

MYSTERY AND MINISTRY

Ephesians 3:1-13

Introduction:

The book of Ephesians is a very personal letter from the Apostle Paul to a very beloved church. Paul knew this church well. He knew the people there. He had been instrumental in founding the church in Ephesus, having spent close to three years there, preaching, teaching, and establishing leadership in the church.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the 3rd chapter of this epistle. Chapter 3 is a very personal note from Paul to these Gentile believers in Ephesus. In it Paul opens up his heart about his ministry and God's plan and purpose for them. But before we get into it, we need to see a bit more background about this letter.

One of the things that I don't think I mentioned when we began this study, is Paul's situation when he wrote this letter. Toward the end of the book of Acts, Paul faced increasing opposition from the Jewish leaders, particularly the religious leaders, on account of his ministry to the Gentiles. Eventually he was arrested and tried at various levels of authorities, both Jewish and Roman.

Having appealed to have his case heard by Caesar himself, Paul ended up in custody in Rome. Even there, Paul faithfully proclaimed the gospel to all who would hear. Some believed but most did not. In the closing verses of the book of Acts, Paul again points out to his Jewish detractors that there are just like the prophet Isaiah said so many years earlier. Listen to Acts 28:25-28 – *And disagreeing among themselves, they departed after Paul had made one statement: "The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your fathers through Isaiah the prophet: 'Go to this people, and say, You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive. For this people's heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed; lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.' Therefore, let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen."*

Then the book of Acts concludes with this statement of explanation:

"He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance."

What it doesn't say is that for those two years Paul was imprisoned in a house in Rome, chained to guards, yet free to proclaim the gospel to all who came to him, including the Roman guards who were a captive audience. It was during this time under guard in Rome that Paul wrote a number of letters, including this letter to the church in Ephesus.

That background information helps us to understand the context of our text today. The context of Paul's imprisonment forms a kind of parenthesis around this passage. Look at v. 1 – Paul says that it is because of the Gentiles that he is a prisoner. Not that it is their fault, but it is because he was willing to obey Christ's call to take the gospel to the Gentiles that he found himself chained to Roman soldiers. So ultimately he sees himself as a prisoner of Christ.

Now look down to v. 13 – he closes out this section with a plea that they not lose heart. Even though he is suffering because of his ministry to them, they are not at fault. He would gladly do it all over again, in order to know that they have come to faith in Jesus Christ. So why is he so confident in the face of opposition and persecution? Because he knows that God is working out his plan and purpose. And that is what we want to look at from this text this morning.

There are two key elements in our text that are very much intertwined—the mystery of God's purpose and the ministry to which Paul was called. Let's begin with...

The Mystery

Some people get very nervous when we start talking about a mystery or something mysterious in the Scripture. But the word mystery in the Bible does not refer to something which we cannot know or something that is beyond the understanding of our mind. Rather it is a truth which has been hidden but is now revealed to us. It is, in fact, truth which we could not know if it were not revealed to us by God.

One writer describes it this way: *“A biblical mystery is something like a treasure hunt. In a treasure hunt, you are given clues. You must figure out one clue in order to discover the next. Finally, after finding all the clues, you arrive at the treasure. It is not until you find the treasure that the mystery is solved.”*

In our passage today Paul gives us some clues about the mystery of Christ and the gospel. As we look at this passage there are two parts to this mystery that God has revealed to Paul and he has passed on to us. The first is...

A. The Mystery of God’s Plan for the Church vv. 1-6

Paul begins by discussing his ministry as it relates to this mystery. He describes his part in this as a “...stewardship of God’s grace.” In the NIV the word is translated as administration. The word in the original is used 7 times. In the AV it is translated as dispensation 4 times and stewardship 3 times. It carries the ideas of

1) the management of a household or of household affairs

1a) specifically, the management, oversight, administration, of other’s property

1b) the office of a manager or overseer, stewardship

1c) administration, dispensation

Paul’s ministry was the stewardship of a mystery. It was entrusted to him to administer under the direction and guidance of God through his Holy Spirit. This mystery came to him by revelation from God – v. 3.

vv. 4-5 show us something of the nature of a mystery – the description that I gave you a few moments ago. It was something which was not known in the past, but was now revealed by the Spirit, in progressive clues, to Paul and to the other apostles and prophets.

So what is the mystery?

The mystery was about Christ, and about the salvation which He would accomplish on the cross of Calvary for both Jews and Gentiles. These things were spoken of in the Old Testament, even though they were not fully understood. What was utterly new and unexpected (a complete mystery) was that Jews and Gentiles would be reconciled to God as “one new man.”

As Paul writes here in verse 6 – *read it.*

This was a totally new and unexpected idea and was not a welcome thought to unbelieving Jews. You need to understand the Jewish mindset. *Expand...* That thinking was carried over into the early days of the church. *Expand on the Jews reluctance to accept Gentiles into the church.*

The reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles in Christ and in His church was a mystery which no Old Testament saint (including the prophets) understood. But it was God’s plan from the beginning.

B. The Mystery of God’s Purpose for the Church vv. 7-12

Again Paul begins this section by pointing out the ministry that has been given to him. We’ll get back to that in a moment. But first, we see in this passage three things that motivated God to show his grace in revealing the mystery of Christ.

1. He wanted the Gentiles to know and enjoy the riches of Christ – v. 8b – not just the gospel, not just doctrine, but Christ himself.

2. He wanted everyone to understand the mystery of the gospel – v. 9 – the truth that had been hidden for so long was now open for all to see and know and understand.

3. He wanted the wisdom of his purpose to be seen in the church – v. 10-11. This is the ultimate purpose of God – to reveal to the heavenly beings the wonder of his incredible wisdom. *Turn to 1 Peter 1:10-12 – read and discuss.*

That’s the mystery that God revealed to Paul – His plan and his purpose for the church. As we wrap this up, let’s consider the ministry for a moment.

The Ministry

Paul was very clear, here and in other places in his letters, about the ministry God had entrusted to him. He called it a stewardship. God had given him a responsibility. As we look at his words here there are a few thoughts that we can take away from them.

A. Ministry is given as a gift of God’s grace – v. 2

God does not call anyone to this stewardship on the basis of merit or ability. God calls each of us to serve Him, and by His grace enables us to do that for which He has called us.

B. Ministry is accomplished through the working of God's power – v. 7
Again it is not our ability or strength which accomplishes anything for His kingdom. It is His strength that does His work.

Col 1:28-29 – “We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me.”

I find a great need to remind myself of this often. I find it very easy to fall into the trap of saying, I can't do this any more. I don't have the strength to go on. Yet the ministry does not depend on my strength and power and ability. I can never change anyone's life, but God can. *Read Eph. 3:7 again.*

C. Ministry is entrusted to imperfect people.

Paul is very candid about his view of himself. Mention today's emphasis on having a good self-image. Yet look at what Paul says about himself:

1 Corinthians 15:9 – “For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.”

1 Timothy 1:15 – “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.”

God has entrusted the stewardship of this mystery to average, ordinary, sinful human beings like you and me. Do you suppose he is ever disappointed in the way that we carry out the ministry he has given us? Of course he is. But does he regret that he did it this way? Do you think he wishes he had given this trust to the heavenly angels instead? I don't think so.

He has given us the administration of his grace and is counting on us to be faithful in the ministry he has entrusted to us.

Conclusion

Read vv. 11-13 – Being a steward of the mystery of God is not guaranteed to always be an easy or pleasant task. Discuss Paul's suffering, yet confidence of v. 12.

Close with Colossians 1:24-27 – read and challenge