

The Ministry of Mystery

Introduction

Today in our walk through Ephesians we move on to look in some detail at the first half of **Ephesians 3**. The chapter breaks down into two halves: **3:1-13** and then **3:14–21** and so this morning I want to start by taking a close look at the first half of the chapter, that is, **3:1-13**. This passage leads on to a long prayer for the Ephesians that forms the second half. In splitting the chapter in the way that he has Paul is actually setting the scene for the second half by providing details of his own background and knowledge and how he came to be God's chosen Apostle to the Gentiles.

In these thirteen verses Paul describes his role and how he was called to be a preacher of the gospel to the Gentiles. In doing that he also expands on the "*mystery*" surrounding the gospel and the Gentiles; a "*mystery*" that was revealed to him by God and not through any learning of his own.

Background

Before we move on to the details in the passage it is important that we put the whole thing in context and expand **3:1** which describes very briefly Paul's situation as he sits and writes to them. In that opening verse Paul describes himself as "*the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles*". Why would he describe himself in such a way and why would he suggest that he was a prisoner of Christ?

Paul's main opposition came from those Jewish leaders who didn't believe Jesus was the Messiah. Consequently when they saw Paul preaching salvation through faith in Christ to the Gentiles they persuaded the Romans to arrest him for treason. Just as they had done with Jesus Himself they demanded Paul's arrest and punishment and I assume the Romans complied in order to keep the peace. That is why at the time of writing this Epistle Paul was in Rome awaiting trial. I should explain that although he had been arrested in Caesarea as a Roman citizen Paul was entitled to have his case heard before Caesar himself, hence being taken to Rome and held as a prisoner there. Prior to being taken to Rome he had been held prisoner in Caesarea for three years. That was followed by his being held in Rome for approximately two years at the time of writing this letter. He wasn't actually behind bars as his imprisonment in Rome was a form of house arrest although he was constantly accompanied by a guard.

Despite being held by the Romans Paul knew that he was really a prisoner as a result of God's will for him, hence the comment "*the prisoner of Christ Jesus*" (**3:1**). He didn't mean that Jesus was the jailer but that it was because of his work for Christ that he had been arrested and imprisoned. Paul then adds the phrase "*for the sake of you Gentiles*" by which he meant that it was his work amongst the Gentiles that was behind his arrest and imprisonment. He most certainly wasn't blaming the Gentiles or Jesus for the predicament in which he found himself.

Throughout all that he experienced during this time Paul remained faithful and kept his trust in Christ and I wonder if we would be able to do the same. Paul had been falsely accused of taking Gentiles into forbidden areas of the Temple and regardless of the truth of the matter he was arrested and charged. How would we feel about that, about being charged with an offence we knew to be false? I'm not sure that Paul was 100% happy about it but he was able at one time to write to the church in Corinth and say to them "*We are hard*

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pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.” (2 Corinthians 4:8-9). He also reminded the Romans that “... we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28). We would do well to follow Paul’s example when we find life isn’t going too well for us by keeping our faith and trust in Christ.

Part 1 – Mystery

When we read the passage carefully we can see that Paul uses the word “*mystery*” four times; that is in 3:3, 3:4, 3:6 and later in 3:9. That may be understandable since it has to be said that much of the relationship between God and ourselves is a mystery since it is a supernatural relationship. However, the mystery that Paul is talking about here is that the gospel was also intended for the Gentiles not only those Jews who already believed in God but not in Jesus as Messiah.

We know from 1 Corinthians 2 that this “*mystery*” was kept hidden by God until He was ready to reveal it to certain Apostles and prophets for them to administer. Paul was one of them and God chose him to minister to the Gentiles. It was God’s timing as to when He made this mystery known and given that it centred on salvation through the death of Jesus on the cross to pay for our sins that time was when Jesus came to earth for the first time. The “*mystery*” wasn’t an idea that we learn about only in the New Testament idea but something that had been announced by God through prophets such as Isaiah. The prophet was one of a number who had written of the involvement of both Jews and Gentiles in God’s family. Isaiah quoted God’s words when he wrote: “*I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, ... that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.*” (Isaiah 49:6b). It’s important to understand here that God is talking of Jesus not Paul even though Paul would go on to be chosen as the Apostle to the Gentiles.

Later in his ministry to the Colossians Paul was able to say to them that having been chosen by God “*I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness — the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord’s people.*” (Colossians 1:25-26). Paul tells us that this mystery was “*made known to me by revelation*” (3:3) before adding that the “*mystery of Christ 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*” (3:4b-5). The “*mystery*” meant that Gentiles were heirs with Israel which must have come as a shock to those who were devout Jews but non-believers in Christ. It was this activity that led to Paul’s arrest that I mentioned when looking at 3:1. The Gentiles not only heard the gospel but they responded and as a result became members of “*one body*” and “*sharers*” in the “*promise of Christ Jesus*” (3:6) in just the same way as the Jewish believers. The “*mystery*” wasn’t hidden because only a few would have understood but because it was kept hidden until Christ arrived; He is the key.

It’s important to understand that this “*mystery*” was revealed by “*God’s Spirit*” thus indicating that it came from a divine revelation and inspiration rather than through human learning. Before becoming a Christian and being called by God to minister to the Gentiles, we know that Paul was a renowned scholar and a zealous Pharisee something he tells us about in Philippians 3:4-6. And yet, even with his knowledge of the Law and all his studies Paul did not know of this “*mystery*” until it was revealed to him by “*God’s Spirit*” (3:5).

Part 2 – Together

When we come to **3:6** we see the word “*together*” used three times a thought which looks back to the unity and reconciliation that we studied in **2:11-22**. In that short passage Paul describes the Gentiles as being “*fellow-citizens with God's people and members of God's household*” (**2:19**); in other words they were together and united with Jewish believers in Christ. The NLT version of that verse changes the words “*God's household*” to “*God's family*” which I feel carries with it a far better thought of unity and togetherness. Paul really emphasises the thought of togetherness in **3:6** when he uses those phrases: “*heirs together*”, “*members together*” and “*sharers together*”. Those words carry the thought of real inclusivity; that is, Jews and Gentiles together in the same family something which for centuries would have been unheard of. When they came to faith in Jesus Gentiles became heirs of Christ, members of the one body and sharers in all of Christ's promises, and what Paul is declaring here is that Gentile and Jewish Christians together are now fellow heirs of the same blessing, fellow-members of the same body and fellow-partakers of the same promise. All this is both “*in Jesus Christ*” since it is shared equally by all who have come to faith in Christ whether they be Jews or Gentiles; and “*through the gospel*” since it is the proclamation of the gospel and God's Word that talks of this unity and makes it available to all those who believe in Christ.

Part 3 – Paul's Calling

In the next few verses beginning at **3:7** Paul talks about himself, his ministry and how he was called by God.

Just like most people in ministry today Paul didn't choose to be a minister or as he puts it, “*a servant of the gospel*”; he was called by God Himself. In the passage in **Acts 26** that we read earlier Paul is explaining to King Agrippa in great detail how he came to be called to take the gospel to the Gentiles. Given his background as a persecutor of the followers of Christ I think we can see that he most definitely wouldn't have chosen to join those spreading the good news of his own volition. God called him to this work of that there is no doubt. There are a couple of phrases in **3:7** that make it very clear that it was all of God and nothing of Paul. Firstly, his calling was “*by the gift of God's grace*”. That grace is the all empowering, unsolicited and unmerited gift of God and He uses it as He wills. In this case God chose Paul to be His servant chosen for the specific task of taking the gospel to the Gentiles. Secondly, all this came about “*through the working of His power*”. God has enormous power, far more than we can possibly imagine and He uses that power to implement His will. That passage in **Acts 26** shows us that power at work as we see God sending a blinding light to stop Paul and his companions in their tracks. A voice came from heaven; it was Jesus and He was appointing Paul to be the one to take the gospel to the Gentiles. In the passage in **Acts 9** where we read of Paul's conversion, Luke tells us that Paul's companions heard a noise but not the conversation. All of that demonstrates to me that God is able to use His power in quite remarkable ways.

To some it would have been quite natural to gloat at being called to this important task. Not to Paul as he explains at the beginning of **3:8**, he regarded himself as “*less than the least of all God's people*”. I don't think that was false modesty, Paul genuinely felt that he was unworthy of God's calling. In his letter to the Philippians Paul provides us with his biography as a Jew and very impressive it is. However, that's not all since in addition to that Luke

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quotes Paul's words in **Acts 26:10-11** where the Apostle says, "*On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them.*" Let's face it if you were an HR Manager looking for someone to preach the gospel of Christ to the Gentiles would you choose Paul? I think it's highly unlikely and yet that is what God did through His grace and power. Paul continued his thought of low self esteem when he said to Timothy: "*Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners — of whom I am the worst.*" (**1 Timothy 1:15**). Given that Paul regarded himself as the lowest of the low I'm sure he was stunned that God had chosen Him. I can just imagine him thinking "*you want me to do ... what?*" I'm equally sure that many who are called to ministry who think exactly the same. That is where those words "*but God ...*" come in. God always knows better and He will choose whomsoever He wants to fulfil His ministry. I suspect that many who are called to any form of ministry feel the same as Paul; they are not worthy.

Paul then explains to the Ephesian believers that God had chosen him "*to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ*" (**3:8b**). There are multiple references to "*riches*" in Ephesians. For instance we read of the "*riches of God's grace*" (**1:7**); the "*riches of His glorious inheritance*" (**1:18**); the "*incomparable riches of his grace*" (**2:7**); "*unsearchable riches of Christ*" here in **3:10** and His "*glorious riches*" (**3:16**). He also makes similar references in Romans and Colossians. These riches that Paul is talking of are those which Christ possesses in Himself and which He bestows on those who come to faith in Him. In his commentary on Ephesians, John Stott suggests that these riches include resurrection from the death of sin; being seated with Christ in the heavenlies; being reconciled with God; being united with Jewish believers in God's new society; the end of hostility between Jews and Gentiles and therefore the beginning of peace; direct access to God our Father through Christ enabled by the Spirit; and membership of his kingdom and family. That's quite a list and shows just how deep and extensive God's riches truly are.

In **3:9** Paul outlines for us just what his ministry was. He was "*to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery*". At first reading that may be a bit difficult to understand although the NLT does read a little easier when it puts it this way: "*I was chosen to explain to everyone this mysterious plan that God, the Creator of all things, had kept secret from the beginning.*" (**3:9 - NLT**). We looked at this mystery a few minutes ago and now we see Paul explaining that his role was to take the mystery to the Gentiles. The original Greek for the phrase "*to make plain*" means "*to enlighten*" and Paul's aim now was to make the gospel clear and thereby lift the fog of spiritual darkness that so many lived in. I suspect that there is still a similar need today! God's purpose in all this was that Paul's preaching, teaching, and praying ministry should build up God's family and the church with Christ at the centre.

Lest we need reminding we learn from **3:12** that it is in Christ and through Him as our Lord and Saviour that we are able to "*approach God with freedom and confidence*". For the Gentiles this was all part of the mystery that had remained hidden since the creation. God always intended that Gentiles should be part of His family and enjoy that direct access to Him that only faith in Christ can bring.

Part 4 – Reassurance

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The final verse of this passage, **3:13**, is intended to provide reassurance to the Gentile believers in Ephesus. Looking back to **3:1** we know that Paul was a prisoner “*for the sake of you Gentiles*”. It is very easy then to imagine that the church would be deeply concerned for Paul’s situation and future. That is why he tells them “*not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you*”. No matter what happened to him, Paul always knew that God was with him and would help him through his suffering. His final words in **3:13** make clear that his imprisonment and suffering were all for “*your glory*”. No one likes to suffer or enjoys suffering although I suspect that Paul was slightly different in that he knew that all he endured was for the glory of Jesus Christ. As a Jew Paul had devoted the second half of his life to taking the gospel to the Gentiles and so consequently he thought it was worth any risk to foster true unity between the Gentiles and the Jewish church. If that involved imprisonment then so be it as it was to the glory of God and for the benefit of the Gentile believers.

If ever and whenever we suffer to any extent we could do worse than follow Paul’s example and remember that such suffering is to the glory of God.

Conclusion

Throughout this passage we see the thought of unity and togetherness; that is unity between Jews and Gentiles and their togetherness in “*the promise in Christ Jesus*”. This is true unity that is not forced but is brought about by the love of and for Jesus Christ.

There is a great challenge here for both us and the numerous protestant churches in the world today. Far too many Protestant churches today have split over issues of what is “*the truth*”. They do so frequently without realising that in doing so they are compromising a central truth of the gospel that is reconciliation and unity in Christ. If more churches and more individuals focussed on the truth of the gospel then true unity in Christ would result. Paul’s ministry was focussed on explaining the mystery by taking the gospel to the Gentiles and bringing about unity in Christ between them and the Jews. He did that by preaching the good news that Jesus died to pay for the sins of Gentiles as well as Jews. As a result of hearing that message many Gentiles came to faith in Christ and became united as members of God’s family. Many millions of people since that time have also come to faith in Jesus as their Lord and Saviour and my hope is that you too are members of that glorious family.