

The Mystery of the Church

October 11, 2002

Ephesians 3:1-13

1 For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles-- 2 if indeed you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace which was given to me for you; 3 that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief. 4 By referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, 5 which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit; 6 [to be specific], that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel, 7 of which I was made a minister, according to the gift of God's grace which was given to me according to the working of His power. 8 To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, 9 and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things; 10 so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly [places]. 11 [This was] in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, 12 in whom we have boldness and confident access through faith in Him. 13 Therefore I ask you not to lose heart at my tribulations on your behalf, for they are your glory.

The Revelation of the Mystery (3:1-3)

Paul begins his intercessory prayer here with the phrase, "*For this reason*" (v. 1). He immediately breaks off from the prayer in order to give an account of his distinctive ministry to the Gentiles and its place in the divine mystery that has been revealed to him. He will pick back up where he leaves off in verse 14, by repeating the phrase, "*For this reason.*" So Ephesians 3:2-13 is a digression or parenthesis. The phrase, "*For this reason*" (v. 1) also connects this passage back to 2:22 and probably to all that Paul explained in 2:11-22. So the cause of Paul's prayer refers back to the group of unifying truths that were just discussed in 2:11-22.

- ***What were these unifying truths?***

v. 15) The person in Christ becomes new.

v. 16) All believers (Jew & Gentile) are united into one body.

v. 17) The Gentiles, who were once far away, now become near when they believe.

v. 19) All believers (Jew & Gentile) are citizens of God's kingdom and members of His family.

vv. 21-22) All believers (Jew & Gentile) are being built into God's temple and dwelling.

This passage (Ephesians 3:1-13) is also a close parallel to Colossians 1:23-28.

Notice that they both include:

- The introduction of Paul (Eph. 3:1; Col. 1:23)
- Paul's suffering (Eph. 3:1; Col. 1:24)
- The grace or commission given to Paul (Eph. 3:2; Col. 1:25)
- The revelation of the mystery (Eph. 3:5; Col. 1:26)

- The Content of the mystery (Eph. 3:6; Col. 1:27)
- The proclamation of the mystery to Gentiles (Eph. 3:8; Col. 1:28)
- ***How does Paul describe himself in verse 1 and what is significant about this description?***

Paul had been arrested in Jerusalem and, eventually, had been imprisoned because he took a stand for the equality of Jews and Gentiles. The Jewish antagonists saw Paul's teaching as radical and destructive to temple practices. Thus, Paul was writing here that he had been imprisoned *for the sake of you Gentiles*. These religious leaders in Jerusalem pressured the Romans to arrest Paul and bring him to trial for treason and for causing a rebellion among the Jews. They used Trophimus, the Ephesian Gentile convert, as a ploy to arrest Paul. They accused Paul of taking Trophimus into forbidden areas of the temple. Paul had appealed for his case to be heard by the emperor, and he was awaiting trial in Rome (see Acts 21:27-28:16).

Notice, however, that he does not refer to himself as a prisoner of the Jews, Romans or even of Caesar. He was a minister of Jesus Christ, bought with a price, and given the special mission of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles. He was therefore the prisoner of Christ Jesus.

- ***What does this reveal about Paul's attitude or perspective toward his life and ministry? How should this affect our own attitudes or perspectives?***

In verse 2, Paul begins to digress from starting his prayer in order to reemphasize the divine mystery and his authority for teaching it.

- ***What responsibility has been given to Paul regarding the divine mystery and how did Paul obtain his knowledge of this mystery? (v. 2-3)***

The words "surely you have heard" in verse 2 are rhetorical. Paul assumed that believers in Ephesus and the surrounding region clearly knew and understood about the stewardship of God's grace that was given to him.

The term translated stewardship primarily referred to the management of a household, business or other concern on behalf of someone else. A steward was responsible for taking care of that which belonged to someone else. He supervised such things as buying, selling, accounting, planting, harvesting, storing etc... Paul was appointed as a steward by God's grace and became a steward of God's grace for the Gentiles. Clearly Paul obtained his knowledge of this mystery by way of revelation. God clearly revealed the mystery to Paul.

- ***What is this mystery that was made known to Paul by way of revelation?***

Paul mentions that he has already written about this mystery. It was briefly mentioned in 1:9-12 and fully laid out in 2:11-22. The mystery is that of Jew and Gentile being united as one in Christ. They are brought into union as the church. **Read 2:11-12.**

The Explanation of the Mystery (3:4-6)

- ***What does Paul reveal about the mystery in verses 4-6?***

Verse 5:

Verse 6:

Fellow heirs: As heirs together the Jews and Gentiles are adopted into the same family, thus becoming brothers and sisters in Christ. Both groups will obtain the inheritance previously mentioned in chapter 1.

Fellow members: As members of one body, the body of Christ, the Jews and Gentiles are united under one head, Christ. (Read 1 Corinthians 12:12-13)

Fellow partakers: As fellow partakers, both Jews and Gentiles in Christ share in the promise of Christ through the gospel.

The Proclamation of the Mystery (3:7-9)

- ***According to verses 7-9, what is Paul's responsibility regarding this mystery?***

The term *minister* has the basic meaning of servant. In particular it refers to one who waits on tables. It later came to refer to servants in general. By definition a servant is one who acts on the commands of others, who recognizes and submits to a higher power. Paul's primary responsibility was to do what he was told to do. He was to be a faithful servant according to the gift of God's grace, which was given to him and according to the working of God's power. Paul was likely emphasizing the authority that he had to proclaim the gospel. It was by God's authority and power that Paul proclaimed the gospel to the Gentiles. It was his responsibility to bring to light, or reveal the full expression of the mystery that Gentiles and Jews are one in Christ.

- ***According to verses 7-9, what is Paul's attitude regarding his role?***

The Intention of the Mystery (3:10-11)

- ***What is the purpose of God's revealing the mystery of the church?***

The rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places is speaking of the angels. These terms are used of both good and evil angels in the Scripture.

God's purpose in revealing the mystery of the church is to powerfully display His manifold wisdom through the church before the angels and this is in accordance with His eternal purpose, which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord.

- ***According to verse 12, what is the great privilege that Jewish and Gentile believers have as a result of faith in Christ?***
- ***How should this great privilege affect our prayer life?***

Paul concludes his digression by asking the Ephesian believers not to be discouraged over his sufferings/tribulations (imprisonment), because it was for their glory (vs. 13).