

Mystery of Christ in His Church

Ephesians 3:1-13

Let me share with you what goes through my mind as a pastor when I prepare to preach a part of the Bible like Ephesians 3 which scrapes the heavens by talking about God's eternal purpose. I wonder, "How do these verses relate to people in this church who are overcome with heartache over someone in their family; who are struggling to raise their children in an increasingly godless world; who are worried about paying their bills; who are juggling busy schedules; and who are wrestling daily with temptation and sin?"

Thinking about God's eternal purpose may be interesting for theologians and scholars, but how does it help people who wrestle with the challenges that life throws at them?

First I assume that the people Paul wrote to in Ephesus were normal people with these same sorts of common, everyday problems to face. What prompted Paul to write these things? He must have thought that it would help them to understand something about God's eternal purpose as it related to them, the church in Ephesus. They needed to know this and so do we.

So, how does learning the truth about God's eternal purpose in the church help us to live more godly lives?

It seems to me that what Paul is doing is raising our vision for what God is doing with the church. All too often, even among Christians the church is viewed as a nice thing to attend (if it's good church), but many don't really think of it as absolutely necessary to the purpose of God for them.

Many who claim to be born again view the church as optional. If it meets your needs, that's fine! But, if it doesn't, then don't bother with it. They think it's really not that important in the overall scheme of things.

And of course, the unbelieving world has an even lower opinion of the church. What matters to the world are things like the global economic crisis, threats of terrorism, climate change, the upcoming election, and the ups and downs in the stock market.

The world tries to push the church off into a corner and ignore it. So it is passages like this that remind us that God's eternal purpose centers on Christ and His church. If we want our lives to count for eternity, we've got to get God's vision and purpose for the church and live accordingly.

Perhaps you've heard the story of three men who were working on a pile of stone at a construction site. A curious passerby was eager to discover what was going on. He asked the first worker, "What are you doing?" "Chiseling stone," was the reply.

Trying for a better answer, he asked the second worker, "What are you doing?" "Earning a living."

He asked the third worker, "Sir, what are you doing?" He dropped his sledgehammer, stood erect, and with a gleam in his eye exclaimed, "I'm building a great cathedral!"

All three men were doing the same job, but only one of them saw how his role fit into a larger, more important vision. Paul wants us to see how our lives fit into God's glorious eternal purpose for His church. When we see this, it will help us very practically to deal with life's difficult trials. He is saying, Since God's eternal purpose is to make known His manifold wisdom through the church, we must pray and not lose heart in our trials.

Last week we considered the how God revealed the mystery of the church and showed the significance of this mystery.

I. The Revelation of the Mystery (vv. 1-5).

- A. Paul's Reason for Writing (v. 1a).**
- B. Paul was a Prisoner as He Wrote (v. 1b).**
- C. Paul had a Stewardship from the Lord (vv. 2-5).**

II. The Significance the Mystery (vv. 6).

- A. "Fellow Heirs" (v. 6a).**
- B. "Of the same Body" (v.6b).**
- C. "Partakers of His Promise" (v.6c).**

Today I want to pick up with verse 7 as Paul describes the preaching of the mystery.

III. The Preaching of the Mystery (vv. 7-8).

A. Preached by the "Power" of God (v.7)

Paul preached this mystery by the power of God. He thought of himself simply as a servant, that's what the word "**minister**" means in verse 7, a lowly servant. It was "**according to the gift of grace**" that Paul was saved, and that he received his stewardship as an apostle. It was God who made Paul a minister. It was God who gave him the gift. And it was God who empowered him.

The word "**working**" is the root word from which we get our word "energy." The word "**power**" comes from *dunamis*, which gives us the word "dynamic." Paul could only fulfill his ministry to the Gentiles by God's "**power**" effectively "**working**" within him.

That same "**power**" is within you. Look down to **v.20**. It is the power of the Holy Spirit "**that works in us.**" Who is us? In verse 21 he says it is "**the church!**" Back in chapter 1 Paul said he prayed, that believers like us would know, "**what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places,**" (Eph. 1:19-20). In other words, God will never call us to do what He will not equip us to do. He will never ask us to do what we are incapable of doing. With His calling, He always gives us "**power.**"

Don't ever say that you can't share the good news of Jesus Christ with others. God gives us His power through His Holy Spirit. Jesus said in Acts 1:8, **"But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me."**

So Paul preached the mystery of Christ by the power of God. What did he preach?

B. Preached the "Unsearchable Riches of Christ" (v.8).

Paul says that he is **"less than the least of all the saints."** Here he takes the Greek word for **"least"** or "smallest and adds an ending which can only be translated "leaster." Some think he was playing off his Latin name *Paulus* which meant "little" or "small," so that the idea is, **"I am little by name, little in stature, and morally and spiritually littler than the least of all Christians. I am Small Paul"** (Hughes, p.107).

Paul said in 1 Tim.1:15, **"Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief."** He said in 1 Cor. 15: 9, **"For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God."** He could not get over the grace of God that called him to preach.

Paul's mission was to **"preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ."** I love **"unsearchable riches."** It means "the riches that cannot be tracked." It is difficult to put in one word, but translators have used words like untraceable, inexplicable, unexplorable, inexhaustible, unfathomable, illimitable, inscrutable, incalculable, and infinite.

The point is Christ always enriches life. Some people don't want to be saved because they feel it will require giving up something. The truth is Christ doesn't subtract from our lives but he adds **"unsearchable riches!"**

We who already have **"unsearchable riches"** ought not to be selfish, but be willing to share from the inexhaustible supply.

III. The Eternal Purpose of the Mystery (vv. 9-11).

God has an eternal purpose for what He is doing in this world. We saw it in chapter 1,

9 having made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself,

10 that in the dispensation of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth; in Him.

God's eternal purpose is to sum up all things in Christ. Jesus Christ is the centerpiece of history. And since He is the head of His body, the church, it is central to God's purpose. Paul in verse 9 that he was called, **"to make all see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ."**

The word fellowship there means administration, or stewardship. He is describing God's eternal purpose for the church.

A. God's Purpose was Carried out by Christ Jesus.

"**The mystery of Christ**" (3:4) refers to God's eternal plan to sum up all things in Christ, the Savior (1:9-10). But, one application of this mystery was the previously hidden aspect of God's uniting the Jews and Gentiles on equal standing in the one body of Christ (3:6). The Old Testament predicted the salvation of many Gentiles, but it did not reveal that God would unite them as one body with the Jews in the church, seat them with Christ in the heavenly places, and display His manifold wisdom through them throughout the ages.

God's purpose was accomplished through Christ Jesus our Lord through His death and resurrection. It was at the cross, especially, that God demonstrated His manifold wisdom. God's sending His own Son to bear the penalty that we deserve displays His wisdom, love, and justice in ways that would not have been seen otherwise.

B. The church reveals the Mystery to Angelic Beings.

Most of us don't often think about the angels, but Paul brings them into the center of God's eternal purpose for us! The "**principalities and powers in the heavenly places**" mentioned in v.10 refer to angels, both good and evil.

All the angels are created beings. They are limited in their knowledge and do not understand everything God is doing. As they watch how He unveils the mystery in our lives, they are curious.

God has chosen to reveal his "**manifold wisdom... by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places.**" In other words, the church not only educates the world, but the angels as well!

Peter tells us that the angels long to look into the matter of our salvation (1 Pet. 1:12), "**things which angels desire to look into**" literally translates "the angels stoop to look."

Luke 15:10 says, "**There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.**" 1 Cor. 11:10 suggests they watch carefully the assembling of saints in a local fellowship. In 1 Cor. 4:9 Paul says, "**We have been made a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men.**"

John Stott says, "**It is through the old creation, the universe that God reveals his glory to humans; it is through the new creation, the church that he reveals his wisdom to angels.**"

Look again at v.10. The phrase "**manifold wisdom.**" It means "many colored wisdom." This same word is used in the Septuagint to describe Joseph's coat of many colors. God's "**wisdom**" calls for the church to be "many colored" of many varieties. This pictures the beauty and diversity of the body of Christ.

C. The church is God's eternal plan (v.11).

Sometimes people get the wrong idea that Israel was "plan A" and the church is "plan B." Nothing could be further from the truth. God has put Gentiles and Jews together **"according to the eternal purpose."**

The church is not a divine afterthought. It is part of God's **"eternal purpose"** something that was in His mind from the beginning.

Guess what? You are not an afterthought. You are not "plan B." You are not a cosmic accident. God made you too for His **"eternal purpose."**

Again, the overall point that Paul is driving home is to elevate our understanding of the importance of the church in God's eternal purpose, so that we will give it the proper priority in our lives. He wants us to understand what a great privilege it is that God has chosen us to be the agents of carrying out His eternal purpose through the church. The church is not just a nice place to drop by on Sundays if you're not doing anything more interesting! The church is God's vehicle for making known His manifold wisdom, not only on earth, but also to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. So we must see how our lives count for eternity.

Paul applies God's eternal purpose for us in two ways:

IV. The Impact of the Mystery to Believers (vv. 12-13).

A. It gives us Great Confidence in Prayer (v.12).

Because we are at the center of God's eternal purpose, we must pray (3:12). Prayer is the primary means by which the church exercises God's authority and brings about His rule on earth over the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. Paul reinforces this in Eph. 6:18-20, where immediately after telling us to put on God's full armor so that we can stand against the devil, Paul calls us to prayer for all the saints, that the gospel may go forward.

This means that prayer (to use John Piper's analogy) is not an intercom to call the maid to bring more refreshments to the TV room. Rather, it is a walkie-talkie to call the general to send more troops and supplies to the front line. Our focus in prayer should be, **"Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven"** (Matt. 6:10). Prayer is to help advance God's eternal purpose in Christ through His church.

Because of what God is doing through His people, we can have **"access with confidence"** that is we can come forthrightly to His throne – we have confidence toward God.

We also can have **"boldness"** – confidence to know that God is working all things together for our good and His glory.

B. It keeps us from being Discouraged (v.13).

Paul wants his friends in Ephesus not to **"lose heart"** because of his **"tribulations"** as a **"prisoner."** He said in Rom.8:18, **"For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be**

compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us." No matter what happens to us in this life, our position in the body secures future glory! Therefore the mystery calls for our ministry.

When Apple Computer fell on difficult times some years ago, their young chairman, Steven Jobs, went to New York to try to convince PepsiCo's John Sculley to move west and run the struggling computer company.

As they sat in Sculley's penthouse office overlooking the Manhattan skyline, Sculley started to decline the offer. He said that Apple would have to offer him an astronomical salary and benefit package. Flabbergasted, Jobs gulped and agreed—if Sculley would move to California. But Sculley would only commit to being a consultant from New York.

Finally, Jobs confronted Sculley: "Do you want to spend the rest of your life selling sugared water, or do you want to change the world?" It knocked the wind out of Sculley. He hadn't thought of it that way. He accepted the offer and moved west. (From, *Leadership*, Spring, 1991, p. 44.)

Many Christians don't commit themselves fully to the local church because they're too focused on themselves and they don't have the big picture. The church is at the center of how God wants to change the world. It is His eternal purpose to display His manifold wisdom through the church. We should respond by committing ourselves to it and praying for God to use it mightily. We should be willing to endure hardship to see it become all that God wants it to be.