

Date: March 12, 2014
Title: Paul's Ministry in Relation to the Mystery
Text: Ephesians 3:1-13
Theme: Paul wishes for his readers to see the incredible grace of God as it is seen in the Church.

Introduction:

Chapter 2:11-22 addresses the consequences of salvation for the Jew and Gentile. God is now dealing with them on an equal plane. They have formed a "new man" (2:15), "one body" (2:16), they have become "fellow citizens" (2:19), and are a "holy temple" in the Lord (2:21). Chapter 3:1-13 addresses Paul's ministry as it relates to this mystery. Chapter 3 picks up where chapter 2 left off.

"In this section Paul returns to the thought which is at the very heart of this letter. That secret was that the love and mercy and grace of God were meant not for the Jews alone but for all mankind."¹

"Having saved people individually by his grace (2:1-10), and having reconciled them to each other as well as to himself through the sacrificial death of Christ (2:11-22), God also now unites them on an equal basis in one body, the Church. This step in God's eternal plan was not fully revealed in previous times. Paul calls it a 'mystery'."²

Some see this as an interruption of his prayer begun in 3:1. **His interruption explains why he is in prison.** Two thoughts explain his imprisonment: **First**, it is for the sake of the Gentiles, and **secondly**, it is as an ambassador of Christ. The interruption is an explanation of the Church mystery. He will pick up his prayer for the church in verse 14.

"To understand the connection of thought in this passage it has to be noted that verses 2-13 are one long parenthesis. The *for this cause* of verse 14 takes up again and resumes the *for this cause* of verse 1."³

The Storyline:

In the earlier part of the *Story*, those initial participants thought the world was theirs. They believed the world would be Jewish and the Law of Moses was the fullest embodiment of God's revelation. Little did they know or fathom just how vast was the *Story* of God.

Here God unfolds the unfathomable riches of His *Story* in Christ. This isn't a Jewish *Story* or a Gentile *Story*; it is a Jesus *Story*. Consider just how mind numbing this initial revelation was for all parties. This new work created by God would be neither Jewish nor Gentile. Wow, how amazing, how glorious, how unfathomable, how inexpressible.

It is this new work that would bring to light the manifold wisdom of God. It is this *Story* that we live in and are now making known.

The Problem:

We are shaped by our past experiences and our present level of knowledge and thus our view of His church becomes very narrow. Yet God is working through providence to call from every culture, ethnicity, time, and place worshippers whose worship of Him is very diverse and celebrates the oneness of His body.

Questions:

1. The reader should know what a biblical mystery is.
2. The reader should understand how this mystery fits into the outworking of God's plan.
3. The reader should see how his own life fits into the outworking of this mystery.
4. What does Paul want the reader to see and have?
5. Paul wants the reader to see the unfathomable riches of Christ (v.8). Paul wants the reader to see the manifold wisdom of God (v.11).
6. Paul wants the reader to have boldness and confident access to God through Christ (v.12).
7. Paul wants the reader not to lose heart in the midst of tribulation (v.13).
8. Paul believes the reader can see and have because he is a recipient of God's grace.
9. What is v. 6 doing?
10. What is the mystery?
11. What are verses 7-9 doing?
12. Who is the Church being shown to? Who are these principalities and powers?
13. Consider the rich diversity within the church. What marks this diversity? What might it look like? How might we go about celebrating the rich diversity within the body of Christ?

The Holy Spirit is calling to us from this passage to consider three ideas.

To Know: The Holy Spirit desires for us to know the rich diversity within the working of God.

To Choose: The Holy Spirit desires for us to choose Him above our own "church" idiosyncrasies.

To Feel: The Holy Spirit desires for us to feel the joy of exploring God's unfathomable riches in Christ Jesus.

Outline:

- I. Paul's stewardship was distinct (3:1-5)

"Paul was the one to whom God graciously gave the ministry of dispensing this mystery and this was in connection with his specific role as an apostle to Gentiles."⁴

The stewardship is Paul's responsibility with reference to the grace of God. The grace of God involved two things: First, it involved the salvation of the Jews and Gentiles, and secondly, the choosing of an apostle such as Paul to communicate this grace. God is doing something different at this point in time with the Gentiles. This new "truth" was a mystery (vv. 3, 4, 9)

that had been withheld from other recipients of divine revelation (vv.5, 9), but was now being made known to Paul and ultimately to the Gentiles through Paul.

Verse one provides us with four thoughts. **First**, Paul is the speaker. **Second**, he is in prison. And his audience is concerned for him. **Third**, his imprisonment is based on his faithfulness to Jesus Christ. **Fourth**, his audience is predominately gentile.

What is vv. 2-5 accenting? The mysterious nature of what is now being made known. "Paul unfolds God's administrative plan for the church and for the universe in this letter."⁵ Let us remember that God has written a *Story* and there is significant continuity and elements of seeming disruption within the one *Story* of God. The mystery is not the inclusion of Gentile into the *Story* of God. The mystery is that there would be neither Jew nor Gentile, but rather there would now be one new man. The idea that it was a mystery does not mean it was unknown to God. When reading a *Story* for the first time you have no idea what is coming until you read the full *Story*. In chapter one, what happens in chapter 3 and following is a mystery. In the earlier chapters of God's story some could not see the great work of God that He would do in forming His Church whereby there would be neither Jew nor Gentile. The sixty-six books of our Bible give us the information we need to know in order to make some initial sense of where we currently are. But not all knowable truth is in the Bible. There is still more to the *Story* and fuller pictures to be painted by God that we do not currently know or see. This idea has no fear for me. If God is writing the *Story*, then I can rest. Whatever the end might look like fully revealed exceeds our ability to comprehend.

What is this idea of "mystery?" Mystery means something hidden, secret or unrevealed thing. A mystery is something previously hidden that God has now made known. Paul uses the word mystery several times in this short letter (1:9; 3:3, 4, 9; 5:32; 6:19- also see Romans 16:25-27). The revelatory mystery involves the notion that the Gentiles are now fellow-heirs and fellow members of the body of Christ. The mystery of His will is specifically the full revelation of the plan of redemption. There are four initial thoughts concerning the mystery.

A. The mystery was worth suffering over (v. 1)

"When Paul wrote this letter he was in prison in Rome awaiting trial before Nero, waiting for the Jewish prosecutors to come with their bleak faces and their envenomed hatred and their malicious charges."⁶

How uncomfortable are we willing to become for the sake of the gospel?

B. The mystery was a stewardship (vv. 2, 7)

Notice how Paul describes this call to the ministry.

First, it was/is a "gift of the grace of God."

Paul could not discover this truth apart from a divine revelation. And we cannot equally understand the enormity of this truth apart from a divine revelation. It is for this reason that Paul prays for the eyes of our hearts to be opened.

When Paul spoke of his message to others, he spoke of “the grace that was given to me” (Gal. 2:7, 9). When he writes to the Romans, he speaks of “the grace given me by God” (Rom. 15:15). “Paul saw his task as that of being a channel of God’s grace to men.”⁷

Second, it is by the power of God (v. 7). This “power” is described as “effectual” in our KJV. It is the Greek word **energeia**. In the NT it is used only of superhuman power, whether God or of the devil. Do we think of the ministry in this way?

Notice how Paul describes himself and his ministry.

First, he sees himself as nothing.

Neither he nor his audience deserved the grace.

Second, though nothing, he is the recipient of God’s grace.

Third, he is to preach among the Gentiles.

The two infinitives found in verses eight and nine (to proclaim and to enlighten) give the two-fold responsibility of the apostle. Not only is he to preach but also “to enlighten all people of the administration of this hidden mystery.”⁸

Fourth, his message is the unsearchable riches of Christ.

C. The mystery was a revelation received and written (vv. 3, 4)

Paul received a revelation that was authoritative, and when he wrote it down it became inspired. Even though there was not a definable or recognized New Testament canon, this does not mean there were not authoritative writings. Paul speaks of them reading his writings. What Paul wrote was received by his audience as coming with divine authority.

“**As I wrote afore** [*kathōs proegrapsa*]. First aorist active indicative of [*prographō*] as in Ro 15:4. But when and where? Epistolary aorist for this Epistle? That is possible. A previous and lost Epistle as in 1Co 5:9? That also is abstractly possible.”⁹

“[Paul] regarded himself as the recipient of a new revelation. Paul never thought of himself as having discovered the universal love of God; he thought of God having revealed it to him.”¹⁰

D. The mystery is no longer a mystery (v. 5)

Verse 5 introduces the idea that the mystery given to Paul was not exclusively given. This mystery also came to apostles and prophets. **Paul's role in receiving the revelation was distinct and primary, but not exclusive.** And it was not made known to the apostles and prophets through Paul but by means of the Holy Spirit. This idea is present in 2:20 and 4:11.

II. Paul's stewardship was deep (v. 8 ["unfathomable riches of Christ"])

“**The unsearchable riches of Christ**’ [to *anexichniaston ploutos tou Christou*]. [*Anexichniastos*] [a] privative and verbal of [*exichniazō*], to track out, [*ex*] and [*ichnos*], track) appears first in Job 5:9; 9:10. Paul apparently got it from Job. Nowhere else in N.T. except Ro 11:33. In later Christian writers. Paul undertook to track out the untrackable in Christ.”¹¹

Paul contrasts himself with the revelation he received. The word “less than the least” is **elachistoteros** and is found only here. It has the idea of the lowest of the low. Paul did not have a false sense of humility. Paul simply saw himself as the recipient of God's undeserved dealings. “Paul never ceased to be amazed that one so unworthy as he should have been chosen for so high a task.”¹²

This is in contrast to the unfathomable riches of Christ. The word “unfathomable” occurs twice in the New Testament (**anezichvastos**). It means, “Past finding out.” It carries the idea of something “that cannot be searched out, that cannot be comprehended.”

Please note with me 2 Corinthians 12. Please note verse 3 and 4.

³ “And I know how such a man--whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows-- ⁴ was caught up into Paradise and **heard inexpressible words**, which a man is not permitted to speak” (2 Cor. 12:3, 4).

I would like to make a passing note by referencing Revelation 1:9-11.

⁹ “I, John, your brother and fellow partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance which are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. ¹⁰ I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like the sound of a trumpet, ¹¹ saying, **Write in a book what you see, and send it to the seven churches:** to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea” (Rev. 1:9-11).

I think we do an injustice to the Book of Revelation when we stop with John's description and do not attempt to see the substance behind what John is saying. Let me illustrate it in this way: When my grandson stays with us, we read to him from *The Jesus Storybook Bible*. When reading the arrest of Jesus, he becomes distracted by the swords and spears and Roman soldiers. The story is written very well but written in such a manner that a small child can understand it. I know there is more and that the picture is only to facilitate understanding for a 4 year old.

God gave John a “revelation.” God speaks to John with imagery and picture so that we might understand. There is so much more to the *Story*, but right now this is all we can handle. Our comprehension is limited. It is not wrong what we know, but let us not assume that what we know is all there is to know. What there is to know is “inexpressible” and “unfathomable.” Bathe and bask in what you do know, but do not think for one minute that your knowledge of Him and His ways is exhaustible.

III. Paul’s stewardship was definable (3:6-13)

God’s purpose all along was that Gentile and Jew would be one (vv. 6, 10, 11). This new mystery opens up a way of access before God (v.12), and it is for this reason that Paul is willing to endure much tribulation (v.13).

“Fancy hearing the news that a family down the street has come into a large and wealthy inheritance – and then being told that you are to become full members of that family, with instant privileges identical to theirs! That’s the situation that Christian Gentiles now find themselves in.”¹³

Consider quickly a short outline that can assist us in our understanding of the passage before us. The outline will answer the question, “What does the mystery reveal?”

A. The mystery reveals the eternal promise of God for Gentiles (v.6).

1. The promise of becoming fellow heirs
2. The promise of becoming fellow members
3. The promise of becoming fellow partakers

“Paul reminds us that the ingathering of all men was part of the eternal purpose of God. Sometimes the history of Christianity can be presented in such a way that it sounds as if the gospel went out to the Gentiles only because the Jews would not receive it. Paul here reminds us that the salvation of the Gentiles is not an afterthought of God; the bringing of all men into his love was part of God’s eternal design.”¹⁴

It has always been “for the nations.”

B. The mystery reveals the eternal purpose of God (vv. 8, 10, 11).

“God’s purpose runs on through the ages. ‘Through the ages one eternal purpose runs.’”¹⁵

1. The mystery reveals the unfathomable riches of Christ (v. 8 [cf. 2 Cor. 12:4 “inexpressible words”])

The word is used only twice in the New Testament, here and in Romans 11:33. “It is beyond man’s ability to investigate; thus it is translated ‘unfathomable.’”¹⁶

“Being a Christian is meant to consist of going from room to room in the king’s palace, relishing the beauty and splendor of it all.”¹⁷

2. The mystery reveals the manifold wisdom of God (v. 10)

“The heart of the present passage is verse 10, which is one of the New Testament’s most powerful statements of the reason for the church’s existence: the rulers and authorities must be confronted with God’s wisdom, in all its rich variety, and this is to happen through the church! Not, we should quickly add, through what the church says, though that is vital as well. Rather, through what the church is, namely, the community in which men, women and children of every race, color, social and cultural background come together in glad worship of the one true God.”¹⁸

Verse ten is similar to 2:7. The church is to showcase the manifold wisdom of God. “The fact that God had done the seemingly impossible – reconciling and organically uniting Jews and Gentiles in the church – makes the church the perfect means of displaying God’s wisdom.”¹⁹

Let me stop for a moment and consider the word “manifold” in verse 10.

Manifold (**polupoikilos** from **polús** = much + **poikilos** = diverse, various, multi-colored) is literally much varied and means many sided, variegated, greatly diversified, abounding in variety. It means marked with a great variety of colors, as in a cloth or a painting. It means manifesting itself in a great variety of forms. It is multi-faceted wisdom. **It pertains to that which is different in a number of ways. Greeks used this word to describe pictures, flowers, garments (e.g. the root word poikilos is used in the Septuagint to describe Joseph's varicolored coat, Genesis 37:3, 23, 32).**

Paul's point is that the **wisdom of God** has shown itself in Christ to be **varied beyond measure** and **in a way which surpasses all previous knowledge** thereof. It is **"infinitely diversified"** and from whichever way you view God's wisdom, new flashes of truth blaze forth. **His wisdom is inexhaustible.** God’s eternal plan is more complex and multifaceted than OT saints had imagined.²⁰

Larry Richards comments that . . .

God’s plan seems so straightforward when we read the Old Testament. He chose a people, promised them redemption, a Savior King, and ultimate triumph. And history moved toward this fulfillment. **Then, suddenly,** the Son of God appeared as the promised King, was rejected by His people, crucified, and resurrected, and we realize that all along God intended far more for humankind than was previously revealed. Don’t put God in a box, or try to squeeze Him into limiting categories. **God’s plans and purposes are multifaceted, and each facet reflects His complex wisdom and love.** The more we glimpse of that complexity, the more we should be moved to worship and to praise.²¹

Who are these principalities and powers (Rom. 8:38; Eph. 1:21; 3:10; 6:12; Col. 1:16; 2:15; Titus 3:1)? They are all those who are celestial in nature.

3. The mystery reveals an unconditional approach to God (v. 12)

This predetermined mystery of God opened up the way of access before God. Everything God intended to do, He did in Christ (v. 11). It is because of Christ that we now have access that is marked by boldness and confidence (v. 12).

Remember, God created us to know and experience the joy He has within Himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit and this joy is only known and experienced in Christ. Because of who Jesus is and what Jesus did, we now have an unhindered approach before the Father.

Paul believed that what he was entrusted with was worthy suffering for. The Gentiles were the recipients of Paul's stewardship. Because they are participants in and partakers of Christ, He becomes for them glory.

Shepherding the Sheep: (What's the NEXT STEP?)

1. What should this tell us? **First**, the truth of our faith far outweighs any hardship that you and I might have to put up with. **Second**, Paul gladly suffered for the advancement of the gospel.
2. Dwelling on the truths of Scripture is the key to overcoming.
3. Have you seen the unfathomable riches of Christ (v.8)? Have you seen the manifold wisdom of God (v.11)? Are you willing to think outside the box of your past experiences and present level of knowledge?
4. Do you have boldness and confident access to Christ (v.12)?
5. Are you losing heart in the midst of tribulation (v.13)?
6. Do you see yourself as a recipient of God's grace?

¹ William Barclay, *Galatians and Ephesians*, 122.

² NIV Study Bible

³ William Barclay, *Galatians and Ephesians*, 119.

⁴ Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary*, 424.

⁵ NIV Study Bible.

⁶ William Barclay, *Galatians and Ephesians*, 121.

⁷ William Barclay, *Galatians and Ephesians*, 124.

⁸ Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary*, 454.

⁹ A.T. Robertson's *Word Pictures in the New Testament* on Ephesians 3:3.

¹⁰ William Barclay, *Galatians and Ephesians*, 123.

¹¹ A.T. Robertson's *Word Pictures in the New Testament* on Ephesians 3:8.

¹² NIV Study Bible

¹³ N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone*, 33.

¹⁴ William Barclay, *Galatians and Ephesians*, 126, 127.

¹⁵ A.T. Robertson's *Word Pictures in the New Testament* on Ephesians 3:11.

¹⁶ Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary*, 454.

¹⁷ N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone*, 37.

¹⁸ N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone*, 36.

¹⁹ NIV Study Bible

²⁰ http://www.preceptaustin.org/ephesians_310.htm

²¹ Richards, L. *The 365 Day Devotional Commentary*. Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books.

Slide 1

Ephesians

From Garden Ruin to Resurrection glory
God Dwells in the Local Church for the Joy of All People

Slide 2

Ephesians 3:1-13

- Here God unfolds the unfathomable riches of His *Story* in Christ. This isn't a Jewish *Story* or a Gentile *Story*; it is a *Jesus Story*.
- God's *Story* is the oneness of all things in Christ. It is the fall that caused the conflict. Yet it is the cross that conquered the curse.

Slide 3

Ephesians 3:1-5

- I. Paul's stewardship was distinct (3:1-5)
 - A. The mystery was worth suffering over (v. 1)
 - B. The mystery was a stewardship (vv. 2, 7)
 - C. The mystery was a revelation received and written (vv. 3, 4)
 - D. The mystery is no longer a mystery (v. 5)

Slide 4

Ephesians 3:6-13

- II. Paul’s stewardship was deep (v. 8 [“unfathomable riches of Christ”])
- III. Paul’s stewardship was definable (3:6-13)
 - A. The mystery reveals the eternal promise of God for Gentiles (v.6).
 - 1. The promise of becoming fellow heirs
 - 2. The promise of becoming fellow members
 - 3. The promise of becoming fellow partakers

Slide 5

Ephesians 3:8-13

- B. The mystery reveals the eternal purpose of God (vv. 8, 10, 11).
 - 1. God’s purpose reveals the unfathomable riches of Christ (v. 8 [cf. 2 Cor. 12:4 “inexpressible words”])
 - 2. God’s purpose reveals the manifold wisdom of God (v. 10)
 - 3. God’s purpose reveals an unconditional approach to God (v. 12)

Slide 6

Where does this leave us?



You tell me.

Ephesians

'From Garden Ruin to Resurrection Glory'

God Dwells in the Local Church for the Joy of All Nations

GROUP DISCUSSION—STUDY 5 —EPHESIANS 3:1-13 [Write down first impressions]

1. What is the mystery Paul is speaking of in this passage?

2. What message did Paul bring to the Gentiles (v. 8)?

3. To what are the unsearchable riches of Christ is referring (v. 8)?

4. To whom is the manifold/multifarious wisdom of God being revealed (v. 10)?

5. How does knowing the mystery comfort us in our suffering (v. 13)?

