



A Post Tenebras Lux Study on Ephesians...

A Great Mystery... Ephesians 3:1-21

^{NIV} **Ephesians 3:1**...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. ¹⁴ For this reason I kneel before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. ¹⁶ I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, ¹⁸ may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, ¹⁹ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge-- that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. ²⁰ Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, ²¹ to him be

glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

When we first started our exploration of the book of Ephesians, I told you that the first half of Ephesians was comprised of three parts: a greeting (1:1-2), a blessing (1:3-14), and a prayer (1:15-3:21). Now it may have seemed as we were making our way through chapter two and the great themes of election and regeneration that Paul had lost sight of the prayer he was praying. But now we find that Paul was right on track. The prayer that he was offering up on behalf of the Gentiles led him to write of the blessings that the Gentiles had received in Christ.

In that sense, Paul's prayers are radically different than my own. I can start to pray and I will get distracted and go off ruminating on some issue that has absolutely no connection to the content of my prayer. Sometimes I come back to my prayer and sometimes I don't. But Paul is different, he may go off on some other issue but it is always related to the point of his prayer. It is the difference between a disciplined and undisciplined prayer life.

There is, perhaps, no better illustration of that than in the text we have before us this morning. Look how he starts.

^{NIV} **Ephesians 3:1**...For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles--

Then, it seems as if Paul is distracted by some side issue because for the next thirteen verses he discusses what seems to be a defense of his ministry. Finally in verse 14, he picks up his thought again.

^{NIV} **Ephesians 3:14**...For this reason I kneel before the Father,

The structure almost looks like, **“For this reason...oh, yeah, I forgot to tell you about so and so...so let me do that now...For this reason, I bow my knees before the Father.”**

All of which leads me to want to examine more closely the content of the supposed distraction. It leads me to want to know why the Spirit of God caused him to reflect on some other issue in the midst of his prayer. So let's do that together.

^{NIV} **Ephesians 3:1**...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,

When Paul wrote the great Epistle to the Ephesians, most scholars think, he was under house arrest in Rome. That would have meant that he was free to rent his own house so long as he paid all his expenses and the expenses of the guard appointed to guard him. They take that from Luke's account in the book of Acts chapter 28.

^{NIV} **Acts 28:16**...When we got to Rome, Paul was allowed to live by himself, with a soldier to guard him. ¹⁷ Three days later he called together the leaders of the

Jews. When they had assembled, Paul said to them: **"My brothers, although I have done nothing against our people or against the customs of our ancestors, I was arrested in Jerusalem and handed over to the Romans. ¹⁸ They examined me and wanted to release me, because I was not guilty of any crime deserving death. ¹⁹ But when the Jews objected, I was compelled to appeal to Caesar--not that I had any charge to bring against my own people. ²⁰ For this reason I have asked to see you and talk with you. It is because of the hope of Israel that I am bound with this chain." ²¹ They replied, "We have not received any letters from Judea concerning you, and none of the brothers who have come from there has reported or said anything bad about you. ²² But we want to hear what your views are, for we know that people everywhere are talking against this sect." ²³ They arranged to meet Paul on a certain day, and came in even larger numbers to the place where he was staying. From morning till evening he explained and declared to them the kingdom of God and tried to convince them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets. ²⁴ Some were convinced by what he said, but others would not believe. ²⁵ They disagreed among themselves and began to leave after Paul had made this final statement: "The Holy Spirit spoke the truth to your forefathers when he said through Isaiah the prophet: ²⁶ "'Go to this people and say, "You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving." ²⁷ For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.' ²⁸ "Therefore I want you to know that God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!" ²⁹ ³⁰ For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. ³¹ Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.**

So Paul was a prisoner of Rome. Yet, look how portrays the event.

^{NIV} **Ephesians 3:1**...For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles--

Notice, he's not a prisoner of Rome or even a prisoner on account of Jewish intrigue. Paul considered himself a prisoner of Jesus Christ. He believed, as we have already seen, in the sovereignty of God. He believed that what he was

experiencing was from the hand of God. Because of that Paul was able to view what would have been a time of terrible anxiety and depression for most of us as the certain expression of God's calling. That's why Paul seems to lose his train of thought.

^{NIV} **Ephesians 3:2**...Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you,

Brothers and sisters, do you see what he is saying? He is saying that he is the prisoner of Christ. He is saying that he was given a special stewardship or responsibility toward the Gentiles. He is saying that responsibility was a sign of God's grace toward both him and the Gentiles. How wonderful his point of view is.

And there is a sense in which one's point of view makes all the difference in the world. If you know God is working out his will in all aspects of your life then you view the difficulties of life in an entirely different light. There is a famous story of the days when Sir Christopher Wren was building St. Paul's cathedral, in London. On one occasion he was making a tour of the work in progress. He came upon a man at work and asked him: **'What are you doing?'** The man said: **'I am cutting this stone to a certain size and shape.'** He came to a second man and asked him what he was doing. The man said: **'I am earning so much money at my work.'** He came to a third man at work and asked him what he was doing. The man paused for a moment, straightened himself and answered: **'I am helping Sir Christopher Wren build St. Paul's Cathedral.'**

That is Paul's philosophy. He is doing the work of God. He is performing according to the stewardship he had been granted and he is performing according to the revelation he has been given. Oh how we need to regain that view of our individual ministries. Oh how we need to think of our jobs, our chores, or responsibilities as the gift of God's grace in our lives. But somehow today in America, we have made a sort of disconnect with our daily tasks. We fail to see that the things we have to accomplish are, in fact, our spiritual act of worship and as a result we are undone by the tedium of life. But such was not the case for Paul.

So what was the content of that revelation given to Paul? He tells us in verses 3-6.

^{NIV} **Ephesians 3:3**...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.

Paul's uses the word "**mystery**" to describe the content of the revelation he had been given. It is an important word to Paul but it is important that we understand that the Greek understanding of the word is somewhat different than the English understanding of the word. In English it generally has the meaning of being something dark or obscure, something unknown to anyone. It is the idea of a puzzle wrapped up in an enigma sealed in a conundrum.

That's why I love the story of Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr., the father of the famous judge Oliver Wendell Holmes.

Oliver Wendell Holmes, Senior, was a doctor. As such he was very interested in the use of ether. In order to know how his patients felt under its influence, he once had a dose administered to himself. As he was going under, in a dreamy state, a profound thought came to him. He believed that he had suddenly grasped the key to all the mysteries of the universe. When he regained consciousness, however, he was unable to remember what the insight was.

Because of the great importance this thought would be to mankind, Holmes arranged to have himself given ether again. This time he had a stenographer present to take down the great thought. The ether was administered, and sure enough, just before passing out the insight reappeared. He mumbled the words, the stenographer took them down, and he went to sleep confident in the knowledge that he had succeeded. Upon awakening, he turned eagerly to the stenographer and asked her to read what he had uttered. This is what she read: "**The entire universe is permeated with a strong odor of turpentine.**" Bits & Pieces, November 12, 1992, Page 20-22

You see in English we think of a mystery as something unknown to anyone but in the Greek world a "**mystery**" represented a secret into which some person had been initiated. It was the world of secret handshakes and secret words of power. It wasn't that these secret truths were unknown; it was that they were unknown to all except a select few. That seems to be one sense of what Paul is communicating here.

Paul is saying that God has revealed to His apostles and prophets the glory of a new society. He says that in verse 6.

^{NIV} **Ephesians 3:6**...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.

Now some scholars have had a great deal of trouble with verse 5 because it says:

^{NIV} **Ephesians 3:5**...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.

They argue, as I pointed out last week, that there was a sense in which the Old Testament is replete with promises of the future blessing of the Gentiles. But the mystery is not that the Gentiles were going to be blessed by God; the mystery is that the Gentiles were going to be blessed by God apart from their inclusion into national Israel. In fact, Jews were also going to be blessed apart from national Israel. This great blessing was going to be the inclusion of Jews and Gentiles into one new grand society called the church.

Now for Paul to make this claim of revelation made him the object of great hatred and persecution among the Jews and there is a great illustration of their hatred in Acts 21:39.

^{NIV} **Acts 21:39**...Paul answered, **"I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no ordinary city. Please let me speak to the people."** ⁴⁰ Having received the commander's permission, Paul stood on the steps and motioned to the crowd. When they were all silent, he said to them in Aramaic: ^{NIV} **Acts 22:1**...**"Brothers and fathers, listen now to my defense."** ² When they heard him speak to them in Aramaic, they became very quiet. Then Paul said:

When he finishes he sums it up in 22:21...

^{NIV} **Acts 22:21**...**"Then the Lord said to me, 'Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles.'"** ²² The crowd listened to Paul until he said this. Then they raised their voices and shouted, **"Rid the earth of him! He's not fit to live!"** ²³ As they were shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air,

But not only did this mystery make Paul the object of great hatred and bitterness, it also made him susceptible to criticism that he thought he was special. Notice how he addresses that concern next.

^{NIV} **Ephesians 3:7**...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,

Paul says he had received this special grace to preach the unfathomable riches of Christ to the Gentiles and not because of any merit in and of himself. He has received his gift as sign of God's mercy and it is mercy extended to him not because of who he was but in spite of who he was. It is a theme that pervades much of his writing, for example:

^{NIV} **Acts 21:19**...Paul greeted them and reported in detail what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. ²⁰ When they heard this, they praised God. Then they said to Paul: **"You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the law.**

^{NIV} **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.

^{NIV} **Galatians 3:8**...The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: **"All nations will be blessed through you."**

^{NIV} **1 Timothy 1:15**...Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners-- of whom I am the worst.

But Paul was not deterred by his own sinfulness. He was not deterred because he knew God's grace and the reality of God's call upon his life. His salvation freed

him to serve his Savior. So he is willing to preach the unfathomable riches of Christ. Notice though how in verses 9-11, he reminds the Ephesians of the nature of what he preached and the reason for what he preached.

^{NIV} **Ephesians 3:9**...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.

Do you see what he is saying? He is saying that he preached the unfathomable riches of Christ. He is saying that in doing so he brought to light the whole mystery of God's revelation concerning the combining of Jews and Gentiles into one new glorious society, the church. He is saying that he did so to reveal the manifold wisdom of God to rulers and authorities in heavenly places. That's Paul's way of saying that the inclusion of Jews and Gentiles together into Christ's church is a marvel of wisdom to on looking angels.

I often marvel that so much is made in our culture regarding angels. They are the subjects of books and movies. Some say they are the means of extraordinary revelations to mankind but Paul will have nothing to do with that. Instead, he says we are teaching the angels regarding the glory of God's marvelous redemptive plan. I've often thought that I might like to write a book someday on How I Instructed the Angels of God. Of course, it really wouldn't be about how I instructed them but how God instructed them through my salvation. I can see, and I say this reverently, that the angels of God are looking over the portals of heaven and saying to themselves, "**Amazing, absolutely amazing.**"

But Paul doesn't stop there. He goes on. He says that the nature of the revelation that has been given us by God leads us to a new boldness. Look how he says it.

^{NIV} Ephesians 3:12...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.

Paul says as a result of the faith that has been granted us in Christ, we now have confident access to God and that access to God leads us to boldness concerning the ministry we have been given. That's why he can encourage the Ephesians not to be anxious over his tribulations. His tribulations are on behalf of the Gentiles. In fact, they are the glory of the Gentiles.

So having said all that, he returns to his first thought.

^{NIV} Ephesians 3:14...For this reason I kneel before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name.

And look at the final request of his prayer.

^{NIV} Ephesians 3:16...I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, ¹⁸ may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, ¹⁹ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge-- that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Paul prays that God will grant that the Ephesians will be strengthened in their inner man. The reason he prays that is so that Christ may dwell in their hearts

through faith. The result of having Christ dwell in their hearts through faith is that they may begin to know and understand something of the surpassing love of Christ. It is asking that the Ephesians may begin to understand something of the geometry of their faith. He wants them to know how wide God's mercy is. He wants them to know how long it is. He wants them know how deep, how high it is so that may be filled completely with the fullness of God.

How I long to begin to pray that way. My prayers are so shallow. My prayers are so me-oriented. Oh, how I long to pray for God's people in a way that reflects something of Paul's theology, something of the glory of Christ. Because I know that when I do, it will lead me to properly worship my God. Look how Paul's prayer turns him again to magnify God.

^{NIV} **Ephesians 3:20**...Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

How often I have misappropriated that verse. I have used it as a guarantee that God is able to do more than I could ever think or ask with regard to my own selfish lusts. But in Paul's mind he is praising God because God can do more than he thinks or asks in bringing about the enlightenment of God's people so that we may have a deeper grounding in the glory of Christ, so that we may

better understand something of the magnitude of what Christ has accomplished on our behalf.

When he grants us that insight we will be better suited to obey His commands and we will be better suited to rejoice in the life that God has given us.

We will be like the old pilgrim, who looked up at his wife as she shamefully placed before him a meager supper of two small potatoes and a small piece of crusty bread. But this pilgrim was filled not with resentment toward his wife but was instead filled with love for his Savior. He knew something of the geometry of God's kindness in Christ. So, he looked up at her with gentle eyes filled with tears of gratitude and said, "**All this and heaven too.**"

May that be our prayer today.

Let's pray.