

SCRIPTURE FOCUS	Ephesians 3:1-13	DATE	09.29.19
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LESSON SUMMARY	God uses people and the church in his plan. By grace, he calls and empowers people to service that is sometimes difficult. Through its unity in Christ, the church becomes a testimony to God's wisdom.		

all scripture taken from NIV unless otherwise noted

ENCOUNTER THE TEXT

^{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 people 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.

Vv 1-13 can be described as a purposeful digression on Paul's part. In v 1, he begins a line of thought that breaks off abruptly. V 14 then picks up this thought with the same language used in v 1 ("For this reason"). Had Paul simply jumped from 2:21-4:14, the logic of the passage would be: (1) Gentile inclusion in God's family, (2) a prayer for included Gentiles. The digression adds one other piece (1) Gentile inclusion in God's family, (2) Paul's calling and authority concerning the Gentiles, (3) a prayer for included Gentiles. As can be seen, there is good logic in this three-fold structure, and I agree with scholars who argue that Paul is purposeful in its inclusion.¹ Rather than being the result of Paul chasing rabbits, vv 2-13 stand as an important testimony to Paul's authority. More than that, these verses give us one of the most remarkable descriptions of the church in the NT.

Paul's self-explanation begins in v 1, where he calls himself a "prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles." This language reflects Paul's actual imprisonment (Ephesians is one of his "prison letters") with an important spin. Rather than being a prisoner of Rome, Paul is a prisoner of Christ, which means that he views his circumstances through a kind of Christ-lens. His hope would then be that the Ephesians, who might get caught up on his being in prison, will do the same. Beyond being Christ's prisoner, Paul is also imprisoned "for the sake of you Gentiles," a point that Paul expands on in the verses that follow.

In v 2, Paul reminds his readers of his special calling on their behalf: he received an "administration of God's grace." The ESV and NASB opt to translate "administration" as "stewardship," and I think this wording is helpful. The Greek word refers to "any position of trust or the duties of that position"² and refers specifically to household management. Paul has already in 2:19 referenced God's household. Now he talks of himself

¹ Slater, 85-86; Arnold, 179-180.

² Souter, A. (1917). [A Pocket Lexicon to the Greek New Testament](#) (p. 172). Oxford: Clarendon Press.

as having been given a position of special authority in the household.³ This authority of stewardship is a trust given to Paul by God for which he will be held accountable.

So, what exactly is the stewardship of grace that Paul has been given/tasked with? He defines it in v 3 as “the mystery made known to me by revelation,” which is then further defined in v 7 as “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.” Paul’s stewardship, then, has to do with the new reality of Gentile inclusion in God’s family. In vv 3-5, Paul says of this new reality (1) that he has already written about it in brief (he probably refers here to 2:11-22 rather than a different letter), (2) that the Ephesians will perceive his insight into it as they read the letter, and (3) that people did not understand it until God revealed it to the apostles and prophets. That last piece understands a mystery as something that was not previously known but now has been revealed.⁴ Thus, all generations before the early church were in the dark on just what God was doing in the plan of salvation. Now, the apostles and prophets are relating what they themselves have been shown by the Spirit. Paul himself fits in that last category.

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 the Lord’s people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless 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 that 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.

In 3:2, we found that Paul had become a steward of God’s grace. Now we learn that receiving that position was a gift of grace. More than that, it was a gift of grace bestowed by the working of God’s power. Remember that in chapter one, Paul prayed that the eyes of the Ephesians’ hearts would be enlightened that they might know deeply God’s power for them. Here we find one effect of that power – it has made Paul into a servant of the gospel. This idea of empowerment for service will surface again later in the letter. There it will refer to all Christians. For the present, though, Paul is speaking of himself.

As Paul speaks of the great gift of God’s grace, he holds the gift up against himself as its recipient. He certainly was not deserving! Instead, he refers to himself as “less than the least of all the Lord’s people,” a title that I suspect points to his pre-Christ past. According to Acts, Paul was one of the early church’s most rabid enemies. In Acts 6, he holds people’s coats as they stone Stephen, the first Christian martyr. In Acts 9, he is on his way to Damascus to arrest Christ-followers for their newfound faith. When the risen Christ confronts Paul on the road to Damascus he says, “Saul, Saul [an alternate name for Paul], why do you persecute me?” Note here that Jesus has taken Paul’s persecution of Christians personally. Unknowingly, Paul had been persecuting the risen Lord, himself! It is no wonder that such an enemy of the faith would call himself “less than the least of the Lord’s people” after conversion. If anyone understood receiving God’s undeserved grace, Paul certainly did! Earlier in the letter, he called the Ephesians to remember their pre-Christ pasts. Here, I think, we find Paul practicing what he preached.

³ Slater, 86-87.

⁴ Snodgrass, 53.

Despite Paul's undeserving state, he was "graced" with the task of preaching the Gospel to the gentiles and helping everyone else understand how God was working out this new chapter in his plan. Here Paul once again refers to the "mystery" as unknown in previous times. In this instance, it was hidden in God in past ages. Then comes one of the more astounding descriptions of the church in the NT. God's purpose in revealing this new chapter in his plan was that "now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly realms."

We in the church are used to being described as recipients of grace (Paul has used this imagery several times thus far). Here, we find a descriptor that might surprise some of us – we are a testimony to God's wisdom. What does that mean? Remember in 1:10 that Paul named God's purpose as summing up all things in Christ. Ultimately, this summing up awaits Christ's return. There is one space in the present age, however, where this summing up has already taken place. That space is the church! It is as if God has put the rebellious powers of the heavenly realms on notice by pointing at the church. "Behold my united people," God might say. "They are only the beginning of the redemption that I will accomplish in Christ!" Thus, the church becomes the prime example of God's wisdom in the present age, for we are a foretaste of what is to come.

A question to ask now is whether the church has any responsibility in its witness to God's wisdom. In one sense, we can say that our witness flows from a spiritual reality that is beyond our control. All Christians are made one in Christ, and God is pointing at this spiritual bond. In this case, the church has little active responsibility. We must simply be the recipients of grace.

In another sense, there is a call for the church to manifest spiritual unity in our lives and relationships. I think here of Thanksgiving dinner. It is possible to speak of a bickering family as "united" at the Thanksgiving table. They are united because they share the same ancestry. How much more powerful is it, though, if we can speak of the same family enjoying harmonious relationships with one another? In this case, unity takes on a new aspect. Yes, the family shares genetics, but they also share a relational bond of peace. Applying this picture to the church, God can point to our spiritual unity even if we are bickering with one another. How much more powerful, though, is it if he can point to a people who have brought that spiritual unity into relational expression? This, I think, is why much of the NT focusses on issues of unity in the church.

As Paul brings his digression to an end, he references God's "eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ." Here is a reminder that God has been a gracious and saving God from the very beginning. After pointing to God's purpose in Christ, Paul points to Christians' benefits in Christ – we who put our faith in Christ can approach God in freedom and confidence. He then ends the section by referring back to his sufferings (he mentioned his imprisonment in 3:1). Paul's

hope here is that the Ephesians will not be discouraged because of his imprisonment. Rather, they should see it as the outworking of Paul's special call to the Gentiles, meaning that his suffering leads to their glory, or new standing in Christ.

TEACH THE TEXT

Ephesians 3:1-13 tells us about Paul's calling and the church's vocation. I would focus on both in teaching the text.

PAUL – UNDESERVING SERVANT

Because Paul references his pre-Christ past when he speaks of being “less than the least of the Lord’s people,” this passage offers a wonderful opportunity to rehearse Paul’s journey to the faith. Students unfamiliar with Paul’s story may be surprised to learn that he was once a significant enemy of the church. According to Acts 9, Paul’s anti-church reputation preceded him. Ananias, whom God used in Saul’s conversion, was suspicious of Paul (Acts 9:13-14), and the believers in Jerusalem were scared of him (Acts 9:26)! Taking a moment to consider Paul’s past can offer powerful insight into grace. No one, not even a persecutor like Paul is beyond salvation. And no one, not even a guy who actively opposed God’s work, is beyond being used mightily in God’s purposes. These truths give us hope when we consider the many ways that we also are undeserving of God’s grace. No one is disqualified.

PAUL – RECIPIENT OF GRACE

According to Paul, his place of service in the church flowed from the grace of God. In one sense, we can affirm this readily. God saves us by grace and then sets us aside and empowers us for service by grace. But remember now that this grace landed Paul in prison. By following God’s gracious call, Paul invited trouble into his life. If you look to 2 Cor 11, you’ll find that he faced all kinds of difficulties beyond imprisonment. Yet Paul maintained that his difficult calling was grace and not curse. In v 1, he even views his imprisonment to a Christ-lens (he is a prisoner of Christ rather than a prisoner of Rome). This is an interesting and instructive view of grace – that it can lead us into difficulty. Can we Christians today imitate Paul’s faith and celebration of grace when times get hard?

THE CHURCH’S VOCATION

As already noted, the idea that the Church testifies to God’s wisdom is remarkable. Talking with students about how this works can lead to a powerful discussion of unity and peace in the church. When we seek peace, we are doing more than just being nice folks who try to get along. We actively take part in testifying to God’s wisdom in summing up all things in Christ.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Vv 1-6

1. What does Paul mean when he talks about a “mystery.” Why was it a mystery that Gentiles should be heirs with Israel and all the rest? (For more on this, refer to last week’s lesson.)
2. How does Paul understand his own part in this mystery?

Vv 7-13

1. Why do you think Paul calls himself “less than the least of all the Lord’s people”? What can we learn from his example here?

2. How did Paul become a “servant of the gospel”?
3. Was this service easy for Paul?
4. What can we learn from Paul’s outlook on his difficulties?
5. What does it mean for the church to show forth the wisdom of God?
6. What are our responsibilities when it comes to showing God’s wisdom?

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