

10. If we are the temple and dwelling place of God in the Spirit, how will that affect our lives? (See 1 Cor. 3:16-17 and 6:19-20.)

Lesson Five (3:1-13)

Paul's Part in the Plan (3:1-6)

1 For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles—2 assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, 3 how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. 4 When you read this you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, 5 which was not made known to the sons of man in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit; 6 that is, how the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

God has a plan for the salvation of mankind, and Paul had a key role in that plan. In order to make the blood of Christ available to all men, Paul was commissioned to bring the Gentiles into the new covenant. This lesson will focus on Paul's mission to the Gentiles and the blessings which resulted from it.

V. 1 For this reason—Paul now resumes the prayer which he had stated in 1:15. The “reason” he mentions is the gracious goodness of God in giving salvation and all the spiritual blessings.

Just as in chapter one, however, Paul no sooner starts this prayer than he digresses again. It seems that his heart must have been overwhelmed with God's provision for salvation, so he just had to tell about it. The prayer is resumed again in verse 14 of this chapter and is concluded in verses 20 and 21.

I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus—Paul wrote this epistle during his imprisonment in Rome. Other epistles written from this same imprisonment are Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon.

Paul did not consider himself a prisoner of the Roman emperor Nero, nor a prisoner of the Jews. He was a prisoner for Christ Jesus. If his Lord had not wanted him there, not all the power of Rome could have held him. His confinement could not shake his confidence (Phil. 1:12-14).

on behalf of you Gentiles—It was for the sake of Gentiles, such as his readers, that Paul was in prison. God had called him to open the gates of salvation to the

Gentiles, and this was what got him into so much trouble with the Jews. With the mention of his mission to the Gentiles, Paul must now again digress from his prayer and tell about God's plan.

V. 2 assuming that you have heard—His readers had indeed heard about the work of the Apostle Paul. The word “assuming” implies no doubt here, just as there is no doubt in 4:21, where the same Greek expression is used. Paul is simply reminding of what they already know, before he begins to build upon it.

the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you—The word “stewardship” (Gk. *oikonomia*) is also translated “dispensation” or “assignment.” It refers to the responsibility that is laid upon a servant or steward to accomplish a given task. The assignment of this task was given to Paul when he was converted on the road to Damascus (Acts 26:16-18).

It is most interesting that Paul should look upon his job assignment as a matter “of God's grace.” As a matter of fact, the giving of God's grace always carries with it responsibility. The privilege always demands purpose. While the grace of God is free and unmerited, God expects unworthy men to attempt a worthy response (Eph. 2:8-10). Thus, for Paul, the handing out of God's grace to him also meant the handing out of a job.

V. 3 how the mystery was made known to me by revelation—The word “mystery” means a “secret” which people do not know until they are told (Eph. 1:9). God's secret strategy for saving the world was to have Jesus die on the cross, and then to offer free salvation to all men—including Gentiles! (See the parallel text in Col. 1:24-29.)

Paul had not guessed the secret plan, nor was he taught it by other men (Gal. 1:1, 11-12). God revealed the secret to Paul directly, and then commissioned him to tell all men.

as I have written briefly—Paul is referring to the previous two chapters of this same epistle. In them he has begun briefly to outline God's secret strategy to reconcile fallen man to himself. The primary purpose of the plan was to restore the man-to-God relationship. A secondary purpose, which is really a necessary corollary to the first, was to restore the man-to-man relationships. True unity with God must bring about unity with other men, whether they are Jewish Christians or Gentile Christians. No man can make his faith a purely private matter, ignoring the rest of the body of believers.

V. 4 When you read this—As Paul's readers read the first two chapters and continued on with this present chapter, they would understand the secret plan.

you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ—From this verse through verse 8, Paul will be

focusing on his own particular role in God's plan. Paul's specific task was to bring in the Gentiles. Paul does not mean to imply here that bringing in the Gentiles was the whole plan; rather, that this was his own part in the plan.

When Paul spoke of "the mystery of Christ" his readers may well have remembered the many mystery religions of Asia Minor. They, too, promised to reveal hidden secrets. (Satan often misleads people by offering a counterfeit imitation of the real thing.) The mystery religions of Asia Minor were foolish collections of myth and fable, long since forgotten. The true revelation of heaven's secret is found in the person of Jesus Christ. He is God's mystery, "in whom are hid all the treasure of wisdom and knowledge." (Col. 2:2-3)

V. 5 which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations—Neither the Greek philosophers nor the Oriental sages were able to uncover God's plan. The wisest of men could not think God's thoughts (Isa. 55:8-9). By concealing these things from the wise and revealing them to babes (Matt. 11:25), God made salvation possible to all men, not just the intellectually elite (Col. 1:26 and 28).

as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit—Just as Jesus had promised, the Holy Spirit led the apostles into all truth (John 14:26). They did not immediately grasp all the implications of Calvary, but were led step by step to complete understanding. This gradual process can be best observed in Simon Peter and his understanding of the Gentiles. Although he opened the door to Gentiles on Pentecost (Acts 2:38-39), several years later he still needed some prodding to preach to Cornelius (Acts 10:1-48). Still later, he became a hypocrite in Antioch when he refused to be seen eating with his Gentile brothers (Gal. 2:11-16).

As Paul writes this epistle from Roman imprisonment, some thirty years have passed since Pentecost. God has fully revealed his plan regarding Gentiles, not only to the apostles, but also to the first century prophets. (See also 2:20 and 4:11.)

V. 6 that is, how the Gentiles are fellow heirs—For at least seventeen centuries the Jews had taken special pride in being God's chosen people, heirs of the promises made to Abraham. They jealously guarded their national identity and excluded non-Jews from any covenant consideration. But now, in Christ, the Gentiles are fellow heirs! As Paul wrote to the Galatian Gentiles, "If you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise" (Gal. 3:29).

members of the same body—This entire phrase is taken from a single Greek word, apparently coined by

Paul himself. Christ's body on earth is his church, and Gentiles have equal access with Jews to become members of this body. The body of Christ must not recognize dividing lines among men. People are freely accepted by God for salvation regardless of color, nationality, sex, or political persuasion. The church must not draw lines where God has not.

and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus—Those who had been "strangers to the covenants of promise" were now partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:12). The seed of Abraham (Gen. 12:7) in whom the promise was to find fulfillment was Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:16), and Christ extended the blessings to the Gentiles.

Paul used three individual words in Greek to express these three statements regarding the Gentiles. To catch the impact of this in English we would say:

The Gentiles are: Co-heirs

Co-body-members

Co-partakers of the promise.

through the gospel—Jesus extended the promised blessings to all men. However, the only way to receive them is through the gospel. All men are potentially blessed in Christ, but only those who respond to the gospel are actually blessed.

To Make Men See the Mystery (3:7-13)

7 Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace which was given me by the working of his power. 8 To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, 9 and to make all men see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; 10 that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places. 11 This was according to the eternal purpose which he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, 12 in whom we have boldness and confidence of access through our faith in him. 13 So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory.

V. 7 Of this gospel I was made a minister—The term "minister of the gospel" has become synonymous with "clergyman" or "a reverend" in the minds of many people. In Greek, however, the word translated "minister" means simply a "servant." The same word (*diakonos*) is used for the banquet servants in John 2 and for the church workers (deacons) in 1 Timothy 3. Paul was not trying to set himself up in a special class of the clergy, but was rather stating his work as a humble servant of the gospel.

according to the gift of God's grace—As in verse 2 of this chapter, the giving of God's grace turns out to be a job assignment. Grace demands response and responsibility. When we get the proper perspective on things, we realize that if God assigns us a task to be done, we have received a very great blessing and privilege. If we look at serving God as a chore and a burden, there is something wrong with our way of thinking!

which was given me by the working of his power—Paul claimed credit for neither his office of apostleship nor his labors in that office. What he had accomplished was possible only through the "resurrection power" of God working within him (Eph. 1:19 and 3:20). While we all must "work out our own salvation" (Phil. 2:12), the credit is still ultimately due to God who works in us "both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13).

V. 8 To me, though I am the very least of all the saints—In view of all Paul's accomplishments as an apostle, it is remarkable that he could view himself in such a lowly fashion. He added both the comparative and superlative endings to the Greek adjective, so that the resulting meaning was "less than the least." He also called himself the "least of the apostles" (1 Cor. 15:9) and the "chief of sinners" (1 Tim. 1:15).

Incidentally, this is strong proof that the epistle was written by Paul himself, and not by one of his admiring disciples, as the critics sometimes claim.

this grace was given—This JOB ASSIGNMENT was given!

to preach the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ—On the road to Damascus God commissioned Paul to preach the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 26:17). Throughout the Gentile world Paul's message was simply "Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2).

The word "unsearchable" means literally "not to be tracked out." It comes from the vocabulary of the hunter, who is tracking his prey. The skillful hunter is rarely outsmarted, being able to follow tracks through almost any kind of terrain. The movements and motives of God, however, are simply beyond our ability to follow completely. The riches of his grace available to us in Christ are beyond our understanding.

V. 9 and to make all men see—Literally, "to enlighten" all men. Paul's commission was "to open their eyes, that they may turn from darkness to light" (Acts 26:18). Paul preached to the pagan Gentiles, but he also tried to show his fellow Jews what God's plan for mankind was.

what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages—The word for "plan" is the same word translated

"stewardship" in verse 2. Now, however, Paul is beginning to enlarge the scope of his vision to encompass not just his own role in the plan, but the whole plan in its entirety. This larger frame of reference is evidenced by the double use of "all" in this verse. (Refer to comments on verses 3 and 4 for additional notes about God's hidden plan.)

in God who created all things—God who is the ultimate source of all things is also the source of the plan for saving mankind. You can notice throughout Ephesians how much Paul stresses the fact that God is the all-sufficient source and Father of all existence. Salvation is given freely through his sovereignty; it is not devised or earned by man.

V. 10 that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known—God has often been mocked and his plans have been called foolish (1 Cor. 1:21-23). However, God has chosen a means of demonstrating his wisdom and showing that he is no fool. This chosen means is the church! Through *the church* God is proving his wisdom! How can this be? Isn't the church weak and full of hypocrites? Do not great numbers of his own children look with contempt upon the church? Surely God had a reason for choosing this surprising way of displaying his wisdom.

It may help to begin by comparing the church with the institutions made by men. No human institution has ever:

1. Cared so much for the poor, hungry, and enslaved.
2. Crossed racial barriers so completely.
3. Lifted morality and decency so much.
4. Inspired hope, beauty, and love so much.
5. Reconciled sinners to God—at all!

When you realize how much the church has accomplished in spite of hypocrites and lukewarmness, God's power becomes much more impressive. In fact, God deliberately chose the weak, lowly, and foolish to overcome the strong, mighty, and wise. When he can win the victory in spite of these handicaps, his power and wisdom are more clearly seen, and no human can boast before his presence (1 Cor. 1:26-31).

to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places—It is not just to men, though, that God is proving his wisdom. The specific audience named here is made up of angels. The "principalities and powers" are angel ranks, especially those who are opposed to God. (See Eph. 6:12 and Rom. 8:38.) What a responsibility is laid upon us to allow God to work through us to prove his wisdom!

V. 11 This was according to the eternal purpose—Paul again refers to God's plan for saving

mankind. This plan for salvation is an eternal plan, fixed in the mind of God from the very beginning.

which he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord—All the promises of God find their Yes in Christ Jesus (2 Cor. 1:20). He is not a preliminary or intermediate phase; he is the final word and the climax of the whole plan (Heb. 1:1-4).

V. 12 in whom we have boldness and confidence of access—The word for “boldness” was the word for the “freedom of speech” of the Greek citizen. God has granted Christians the right to speak and be heard before his throne of grace.

The “confidence of access” reminds us of Eph. 2:18 and the removal of all barriers standing between various kinds of men and their Father. It is only in Jesus, our great high priest, that we can have such confidence before God (Heb. 4:14-16 and 10:19-22).

V. 13 So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you—Paul also had to encourage the Philippians (1:12-14 and 2:17-18) and the Colossians (1:24) in regard to his imprisonment. Paul wanted them to see that imprisonment was not defeat. Suffering and affliction should not be allowed to overwhelm oneself, but should be accepted gladly. It is often in our weakness and distress that God’s power is most clearly seen at work (2 Cor. 12:9).

which is your glory—It was an honor to all the early Christians that Paul suffered for them as he did. Therefore, they should not lose heart (Gal. 6:9) but take great courage in the power of God to sustain Paul even in imprisonment.

Study Questions

1. How had Paul’s association with the Gentiles caused him to be imprisoned?
2. What was the “stewardship of God’s grace” which was given to Paul in verse two?
3. What does “mystery mean in these verses?
4. Why did God hide his plan from the sons of men in other generations?
5. What three descriptions of the Gentiles in verse six point out their full citizenship in God’s kingdom?
6. What is a “minister of the gospel?”
7. What is God teaching the angels?
8. What object lesson is he using to teach them?
9. What does it mean that God has “realized” his “eternal purpose” in Christ Jesus?
10. What is the boldness and confidence of access we have?
11. Can you appreciate how the people of Asia Minor would be tempted to lose heart over Paul’s imprisonment? Would you have wanted to volunteer to preach in his place?

Lesson Six (3:14-19)

A Glorious Prayer (3:14-19)

14 For this reason, I bow my knees before the Father, 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, 16 that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with might through his Spirit in the inner man, 17 and that Christ may dwell in you hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, 18 may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19 and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Paul now concludes the prayer from which he has twice digressed. The power and beauty of this prayer transcend the frailties of human language, speaking directly to our hearts. All the glory of the body of Christ, filled with resurrection power, is graphically stated. If this prayer can be fulfilled in our lives today, the glorious bride of Christ will be seen by a doubting world.

V. 14 For this reason—This is the third time Paul has said these words (1:15 and 3:1), and now he will finally conclude his prayer.