

The Church Is Located at *Center and Main!*

Ephesians 3:1-13

August 21, 2005

Let's begin by reading Ephesians 3:1-13:

1 For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—
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. 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 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.

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.**

How would you like to be so immune to circumstances that no matter what difficulty you were facing—you could enthusiastically tell somebody: “Hey, I don't want **you** to get discouraged about what **I** am going through?” That almost sounds *strange* doesn't it? You would expect it to be the other way around. “Hey, please pray for **me** so **I** don't get discouraged and give up.”

So what is going on here? Paul has his eye on the very thing that he wants *you* to see in this text. It is *so big* to him that the fact he is sitting in a jail cell as he writes this letter is of far less concern to him than the implications of the message he is writing. This guy is really *into* the Gospel! He is *so* into it that the things that normally bother the rest of us are not even worth the time or effort it takes to complain!

Paul's outlook reminds me of an Olympic gymnast from Japan named Shun Fujimoto who completed his last two floor exercises at the 1976 Montreal Summer Olympics—the pommel horse and the rings—with a *broken knee cap*. His performance on the rings was not only his last one—it was his best one—even though it involved a twisting triple-somersault dismount. The pain of the impact went through him like a knife and left him with tears in his eyes. It also spurred his teammates on to one of the great upsets in Olympic history as Japan outperformed the heavily favored Soviet team for the gold medal. Like Shun Fujimoto who could only see a Gold Medal, **Paul had his eyes fixed on something bigger than his own life and his short-term comfort**. So what was it? Let's dig a little deeper and find out.

As you begin to read this chapter, Paul is about to pray for his Gentile readers who have now become part of God's family and who have been incorporated into His Temple of which Jesus is the Cornerstone—when suddenly he interrupts his prayer with a lengthy digression. You can see this if you look carefully at verse one—*For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles*—then he starts the digression in verse 2 and continues all the way through verse 13. When you look at verse 14, he then resumes the thought he had begun and interrupted in verse 1. *“For this reason I kneel before the Father...”* and closes out the chapter with his prayer.

But before you say—“Come on Paul. Let's cut the interruptions and get to the point,” you need to thank God for this inspired detour—for in it you really begin to get a sense of Paul's heart and the largeness of his world. As he begins to launch into this prayer, he refers to himself as *the prisoner of Christ for the sake of you Gentiles*. And then he suddenly stops. [Pause]. He realizes that what he has just said is a mouthful. It comes out so naturally because he is totally *ok* with his circumstances. But he recognizes that what he has just written might not sit so easily with those who will be hearing these words read before the various congregations in Asia Minor, starting with the church at Ephesus. These Gentile believers know all too well that he would not even *be* in prison if it weren't for his insistence that the Gospel was intended for *them* as well as Jews. It was the very truths that Paul had just been talking about in Ephesians chapter 2 (that Jesus has demolished the barrier between God and man as well as Jew and Gentile) which got him into trouble with the Jewish authorities and resulted in his imprisonment. You can read more about that in the last eight chapters of the book of Acts.

Now you may be thinking to yourself: *“Ok. I can see that Paul is really excited about a Gospel that breaks down barriers. So excited that he is willing to endure living behind a barrier as the price of proclaiming this Good News. But what does this have to do with me 2,000 years later?”* Good question. Are *you* asking that question? You need to. Because if you aren't, you are wasting your time here tonight. The truth here is that Paul is not saying a whole lot more in this digression than he has already said in chapter 2. What he is doing, however, is giving us a cue as to how these truths ought to be affecting *you and me personally*. And if they are not doing for you what they did for him, that all the more points out how much we need the prayer that he prayed in verses 14-21. With that in mind, let's ask the Lord for His understanding as we look at this text tonight.

Prayer—*Lord, something is going on in this passage that we need to understand much more clearly than we do at this moment! And so we ask you—just as Paul asked you on behalf of the audience to which he wrote this very letter: Give us eyes to see and hearts to believe what your Spirit is saying to us through this text! Help us to understand what you are revealing here. We humbly acknowledge that we cannot grasp it—unless your Spirit removes the blinders that come from our deceitful desires, our empty pursuits, and our malnourished faith. Spirit, right now grab our attention with your life-changing Word and so transform our hearts that we will not be able to put the implications of this text out of our minds until we have responded with obedient faith. Father, by your Spirit of Promise, make each one of us here tonight an answer to the prayer Jesus prayed in John 17. Help us to see your plan, to embrace it, and to live it out before a watching world so that they along with the angelic hosts will see your undeniable wisdom through us, **your church**. In Jesus name we pray.*

Transition: What was it that enabled Paul to be so upbeat in spite of his circumstances? What was so *big* to him that it made his imprisonment seem like a *small* price to pay for his unique role as God’s ambassador to the Gentiles? There are two great realities in this passage that captured Paul’s heart and made life sweet, regardless of whatever the present circumstances. And the Holy Spirit moved Paul to mention them here because they have relevance for you and me today. The first one is this:

I. God gave Paul a *message* (vs. 1-6).

In verse two, Paul talks about the *administration* of God’s grace that was given to him. The word, administration, for most of us conjures up pictures of a building with a CEO running an organization or a civil leader managing some level of government. A better word would be *stewardship*. Paul is saying that God gave him a stewardship or responsibility to carry out. That responsibility had to do with an important message. So far so good. But the word that Paul uses to describe the message might throw you off at first. He refers to it in this passage three times (in verses 3, 4, and 9) as a “mystery.” When I think of a mystery, I think of Ripley’s “Believe It or Not.” Or maybe a “murder mystery.” To us, a mystery is something dark, secret, or puzzling. When we say that something is “mysterious,” we mean that it is unexplainable—or perhaps even incomprehensible. If you saw the movie, National Treasure, you know exactly what I am talking about. National Treasure is a fictitious action film about people trying to break down a secret code to find an enormous treasure left behind by America’s founding fathers. But the biblical meaning of the word “mystery” is quite different from that concept. It still has the idea of “secret” but it is no longer a secret that is *closely guarded*. It is *open* and has been *revealed* by God. Unlike our modern mysteries or even the pagan mystery religions of Paul’s day—the Christian mysteries are those truths that have been revealed by God and so now belong to the whole church. *To put it simply, a mystery is a truth that at one time was hidden from human knowledge—but now has been disclosed by divine revelation.*

So what was the particular mystery or divine revelation that Paul was given? In verse 4, Paul refers to it as the “*mystery of Christ*.” In verse 5, he mentions that it was not understood in previous generations, but was revealed to the NT apostles and prophets and specifically to himself (Again, if you want more background on this, you can find it in Acts chapters 9-11). But in verse 6, Paul explains what the mystery is:

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.

Notice again that Paul is not mentioning anything he has not previously talked about in chapter 2. But he seeks to draw into focus what all this means by using three phrases—each of which has the idea of “*with*” built into itself. In fact, the second of the phrases Paul apparently makes up because there is no known

occurrence of this word anywhere else in the New Testament. What are these three phrases? *Fellow heirs, fellow-members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise*. These phrases do not add any new revelation concerning God’s redemptive plan to save lost mankind—both Jews and Gentiles. What they do is shed light on something that previous generations had never known before—and that is the *precise manner* in which God’s saving work would take place. For example, God had told Abraham in Genesis 12:3 that through his descendents, the Jews, all the nations of the earth would be blessed. But the mystery of Christ given to Paul goes even further in unfolding what that would involve. Namely that the Gentiles would be:

- “*Fellow-heirs*” *with* the Jews of the *same* blessing. In other words, the Gentiles don’t merely receive some general blessing as God promised in Genesis 12:3, but the blessing itself consists of the *same family privileges* as the Jews! Consequently, in Romans 4, Paul is able to describe Abraham as the father of *all* who believe in Christ Jesus! We are *all* brothers and sisters by faith in Christ regardless of our ethnicity.
- Furthermore, Gentiles would no longer be outcasts but “*fellow members*” of one body *with* the Jews. In other words, we are all on the same footing. There are no class distinctions. No compartments in heaven or on earth for *first class* and *second class* believers. We are all members of the same body with Christ as our Head.
- Finally, Gentiles would become “*fellow partakers*” of the promise *with* (those of Jewish birth) in Christ Jesus. In the OT, the original covenants were promised to the people of the OT, the Jews. They were promises that ultimately pointed to salvation, a salvation that would involve a new heart and the ministry of the Holy Spirit taking up residence in the very hearts of God’s people. But now Paul is saying that we all are recipients of that Spirit of promise by whom we have access through Christ to the Father (Ephesians 2:18).

And all of this is for those who are *in* Christ Jesus, Jews or Gentiles. And it comes to us *through* the Gospel.

God’s people always knew that God had a plan for the Gentiles as well as the Jews. What we didn’t always know was the *radical nature* of the plan. That God would suspend his theocracy through the nation of Israel and would bring into being a brand new international, multi-cultural, multi-racial entity called the Church—the body of Christ!

Transition: This mystery was the message that God gave to Paul. But with the message came something else. Read verse 7:

I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God’s grace given me through the working of his power.

II. God entrusted Paul with a *ministry* (vs. 7-13).

Paul was not only given this message, but along with it he was given the empowerment to minister this message to others. But who were the recipients to which Paul was responsible to minister the message? Look at verse 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.

A. Making known to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ (8)

We don't need to elaborate much here. All you need to do is go back and review chapters one and two to understand what Paul is talking about. Whatever the riches are, they are freely available because of the cross. They involve resurrection from death caused by sin. They involve future and in some way our present enthronement with Christ. They involve reconciliation with God and with other believers. They make all believers in Christ a part of God's family. They make us all *live* building blocks in His Temple as he makes His people his dwelling place among men!

Some heavy stuff, right? But stop and get a feel for how all this is affecting **Paul!** Listen to his descriptions. He refers to it as the unsearchable riches of Christ. Unsearchable. What does he mean by that? Some other translations of this word include: Unfathomable. Incomprehensible. Incalculable. Or how about just plain "*infinite?*" (GNB).

Paul is so moved by this message that he has been given to minister to the Gentiles that he has to labor to find words to express it! Whatever it is that he feels, I can tell you one thing it's not. It is not "boring." The Gospel for Paul is *anything but boring*. The Gospel is God's *anti-dote* for boredom. Boredom is price the world pays for seeking its fulfillment in the creation apart from the Creator. Boredom is what we feel when we become disconnected from the One who created us and gave life its ultimate purpose and meaning. Paul knew something that too many of us have forgotten. We weren't made to be satisfied with this world or anything in it apart from God. We were made to be satisfied with Christ and all the riches that are in Him.

Illustration: All the distractions at Ford Field (Lion's game) to keep the fans interested!

Do you know the definition of a travesty? When those who possess the infinite, unsearchable riches of Christ live for and pursue the same things as those who are altogether blind and indifferent to the Gospel. When we who are infinitely rich in Christ act as bored as those who have little more than the mud pies of internet chat rooms and the trivial pursuit of fantasy sports and who can treat the unsearchable riches of Christ with less dignity than a coaster upon which to set your coffee mug! Paul knew what he had and knew the responsibility that came with it. To make it known—

whatever the cost to the Gentiles! But that is not all. Another part of his ministry was...

B. Making plain the mystery to *all* men (9)

Notice verse 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.*

The phrase, “to make plain” means to “shed light on.” Paul’s ministry was to shed light on the mystery of the Gospel by proclaiming it and calling upon those who received it to live out their “with-ness” or “oneness” before a watching world. To that end, Paul did not just preach it—he lived it. He lived it out when he publicly confronted Peter for caving in to the Legalists in the book of Galatians who threatened the Jew-Gentile unity with their insistence on ceremonial law-keeping. He lived it out when he challenged the predominantly Gentile churches to give sacrificially for their Jewish brothers and sisters in economically devastated Jerusalem—and later delivered the offering on his final trip to Jerusalem in Acts 21. Paul not only preached the mystery—he lived it. And he lived it fully knowing that it was part of God’s eternal plan—a plan that started with creation and will one day culminate in the re-creation of all that sin once ravaged. God will do what no man could ever do. He will put *Humpty-Dumpty* back together again. And Paul was totally committed in word and deed to that end. But there is one more thing to which Paul gave himself. Look at verses 10-11:

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.

Paul was part of something that involved...

C. Making known God’s wisdom to the heavenly powers (10-11)

This has got to be one of the most fascinating verses in all of Scripture. First of all, about whom is he speaking here? Look at 1:19-21 and 6:11-12. He is talking about the angels—good and bad. And what is the **manifold** wisdom of God? The word means “many-colored” and was used to describe flowers, crowns, embroidered cloth and woven carpets. A near cousin of this word was used to describe Joseph’s richly ornamented robe in the Greek version of the OT (Genesis 37:3, 23, 32). It points to the multi-colored wisdom of God. And it may hint of the multi-cultural tapestry of the church—whose members come from many backgrounds and languages, yet where there is unity and harmony that is a result of the wisdom of God in the Gospel. God’s wisdom can be seen in so many ways. In nature through such spectacles as Niagara Falls or the Grand Canyon or a spectacular star-lit night! Or it can be seen in the intricacies

of the human body or even in the growth of flowers or vegetables in your own backyard. But the pre-eminent display of God's wisdom is what He is doing to display His wisdom to angels through the ages through the Church! John Stott in his book, The Message of Ephesians, describes it this way (pages 123-124):

"It is as if a great drama is being enacted. History is the theatre, the world is the stage, and church members in every land are the actors. God himself has written the play, and he directs and produces it. Act by act, scene by scene, the story continues to unfold. But who are the audience? They are cosmic intelligences, the principalities and powers in the heavenly places. We are to think of them as spectators of the drama of salvation. Thus 'the history of the Christian church becomes a graduate school for angels.'"

Three practical truths to take home, ponder, and live (From John Stott in The Message of Ephesians, pp. 126-130).

1. The church is central to **history**.

History is not a random succession of events that cyclically repeats itself in meaningless fashion as Alfred Toynbee believed. It is a linear march with a beginning and a climax—and that climax is Jesus Christ as He redeems a sin-divided and sin-ravaged creation. And what is the instrument He uses to bring this about? **The Church!**

2. The church is central to the **Gospel**.

The Gospel is not merely about a personal Savior who died to rescue individuals. It is about Christ dying and rising again to re-create a new humanity, a new community of people who are reconciled to God and each other made into a family and a dwelling place for the Living God called **the Church!**

3. The church is central to Christian **living**.

The church is so central to the Christian life that it was a small thing for Paul to suffer for the Gentiles. So here is the challenge in the words of John Stott: *"If the church is central to God's purpose, as seen in both history and the Gospel, it must surely also be central to our lives. How can we take lightly what God takes so seriously? How dare we push to the circumference what God has placed at the center?"*

Application: What are you giving yourself to in order to cooperate with God's grand object lesson for a watching world and watching angels? How is that playing out in your relationships at home, at work, and in the local family of believers (See Eph. 4:1-3ff)? How is the Gospel of reconciliation being mirrored through our church to a city

that has a devastating history of bad race relations? How is the complexion of our congregation reflecting the multi-colored wisdom of God? How do our prayers reflect Paul's prayer (vs. 14-21) and Christ's own prayer for His church in John 17?

We have only this little bit of time on earth—and then eternity. As the saying goes: "*Only one life twill soon be past—only what's done for Christ will last.*" How do you do that? By getting in step with God's program in and through His Church. And where is it located? Where do you have it listed in your planner? It's not on 17017 12 Mile Road. It's located at the corner of ***Center and Main!***

