

EPHESIANS CHAPTER 3

EPHESIANS 3:1-6

THE MYSTERY IS REVEALED!

The new chapter (3) begins with “for this reason”. Remember that Paul did not write with chapter and verse divisions. At the end of our chapter 2 he has revealed the great privileges that the Gentile Christians share with their Jewish brethren in Christ. It seems as if he wants to pray, for he repeats these very words in verse 14, followed by a prayer. But, as so often, he gets distracted, this time by wanting to make clear the privileged responsibility assigned to him by God on behalf of Gentiles. This was in order to encourage them as regards his imprisonment (verse 13). So he writes to them about his imprisonment (verse 1), the stewardship he has been given (verses 2-6), and his ministry (verses 7-12).

1. PAUL IS IN PRISON FOR THE SAKE OF GENTILES (3:1)

Three of Paul’s letters, to the Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians, were written from prison in Rome (see 3:1, 4:1, 6:20). He had been accused of taking a Gentile into the Jerusalem temple (Trophimus the Ephesian, Acts 21:29), something punishable by death. There was a riot, Paul was arrested, and after many trials he could see he would never get justice, so he appealed to Caesar, the right of every Roman citizen. This is recorded in Acts 21 – 28. What had he said that made the crowd to riot? He preached to them that God had sent him to the *Gentiles* (Acts 22:21). The thought that the Gentiles were included in the saving plan of God was abhorrent to them. But Paul was insistent that salvation in Christ is equally for Gentiles as for Jews. Hence his imprisonment.

Note that Paul writes, “*the* prisoner for Christ Jesus.” He is Christ’s prisoner, not Rome’s. There were unseen chains more strongly binding him to Christ than those binding him to the soldier in prison. He nowhere asks for prayer to be released (see 6:19-20 for what he does pray), nor does he utter any complaint or talk of being discouraged. In prison he continues to serve Christ (so Philippians 1:12-14), although obviously weak and put to shame. Just as Christ died in weakness and shame and so obtained the victory, so it was with His servant Paul.

Some Christians think that because Christ is exalted “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion” (1:21), then it is impossible that His servants could be unjustly imprisoned. This is common thinking today because it is thought that nothing ‘bad’ should ever happen to a Christian. But consider Joseph sold by his own brothers and unjustly imprisoned, Job losing everything in a day yet God had testified of his blamelessness, and the first martyr Stephen. God brought blessing through their lives. Let us change our attitude to God’s providences in our lives, for all that happens is of God, even if through the devil (so Job 1:6-12, so Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:7). Rather, let us consider how we can serve God when we are opposed, unjustly treated, when we lose our job, or stricken with sickness. God delights to make us weak in order to use us (see 2 Corinthians 4:7ff.).

2. PAUL HAS BEEN GIVEN A STEWARDSHIP FOR THE GENTILES (3:2-3)

God has a plan that includes the Gentiles as well as the Jews. And Paul was given a very important part in the fulfilling of the plan. He calls it a “stewardship”. We refer to the parable of ‘The Dishonest Steward’ (Luke 16:1ff.) who was the manager of the estate of a rich man. This language shows that whatever Paul is or does is on behalf of the Lord and not of his own choosing.

(1) He is a steward of *God’s grace*. He has been entrusted with a message, called “the mystery ... of Christ”. It is a message of grace from beginning to end, because we deserve nothing except judgement. It tells of a free salvation for sinners (Acts 20:24). It is out of pure love alone that our Lord was sent to purchase our salvation on the cross. He has paid it all. This is what makes the Christian gospel so different from every other message.

(2) It is a message of God’s grace *for the Gentiles*. It is of special relevance to them. The Gentiles were completely helpless and hopeless (see 2:11-12), as no message of hope had been proclaimed to them. They were at enmity with God and the Jews, and ripe for judgement because of the greatness of their sin (Romans 1:29-32). Now Paul had been made a steward specifically for them, as God’s plan for the world (first promised in Genesis 12:3).

(3) The message came to him *by revelation*. It did not come to him through much study or by special wisdom. In Galatians 1 Paul emphasizes that it was through revelation and not by consultation even with leaders in Jerusalem (1:12,16). Once again, there is the emphasis on the divine initiative, and not on Paul himself, as happened on the Damascus Road where the Lord appeared to him. If the message were of Paul then there would be no reason to believe it. We do not put our trust even in the thoughts of the wisest men, but in the very words God has given (2 Timothy 3:16, 2 Peter 1:21).

3. THE MYSTERY REVEALED IS ABOUT THE GENTILES (3:3-6)

The mystery is “of Christ” (verse 4), and that “the Gentiles are fellow heirs” (verse 6). This is not so much new information, for there is much about salvation reaching the Gentiles in the Old Testament. So, for example, Genesis 12:3, Isaiah 2:2, 19:24-25, 49:6. It is first about Christ Himself, who in the fullness of time came to earth in fulfilment of all the ancient promises. He has accomplished this salvation which includes the Gentiles. And it is this that Paul preached. He made the place of the Gentiles in God’s purpose crystal clear. They were not to be absorbed into a Jewish type church, the controversy which was ironed out in Acts 15. Rather, he makes it clear that the old Jewish theocracy was torn down, and Jew and Gentile believers were united equally in the church.

Three words describe the present status of Gentiles with respect to Jewish Christians, each prefixed by a small word meaning ‘with’ or ‘fellow’ – fellow heirs, fellow members, fellow partakers. It is astounding that Gentile Christians are put on exactly the same footing as Jewish Christians:

- They have the same inheritance. They receive the same benefits, the blessings of the new covenant which are not like the blessings of the old covenant, finally the blessing of being with Christ in glory and being like Him for ever.

- They are part of the same body. It is possible to be an heir and yet not be of the same blood (remember Abraham's Eliezer). But as part of the same body we must not perpetuate any distinction between Jew and Gentile believers before God. This is against Dispensationalism that teaches Jews will be special in the so-called 1000 year reign of Christ, and that God has one plan for the Jews and another for the Gentiles.
- They enjoy the same promise. They receive the Spirit just as the Jews (Gal. 3:14, Acts 10-11). They will experience the same future resurrection of the dead.

When you consider what a great wall of separation there was, it is all abolished and there is now total identification. So the Gentiles are not to think that it is a defeat for them that Paul is confined to prison. He is there because he stood his ground on their behalf, as opposed to Peter who compromised (Galatians 2:11-14).

How is all this possible? It is "in Christ Jesus" and "through the gospel". Our Lord is the One who has done it all on our behalf, and to experience it we must be united to Him by a living faith. This grace of God in Christ is preached to you (written here for you to read). This is what happened to the Ephesians as recorded in Acts 19. What more do you need? Here is a man (Paul) with a message about grace to us Gentiles, one in total contradiction to his pre-Christian life as a bigoted and persecuting Pharisee. Now he is prepared to suffer unto death for this glorious message. This is the transformation the message of the gospel has brought to so many lives down the ages. Has your life been so transformed?

EPHESIANS 3:7-8

HOW THE GOSPEL COMES TO YOU

Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ, is writing a letter to the church in Ephesus. He is in prison and in chapter 3 of the letter he explains that it is because of the gospel that he is suffering. He makes it clear that it is God who has called him to preach this gospel, having revealed it to him as an apostle (verses 5-6). Just as God used Paul in the lives of the Ephesians (and so many others), so God has continued to call men to preach. Let us learn what God does in bringing salvation to sinners. He does two things.

1. GOD APPOINTS A MINISTER (3:7-8a)

There are two things about the man God appoints.

(1) He is a "minister". Paul does not call himself an apostle here. Nor is he a general at the head of an army to conquer his enemies, nor a king for others to serve him. He is a minister, a servant, one who works in the interest of and for the benefit of another. This word is used of all Christians (Matthew 20:26, 23:11), of Phoebe (Romans 16:1), and is the word used for deacons (Philippians 1:1, 1 Timothy 3:8,12). It is even used of Satan's spokesmen (2 Corinthians 11:14). There are both earthly ministers, the governing authorities (Romans 13:4), and spiritual ministers (2 Corinthians 6:4, 11:23, Colossians 1:7, 1 Timothy 4:6). Even today we call those in high office in government 'Minister'. Such a minister or servant is only given authority if he is faithfully doing the work entrusted to him. He is under orders, so not serving for his own benefit but for the Master in His kingdom. It is a great privilege to be such

a minister, but the service is not for one's own honour but for the Master's honour. As a servant there is nothing beneath the dignity of the Minister to do and each one has a different work. God's people are commanded to esteem such ministers who are leaders "very highly in love because of their work" (1 Thessalonians 5:13). But do not exalt them as if they are like priests, between you and God, almost beings of a different nature. No, ministers are only servants, at the call of the Master, to do joyfully whatever He appoints.

(2) He is an unworthy minister. Note the following two things Paul writes about himself.

- "I am the very least of all the saints." Paul could never get over the reality that he, of all people, had been given this ministry. He emphasizes the words, "to me" (verse 8), by putting them first. Literally, he writes, 'more least than least', as the very lowest of all people set apart to God. But we might ask how Paul could truthfully write this, as to us he is such a great Christian (see also 1 Corinthians 15:9 and 1 Timothy 1:15 for similar statements). Let us never forget what Paul used to be, a proud Pharisee, a violent persecutor of the church, and even a blasphemous opponent of Christ Himself (1 Timothy 1:13). Humanly speaking, there was no more unlikely candidate to be a Christian, and certainly not a minister. We could look back at our lives to our rebelliousness against knowledge, to years of stubborn refusal to believe, to living as a hypocrite, to abandoning ourselves to sin, and we would be rightly greatly humbled.
- "According to the gift of God's grace." Note the repeated insistence that it is God, and not himself (Paul), who has made him a minister. "I was made", "the gift", "God's grace", "given me" (verse 7), and "this grace was given" (verse 8). Paul became a minister, not because of anything in him, but because God decided it should be! No credit is to be given to Paul for deciding to become a Christian, for having such deep insight into the Christian message, for being such a powerful preacher and having amazing success. Rather, it was by "the working of His power." Paul would never have become a Christian unless God had worked powerfully in his heart to change this raging persecutor; he would never have served the gospel he once hated; he would never have been able to fulfil the commission to go to the Gentiles (see Colossians 1:29). This teaches us that it is God who raises up ministers of His choice, that whatever ability they have is from Him, that whatever they accomplish is His doing, and that to Him therefore is all the glory (1 Corinthians 3:6-7). Never praise the minister. Only praise the Lord of the minister. Rejoice in the Lord when you see God raising up such ministers.

2. GOD INSTRUCTS THE MINISTER TO PREACH (3:8b)

(1) What he is to do. "To preach to the Gentiles." When God purposed to bless the Gentiles He raised up a ... preacher! Men who have changed the spiritual map of the world have been preachers. Just think of the Reformation with Luther and Calvin, the Puritan era with a host of preachers whose sermons we read even today, great missionaries such as William Carey, and the East African revival. There is a message, and it needs to be told to the world (Mark 16:15, Luke 24:47, Acts 1:8). There is no power to change the hearts of sinners by messages about good governance and anti-corruption, of development and especially of education, as important as these are. It is the message of the gospel alone that can change individuals and so the world. Just consider what the message did for Saul of Tarsus, the Philippian jailer, and

untold multitudes of others (1 Corinthians 6:9). It is this gospel that you need, a message that when received will totally change your life, from a guilty conscience, enslaving habits, a lack of purpose, hopelessness, and failure, and all by the working of God's power.

(2) What he is to preach. "The unsearchable riches of Christ." These are riches that are unsearchable. Imagine you go into a vault where a nation's gold reserves are stored. You go from room to room, but there is always another room to search. What are these riches?

- Preaching is centred in Christ, not in the preacher, not in the church, nor in duty or works. It is about Christ the God-man, who is fully God and at the same time fully man. "In Him the whole fulness of deity dwells bodily" (Colossians 2:9). Think of the greatest man, or all men together: they cannot solve our problems, for the problem of sin is just too difficult. Rather let a leopard change its spots, and an Ethiopian his skin colour (see Jeremiah 13:23). In fact, unity only brings rebellion, as at the tower of Babel. Only Jesus Christ is able to get to the root of this problem of sin. We mortals may have some success in dealing with our fellows, but who can deal with a thrice holy God? Our Lord can, because He IS God, and as man He understands and represents us before the Father.
- Preaching tells us of Christ who has unsearchable riches, all for our benefit! This is the good news, the gospel. There is much preaching today about the right of a Christian to be prosperous in this world. Yet Jesus said, "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth" (Matthew 6:19), and the apostle writes, "Those who desire to be rich fall into temptation" (1 Timothy 6:9). Such riches are 'searchable', but the riches Christ has to give are "unsearchable". They are not just for time, but go on into eternity. What good are those riches you must leave behind when you exit this world? In Christ there are riches of election, predestination to adoption, redemption, revelation, glory and the gift of the Spirit (remember Ephesians 1:3-14). Do present earthly riches guarantee joy and peace? Do they give you sure hope in sickness and bereavement? The richest persons die despite the expertise of the best medics. Millions may be spent on a funeral but they cannot restore the deceased. Christ gives you all you need, and beyond, what He calls 'abundant life' (John 10:10). His blood cleanses from sin so that now there is peace of conscience and the assurance that there is no future condemnation. His righteousness imputed enables us to dwell in God's holy presence. The Spirit of God indwelling gives the necessary understanding and strength for daily living and until the end. None have ever gone to Christ and been turned away empty (John 6:35,37). Today Christ says: 'Come to Me in all your deepest need, as you acknowledge your emptiness, and I will satisfy you in the depths of your soul. I will give you a new heart and put My Spirit within you. Come, and call on My name.' May the Lord be pleased to raise up more and more of such preachers today and use them to bring untold blessing on multitudes of sinners.

EPHESIANS 3:9-11

GOD'S MANIFOLD WISDOM

If God is God then we all agree that He is the most wise Person; He is *all-wise* (Romans 16:27, see 11:33). He knows everything, and because there is no sin in Him, he always uses the best possible means for the most glorious purposes. Where do we see God's wisdom? Of course, in His creation (Jeremiah 10:12, see Proverbs 8). We see its beauty, its vastness, its detail, the way it all fits together and works perfectly, despite the world now being in a fallen state. Our passage, however, refers to God's **manifold** wisdom and finds it in connection with the CHURCH! This wisdom is multi-coloured, like a garland of flowers, like a rainbow, beautiful, and full of splendour. Too often the 'church' is despised and ridiculed as if something foolish. Many see it as just full of hypocrites, useless in today's society as totally unable to change anything, as an institution only interested in money and power. Yet, we need to learn that it is specifically and pre-eminently through the church that God's manifold wisdom is made known. Of course, we must know where to look for the church: not in buildings, nor in leaders who push themselves forward as 'men of God' for riches and influence.

1. GOD'S WISDOM IN STARTING THE CHURCH (3:9)

Who did God choose to start this work? It was seemingly a useless earthen vessel, Saul of Tarsus, who describes himself as "the very least of all the saints" (3:8). How was he to accomplish the work? He was simply commissioned to "preach" a message that there are unsearchable riches in Christ (3:8), the One whom the Romans crucified, yet who it is claimed rose from the dead on the third day and ascended into heaven. If this is it, then who could be expected to respond? It is an unbelievable message. And anyway, who is this unknown preacher, Paul? How, then, is it wisdom to use such a person, to carry out such a responsibility?

Paul makes it very clear in verse 9 that the preaching ministry is not simply about giving information. It is also a power to work in those who listen. When God raises up a preacher God's purpose is that people all over the world have "the plan of the mystery" *brought to light* in their lives. This means that God enlightens them to receive the message with understanding and joy (1:18, Acts 26:18). Brethren, there is divine power in this gospel message! It is the only way its success can be explained. God has not commissioned famous people, there is no vast organization with financial resources, nor powerful rulers to enforce the message. So Lydia's heart was opened by the riverside (Acts 16:14), the Corinthians believed (1 Corinthians 2:4-5), and the Thessalonians were blessed (1 Thessalonians 1:5). As men and women believe, so a local church is started; the stones of the spiritual building begin to be laid.

What God purposed to do in His eternal plans had not been fully disclosed, so it is called a "mystery". It awaited the time of fulfilment as it could not be comprehended until its outworking was made clear. The church is a body of believers, both Jews and Gentiles, as they are equally the children of God through faith in Jesus Christ (see 2:19-22, 3:6). God's full plan is to unite "all things" in heaven and on earth (1:10). God created all these things and will surely bring them back into full harmony. He has the power to do it, and He does it through

the preaching of the gospel. This is God's wisdom, as the purpose is glorious, and the means is most efficient.

2. GOD'S WISDOM IN ESTABLISHING THE CHURCH (3:10)

The church becomes established because over time groups of believers begin to meet in various places. They were first called Christians in Antioch of Syria (Acts 11:26). They were also known as The Way (Acts 9:2), or just as disciples (Acts 9:1,19). They are a diverse people: Jews, Samaritans and Gentiles; men and women; free and slave; adults and children. Yet they are united together, loving each other as a closely knit family, with one hope of glory. This is the true church, and there is no other society on earth like it. The world is always divided, with no real hope. Just think of the so-called 'United Nations' with different blocks that vote according to their own interests. When I first was in Kenya (1968), six brethren, who I did not know at all, came to meet with me. We were different in almost every way except one; we were all Christians with a testimony of how the Lord had saved us. So we were united. Just think of the different people who came together in the Biblical record: Paul the Jew and Luke the Gentile; the master Philemon and his slave Onesimus; and in the Philippian church, the business woman Lydia, a slave girl, and the jailer. God is doing before our eyes what sin destroyed at the beginning, what man by himself has been unable to repair. Sure, there are many unworthy things that you can find in the name of the church, just like on an unfinished building site. But there are also so many wonderful things. The church is God's building project for the reconciliation of all things (see Colossians 1:19-20).

Equally surprising is that this wisdom is made known to "rulers and authorities in heavenly places" and not just to people on earth.

Many believe this refers to *evil angels* (as in 6:12), who seek to sow discord and to destroy, but who are defeated by the 'foolishness of the cross' as Christ crucified has become "the wisdom of God" (1 Corinthians 1:24). This would be of great comfort to Christians who before used to fear such evil powers (see Ephesians 1:21). It would apply also to those who today have been caught up in the so-called 'deliverance movement' and the fear of generational curses.

However, it is probably better to see a reference to *good angels*, who want to know what God is doing (as in 1 Peter 1:12). They rejoiced over creation, then sin entered and brought futility, a problem that the flood did not solve. Then they witnessed the choice of Abraham and his grandson Jacob as the ancestor of the Jewish nation. They followed their history into Egypt, then into Canaan, with all its ups and downs. Sometimes it looked as if it would be a failure. Then the promised One was born and they sang over the birth of Jesus as the Saviour Christ who would bring that longed for peace (Luke 2:14). But how would He do it? We imagine these angels marvelling at the great crowds who followed His teaching, witnessing His powerful miracles, but it seemed to end in utter defeat, the cross! Far from being defeat, the cross was victory over evil powers, as shown in the resurrection and the pouring out of the Spirit. The preaching of the cross has since gone throughout the world, establishing a church out of "every nation" (Revelation 7:9). No longer is the world divided between the Jews as God's people, and the Gentiles outside God's kingdom. In accomplishing this God's wisdom is seen as manifoldly great. Let us adore Him.

3. GOD'S WISDOM IN FULFILLING AN ETERNAL PURPOSE (3:11)

We all make plans. Some fail because they are foolish. Others fail because of unforeseen circumstances. God has made plans, an "eternal purpose". Central to God's plan was **the church**. Christ said He will build His church (Matthew 16:18). Paul wrote that "Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:25). The church is not a 'parenthesis' as found in the older Dispensational teaching (as in the Schofield Bible). It was falsely believed that although the Jews first rejected Christ's offer of the kingdom to them, at a future time they will receive it in a millenium. So the church is only there because of the failure of the Jews. NO! The church is God's masterpiece. It was His purpose from eternity. It is established because of the coming and work of "Jesus Christ our Lord". He came as a substitute for a multitude of sinners, he lived a sinless life, He was punished on the cross for our sin, and rose on the third day triumphant over every enemy, and will return for final salvation. God is fulfilling what He planned. How wise He is!

Don't be found guilty of fighting against God's eternal purpose by dividing the church. Paul will go on in this letter to urge the Ephesians "to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (4:3). We must do everything we possibly can to show that we are spiritually one in the midst of our earthly diversity (Colossians 3:11).

You need to be sure that you are part of this church that Christ is building. How can you know? Ask yourself these questions. Are you totally depending upon Christ for salvation from sin? – remind yourself of Ephesians 2:1-10. Is Jesus Christ your Lord so that your life is patterned on His word? Do you count *anyone* like this a spiritual brother so that you love them in a Christian way? Do you magnify the wisdom of God in your salvation from beginning to end? Have you identified with a local church that also believes and practices these things?
