unity that is as close as the relationship between your wrist and your hand.

3. sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.

Earlier he mentioned the covenants of promise that we used to be separated from. Now we are sharers together in the promise (singular) of Christ. The point of that is that all the promises given to Israel in the OT, and all the promises given to God’s people before Israel’s time, and all the promises given in the NT (including the promise of the Holy Spirit)... **in Christ Jesus**. It’s all ours in our close association with Christ Jesus. That’s a little review of what he’s been saying in ch.2. Now he gets back to his point about his role.

In Service of the Mystery

7 I became a servant (deacon) of this gospel

The word *deacon* means servant or server. It’s used of the waiters at the wedding in Cana (Jn.2:5:9). Some scholars say the difference between this word and the other common word for servant (*doulos*), is that *doulos* calls to mind more the idea of the servant belonging to his owner, whereas *deacon* focuses more on the servant’s task. It’s interesting that instead of calling himself a *deacon* of Christ, he calls himself a *deacon* of the Gospel.

What does it mean that Paul was a servant of the Gospel? When he says “the Gospel” here, he’s referring to more than just the message. He’s referring to all that the Gospel brought – the outworking of the Gospel.

The whole work of Christ in this age...

- the conversion of lost souls,
- the unification of Jew and Gentile
- the workings of the body of Christ – all that the Church does...

He’s a servant of all that. Every one of us should consider ourselves a servant of that work. That work is our master. We all have unique roles within the task, but for the Church, there is only one task: the outworking of the plan of the Gospel.

Stewardship

The word translated **administration** in v.2 is the word for stewardship. Chapter 2 describes the grace God gave us, but He didn’t just give it to us directly. He gave it to Paul to give to us. Paul was a steward of that

grace, and it was up to him to get it to us. It's beyond our understanding how this fits with the fact of God's sovereignty.

If God is in full control of everything, how can it be that the outcome of something is dependent upon a human being? I don't know how, but I know that's what the Bible teaches. The Bible is clear that God is in full control of everything – including the outcome of human decision making. But it's also clear that what happens in our area of responsibility is determined by what we do.

Every one of us is a steward in God's house. We have responsibility over some area of the Master's house. That's your ministry. And if you fail to do it, God will allow it to go undone. He will allow harm to come to His own kingdom as a result of our unfaithfulness, and He will bring good to His kingdom as a result of our faithfulness. Your calling is not just something to keep you busy or get you involved in the church. Your gifts are not just some abilities God has given you to spice up your life a little. Your calling and task in life is something of monumental, eternal importance, and if you are unfaithful in it, that will do harm to the Church. The outcome in your area of responsibility is riding on you.

What was Paul's ministry Like?

There is no end to the excuses people come up with for why they are not faithfully carrying out their calling:

- In the last church I was at I got offended. People mistreated me. So I'm going to withhold my gifts and my labor from God and His Church.
- You don't understand how busy my life is. I'm busy at work and busy at home. I don't have time to function in the Body as a part of the Body.
- My gifts aren't really worthwhile. My calling seems to be to just do unimportant things.

People like Paul are out there saying, “This one thing I do...” and they are so zealous over one, great, overriding passion. But my calling seems to be to help out with some little project over here that only indirectly supports the preaching of the Gospel... And then I serve on some little committee over here for a few months... Then I volunteer in the nursery... Some times my only role seems to be to try to encourage people at church in conversation or over the phone... My calling seems so unimportant.

- My calling is too hard.

If I did what the Lord is calling me to do it would require years of training and lots of money and a restructuring of my whole life. People think if they had as glamorous a calling as Paul, then they would be more committed and more joyful about it.

Let's take a look at Paul's calling. He had a very influential leadership position in a very prestigious career, and he had to give that up completely and instantly – the very day God called him. We are always careful to make sure new converts don't have a bad experience when they first come into the church. Listen to Paul's experience when he was a new convert:

Acts 9:23-30

After many days had gone by, the Jews conspired to kill him

Those who had been his friends and comrades and co-workers are literally, seriously trying to kill him. He finds out about it and escapes through the wall in a basket.

26 When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple.

His conversion was genuine, but they weren't buying it. So they shunned him.

So Saul...moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. 29 He talked and debated with the Grecian Jews, but they tried to kill him.

Instead of getting a loaf of bread on his door, this was Paul's experience as a new convert. He only had two groups against him – the believers and the unbelievers. Some people feel like they can't function in the church because they have been hurt by a church in the past – I'm glad Paul wasn't like that. He would be paralyzed.

The task God gave him was to bring the Gospel to the Gentiles, which was the only reason he was in prison. Had he just preached to Jews, he would have been fine. But the Jews hated him, because he was ministering to Gentiles and telling them that there is no longer any ceremonial law. The Jewish customs are all done away with. God required all the Apostles to work hard, but Paul worked harder than all of them.

His calling involved

- frequent imprisonments,
- severe floggings and whippings,
- exposure to death again and again
- 39 lashes 5 different times
- beaten with rods three times
- shipwrecked three times
- once he was stoned
- he was stranded for 24 hours in the open sea
- constantly on the move
- in danger everywhere he went
- he labored and toiled and often went without sleep
- at times he went without food and water and clothing and shelter. (2 Cor.11:23-33)

He fought wild beasts in Ephesus, and faced riots everywhere he went. Of all the things God calls people to do, Paul got about as bad a calling as you can get from a natural point of view. In fact, even you if consider it from a spiritual perspective, from a human point of view even that didn't seem very successful. People constantly disappointed him in ministry. Aside from all the unbelievers trying to kill him, and the believers constantly falling back into sin and error... People in the church were attacking him. There were men in Corinth convincing the Corinthians that he was a phony and had no real authority. Demas deserted him, Alexander did him much harm, Luke bailed out on him... Barnabas went astray. Even Peter went astray, and Paul had to oppose him to his face.

“But what about all he accomplished? If I could look back on that much fruitful ministry, I would be encouraged.” Fruitful ministry? From a human point of view even that is questionable. Nowhere did he pour himself into a church more than in Ephesus, where he spent three years developing leadership. And just a few years later they have unqualified leadership – wolves that came in and who were destroying the flock, and the people were accepting them. So he has to send Timothy to depose those men and get the church back on track. And then years later he writes Timothy again telling him to hang in there – that job still wasn't done. The churches he founded, after he left, embraced all kinds of sin and error... They divided into factions and turned against Paul in many cases. He describes his work in the churches in Galatia as being like giving birth, it was so agonizing. Finally they accepted the Gospel. Then after he left they embraced a false gospel of legalism. Even in what seems the godliest church of all (Philippi) prominent women were fighting and he had to pull in a third party to calm that down. And how did it all end up? Was there a storybook ending? It ends with Paul getting unjustly slammed into prison once again, wasting away as an old man on death row...

The new, young, popular preachers were out there preaching out of envy and rivalry and selfish ambition, not sincerely, trying to stir up trouble for Paul while he was in chains. (Php.4:17) And not too many years after Paul died we read about all those churches in Rev.2,3 and most of them were a mess. The Lord Himself has to come and call them all to repent. From a human perspective, Paul's ministry was a gigantic disappointment.

Now if we sent a clipboard around for openings for that ministry how many of you would sign up? Paul did. And what was his attitude? Did he say, “I’ll do it because I have to, but I resent it”? No. Did he say, “I’ll willingly bear this heavy burden. Sure it’s a terrible trial, but I’ll just have a godly attitude toward suffering”? Look what he says. **7 I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace... 8 Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me!**

Paul knew God was good and loving and kind and gracious... But still, he was astonished – floored – amazed – astounded – flabbergasted – shocked – stunned – dumfounded – incredulous... That God would be so gracious as to give this ministry to him. It just seemed too good to be true. He never got over it. He never referred to his task as his cross or his burden. He referred to it over and over as an unspeakable grace from God.

We tend to think of ministry as our gift to God. And there is a sense in which that’s true. But Paul always spoke of his ministry as God’s gift to him. How did he have an attitude like that when he was called to a task that was so horrible and so miserable from a human point of view? Because he didn’t look at things from a human point of view. That’s why he never calls himself a prisoner of Rome. Instead it’s “I’m a prisoner of Christ.” Did all those hard aspects of his ministry cause him sorrow? Absolutely. Did he lie awake at night and weep and cry and pour out his heart in desperate prayer over those things? He sure did – just like Jesus did. But his overall perception of his life was that he had been given the highest honor imaginable – the greatest conceivable gift of grace... And as a result he was so full of joy he could hardly contain himself. When he thought about those trying to stir up trouble for him in their preaching, he said, “But even though their motives are bad, they are preaching the Gospel and because of this I rejoice! Yes, and I will continue to rejoice” (Php.1:18)

Php.2:17 **I am glad and rejoice with all of you.**

Col.1:24 **I rejoice in what was suffered for you**

To the Romans he said **I am full of joy over you** (Ro.16:19)

To the Thessalonians he said **you are our glory and joy.** 1 Thes.2:20

To Philemon he said **Your love has given me great joy and encouragement** (Phlm.7)

Even to the Corinthians he said **I had confidence in all of you, that you would all share my joy.** (2 Cor.2:3)

And a few chapters later he said **I am greatly encouraged; in all our troubles my joy knows no bounds.**

7 ...my joy was greater than ever. (2 Cor.7:4-7)

To the Philippians he said, **In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy** (Php.1:4-5)

In 1 Thes.3:9 he said **How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you?**

He wasn’t lying in any of those verses. He really was full of so much happiness and joy that he could hardly contain it. If you interviewed him on his deathbed, and asked him to assess his life, he would say, “I’ll have to wait for judgment Day before I’ll know for sure about the quality of my service, but one thing I can say for sure – it sure was a happy life.”

How could Paul be that happy about getting such a hard, painful task?

The Mystery of the Church Part 4 Eph.3:1-8a “The Joy of Ministry”

tape 220b
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“Because he had such amazing results. If I had a calling that important, I would be joyful too. Think of all the converts he had – all the churches he planted – all he did for the Kingdom.”

Is that what brought him such joy? No. When he talks about his joy in his ministry, those aren't the things he mentions. You don't see him writing back to his financial supporters in Philippi and saying, “Here's my missions report. We have ___ converts, ___ baptisms, ordained ___ pastors, planted ___ churches in ___ cities, wrote 13 books of the Bible...” You never see him do that. Those aren't the things he pointed to as bringing him joy.

What brought him joy was the fact that he was graciously given his own, personal task by God Himself.

“Well sure – if you're an Apostle. Of course you're going to be excited about that. But I'm just a grunt in the Church doing a low-level task.” It wasn't even his apostleship that brought him the real joy. He only mentions that in times when he has to establish his authority. But once the foundation was laid, the role of the Apostles faded away – even during the writing of the NT. Except for the primary leaders, you never even hear about the individual Apostles. We never read about the exploits of Thomas or the ministry of Bartholomew. And even the greatest Apostles – the inner part of the inner circle (Peter and John), when they write their epistles, instead of calling themselves Apostles, they call themselves Elders (1 Pe.5:1, 1Jn.1, 2 Jn.1). They would rather identify with one of the ongoing roles of the Church than with being an Apostle.

The reason Paul had such overflowing joy wasn't because of the high status of his ministry or because of the number of converts or number of anything. It was because he was a premier theologian, and he understood what he deserved, and he understood how much grace was involved in instead of getting what he deserved, he gets called into the service of the King. He didn't judge the value of his ministry by the fruits he could observe, or by the impressiveness of his gifts, or by how enjoyable the work was. He judged the value of his calling by the supremacy of the One who called him.

The importance of a task is determined ONLY by whether or not God called you to do it. If God calls you flip burgers at MacDonald's and instead you become President of the United States, you have wasted your meaningless life on this little speck of dust in the universe. But if the Creator calls you to do *anything*, and you do it, you have just done something of eternal significance! We don't deserve that grace! And if we understood anything of how much grace is involved in you or me being called by God to do something for Him – we would go through life stunned and amazed and full of overflowing joy. Some people think if they work hard for God, God owes them. No, the more I work for God, the more I owe Him, for graciously giving me that privilege.

Look at your servant role as a gift of grace. Don't bemoan the fact that you don't have a different role. When we do that, we are like children on Christmas who open a gift and start complaining because it's not something else. To be a subject of the King is a wonderful thing. But to be commissioned by the King Himself to be in His service is the highest and holiest honor there is.

Don't ever complain about your ministry. Don't be the person who gets summoned by the King from off of death row, brought into the King's home, and appointed to high office... And then says, “I don't like this job. Why can't I have a job like his? ”Don't be the person who was raised from the dead, lifted out of the sewer, taken off death row, brought into the family of the King of kings and given spiritual gifts by the Holy Spirit for a special task for which you were created...

- gifts that the Lord died in order that you might have them...
- Don't be the person who gets all that and says, “I don't like the spiritual gifts You gave me. They are no good. I want different ones.”

You will never say that if you understand the rest of v.7.

The Source of Power

7 given me (lit. in accordance with) the working of his power.

He uses two different words for power to emphasize how much power he’s talking about. The word **power** is *dunamis*, which is a word that refers to ability. The word **working** is *energia*, which is a word that refers to the outworking of ability. The grace of Paul’s ministry was given to him in accordance with the level of ability God has... And that ability actually put into effect in action. How much power is that?

Just so you can get this in perspective, think of this – what would you think if I said that about my ministry? “My ministry was given by God in accordance with the degree of ability God has, and all that ability put into action.” Would that strike you as a little prideful? You hear Paul say it in the Bible, so you know for him it’s true. But what about if you heard someone sitting next to you say it about his own ministry? Could you ever say it about your ministry?

I would like to suggest that until you can wholeheartedly say that about your ministry, you are missing the full joy of serving God. The reason Paul had so much joy in such a hard and seemingly fruitless ministry was because he understood this.

- Regardless of how things look
- Regardless of the factions and sin going on in Corinth
- Regardless of the churches I poured my life into that are turning their back on Christ
- Regardless of all my own sin and weakness and limitations and frailty

...When I serve God I am using *spiritual* gifts. And if they are spiritual, that means they are from the Holy Spirit. And if they are given and operated by the Holy Spirit, the result of them is supernatural and divinely authored, and powerful with a level of power commensurate with all the ability of God being put into action. That’s why it’s so important that you use your spiritual gifts. That’s the conduit through which divine, supernatural power comes into your ministry. And if you believe all that, that’s not pride. That’s faith. Paul wasn’t on an ego trip – look at the very next line. **8 Although I am less than the least of all God’s people, this grace was given me**

less than the least

The regular form is already a superlative, and this word is a comparative formed on the superlative “least-est” hence, less than the least. (Graham 216) The point of that isn’t for Paul to put himself down. His point is to show us how great the grace is. If you have ever sinned, you are not in a position to serve God. And if you have sinned a bunch of times, you really don’t belong in God’s service. And if you have ever sinned any serious sin, you are especially unqualified to be in His service. And so if God has taken someone who has sinned as much and as often and as egregiously as me... And has given me spiritual gifts and a calling through which He exerts His mighty power and strength through my efforts... That is cause for rejoicing.

Benediction: 1 Co.15:58 **Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.**

Review Questions:

1. Why was Paul so amazed at the grace of his ministry?

Because he had such an awareness of his unworthiness, and such an awareness of what a high privilege it was to serve the King, and such an understanding of how much power was at work in a ministry God called and gifted him for.

2. What is the key to divine power in ministry?

Use your spiritual gifts.