

Ephesians 3: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 04 September 2020

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Ephesians chapter 3 For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles, assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly.

When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.

This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. 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.

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, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him. So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory.

[1 : 2 1] For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

In Ephesians chapter 1, Paul described the long-purpose plan that God accomplished in Christ and its cosmic scale and implications. In chapter 2, he spoke of the way that it brought both Jews and Gentiles from death into life and overcame their separation from God and from each other, as one new people is formed in Christ.

Now in chapter 3, he turns to his part in the purpose of God. For a man who exalts his message over everything else, Paul can speak a surprising amount about his role as a minister in his epistles.

This is because for Paul, his role is not merely that of a commentator from the sidelines or a messenger whose role is entirely incidental to the message that he bears. Rather, in Paul's understanding, his apostolic mission is a participation in the apocalyptic work of the gospel itself.

[2 : 57] Paul has a key role to play in the fullness of time, akin to the way that John the Baptist had a key role to play in the transition from the Old Testament prophets to the ministry of Christ and the New Covenant.

In a like manner, Paul is one through whom the transition of the gospel to the wider Gentile world truly occurs. As in chapter 1, much of this chapter, from verses 2 to 13, is a long, single sentence.

It's a parenthesis. Paul begins a thought in verse 1, develops his parenthetical discussion of his ministry in the next 12 verses, and then picks up and completes the thought in verses 14 and following.

Paul describes himself as a prisoner of Jesus Christ. He conceives of his imprisonment as part of his service of Christ Jesus. Indeed, he speaks as if Christ himself were the jailer.

He is not just in prison for Christ Jesus, but is also a prisoner of Christ Jesus. And he is a prisoner on behalf of the Gentiles. It is his service of the Gentiles that has occasioned his imprisonment.

[3 : 56] As Daryl Bach notes, there is a particular irony when we consider the false charge on which Paul was arrested in Acts chapter 21 verse 28. The claim was that he had brought a Gentile, Trophimus the Ephesian, into the temple.

While Paul had not in fact done this, the charge had an ironic truth to it, as Paul was bringing Gentiles into the house of God, in the new temple concerning which he teaches here and elsewhere.

He now begins his digression explaining the nature of his ministry. He had been granted a stewardship of God's grace for the sake of the Gentiles. His stewardship was a gift graciously given in order that he might be an active participant in God's giving of his grace to the Gentiles.

In Galatians chapter 1 verses 15 to 17, Paul declares that his message was received directly from God, not through the mediation of any other apostle. But when he who had set me apart before I was born and who called me by his grace was pleased to reveal his son to me in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia and returned again to Damascus.

The mystery that was made known to Paul and has been revealed through the apostles and the early church prophets is one that hadn't previously been known, but only became apparent in the fullness of time. At the heart of this message is the fact that God's purpose involves Gentiles as full participants and beneficiaries, not merely as those enjoying the offcuts of the blessings of Israel.

[5 : 31] A new body is being formed in Christ and Jews and Gentiles alike are members. They are fellow heirs, both in line to receive the realisation of God's promise and needing to recognise their kinship together in the new family that this entails.

They are both participants in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. In God's powerful working, he took one of the greatest enemies of his church and overcame him by his grace, making him who was once an enemy into his greatest servant.

In Paul, God manifested the extent of his grace so that Paul might be a fitting instrument and a worked example of the wonder of the grace of God in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Paul is a minister or a servant. He is one commissioned by his master, who now represents his master and acts in his master's name towards others. Paul is keenly aware of how exceptionally unworthy he was of being set apart for such great mission.

He is the very least of all of the saints. He makes a similar point in 1 Corinthians 15, verses 9-10. For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.

[6 : 41] But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.

His calling is to declare the unsearchable riches of Christ to the Gentiles, unveiling to the whole world the mystery of the creator God's purpose from before time began. Now, in the formation of the church, this mystery is being unveiled to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

What is revealed through this is the manifold wisdom of God, the mind of God that surpasses understanding. The revelation is made to the great forces and powers of the cosmos, so that in the steady unveiling of God's purpose in the church, all of the angelic and demonic powers of the cosmos might be amazed at the greatness and majesty of God.

It is all too easy to forget the presence and the importance of other forces and parties in the narrative of salvation. Yet Paul is often keenly aware of the way that God's work is addressed not just to humankind, but to the natural world and to the angelic powers.

The church is at the heart of this revelation of the wisdom of God. All of this is according to the purpose that God has realised in Christ Jesus our Lord. The church is being formed before the watching angelic forces.

[8 : 00] And as we saw back in Ephesians chapter 1, this is occurring as God purposed before the foundation of the world. It's a plan that centres on Christ. In Christ, we now enjoy a new access to God's presence, something that we can enjoy with confidence on account of either our faith in him or his faith.

The expression is ambiguous in meaning. Although a robust theological case could be made for either. When we have a firm sense of God's purpose in Christ and its effectiveness, we will be much less troubled by seemingly threatening or contrary circumstances.

Paul wants the recipients of his letter to have a confidence in God's purpose when they consider his imprisoned condition. Paul, whatever his enemies and captors might plan for him, is exactly where the Lord intends for him to be.

The Lord's purpose for him has not failed. And while he is suffering, he is suffering in the performance of his calling as the apostle to the Gentiles. And the outcome of it all, as he follows the pattern of Christ himself, will be the glory of the churches to whom he is ministering.

They will be benefited by him. Now Paul finally returns to the dangling half-started thought of verse 1, which preceded his long digression concerning his ministry.

[9 : 13] In what follows, he shares his prayer for the readers and the hearers of his epistle. The, for this reason with which it begins, returns to verse 1 of the chapter. But verse 1 looks back to chapter 2, verses 19 to 22.

They are members of a new building, and more importantly for Paul's prayer here, a new family.

The household of God. Paul addresses the prayer to the Father, bowing before him in reverence, dependence, homage, and fealty. He describes the Father as the one from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named.

Although it may be theologically attractive to translate this verse as the ESV does, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, and a linguistic case can be made for it, it seems most likely to me that it refers to the naming of the whole family in the heavens and on the earth.

Not every family. We all bear the name of the Father, are all members of a single household, and must acknowledge each other accordingly. His prayer is that he might, by his Spirit, empower them within, returning to the themes of riches and might that he mentioned in his earlier prayer, in chapter 1, verses 15 to 23.

[10 : 47] God will enable them in a supernatural way so that Christ will reside in their hearts by an enduring faith that is brought about by the work of the Holy Spirit within them. Once again, we should observe just how fundamental the Trinity is to Paul's understanding of the pattern of salvation.

The Father grants the Spirit, who is the means by which Christ abides within us. As we are rooted and grounded in love, as we grow out of the security of God's enduring love for us, a love from which our own love for God and our brothers can develop, one of the results will be understanding.

God will give us the strength and the capacity to perceive things that we would not otherwise. As a collective act of the people of God, Paul wants his readers to come to a grasp of the true scale of the love of Christ that, as he goes on to acknowledge, knowledge surpasses any capacity of our understanding.

The result will be that we are overwhelmed by a growing sense of God's unfathomable goodness and, as this occurs, be filled with all of the fullness of God. Once again, Paul has in view a collective growth in knowledge and filling here.

This isn't just for solitary Christians, but is something that we grow in together, in fellowship with each other, and as we minister to each other. He concludes this section with a doxology.

[12 : 04] God's power and goodness exceed both our requests and our understanding. In his work within us, he has a far more wonderful and glorious purpose and intention than we could ever hope to appreciate.

The result should be the glory of God in the church and in Christ Jesus, both in what he is doing in and making of us, and also in our joyful response of praise.

This glory should grow with the passing ages and never come to an end, as the glory of God is ever more fully and wondrously made known. A question to consider.

When we talk about salvation, we tend to focus upon things from a very human perspective, thinking about what God's deliverance does for us. How might Paul's profoundly God-focused and God-centered portrayal of salvation in the book of Ephesians change the way that we think about things?