10-7-18

Ephesians 3:1-13

In these verses, Paul, writing under the direction of the Holy Spirit, basically considers three subjects: his own part in God’s plan to spread the Gospel, the mystery that God has kept hidden from the beginning of time until now, and how God’s wisdom is being revealed. So, we have Paul, God’s mystery, and God’s wisdom. Now, all three of these have been mentioned and somewhat looked at already in this letter, but now they are brought out more fully. The thing is that Paul doesn’t discuss them here one after the other; Paul has woven them together throughout our text. The result is quite beautiful.

However, if I go verse by verse in studying this passage, I’m afraid that I’ll end up with a mess by jumping back and forth between these three subjects that Paul is discussing. What I hope to do is to look at each of these topics by themselves over the course of three Sundays. We may be bouncing around within this passage, but at least we’ll focus on one topic at a time.

Notice that Paul breaks off abruptly at the end of verse 1, speaks of himself, God’s mystery, and God’s wisdom up through verse 13, and then comes back to his original idea in verse 14. He started off telling them of his prayer for them, went off on a tangent (an important tangent), then went back to his prayer. We can see that verse 1 and verse 14 begin the same, “For this reason”.

“For this reason,” refers back to his previous discussion of the Gentiles becoming one with the Jews in a new creation in Christ. It refers to their becoming citizens of Christ’s Kingdom, a member of God’s family, and a living stone that is part of God’s temple. It is for these glorious reasons that Paul prays for the Ephesian Christians; that they may come to a fuller understanding of these riches.

We come face to face here with one of the peculiar aspects of this apostle: He will begin one thought, go to another for deep clarification, but then, he always comes back to finish the original thought. This is part of Paul’s style along with long sentences that cover several subjects, many of them deep. He does tackle deep theology and tells of revelations we don’t find elsewhere. In short, Paul is not always easy to read. Don’t feel bad, the apostle Peter writes in 2 Peter 3:15-16.

and regard the patience of our Lord *as* salvation; just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, as also in all *his* letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand

In these verses, Peter is giving support to Paul in answering a common question we have: “Things are such a mess, why doesn’t the Lord step in and fix everything?” He will. But once He does, the chance for salvation is over. His patience will allow people to come to Christ and avoid eternity in hell. If we continue reading the following verses in 2 Peter, we will see that Peter is warning against those who take advantage of Paul’s difficult ideas by twisting them into something different. There is a warning here for us to be careful when studying Paul; we want to make sure we search for the true meaning and avoid the temptation of making Paul say what we want him to say.

Some of the most precious gems and minerals are the most difficult to get; they require a lot of work, but in the end, they are worth the effort. It is the same with Paul’s teaching. His depth of teaching coupled with his personality and the way he thinks can be difficult. But he is worth the effort.

One of the interesting things about Paul is that he will talk about himself. If we look at just a few of his statements, we can get the impression that he is egotistical; that he likes to keep reminding people of his apostolic office to keep them under his thumb. But if we read his letters carefully we come to see that this is never the case. Paul is more amazed than anyone else that God has called him to apostleship. He is careful to give God credit for his ministry through Jesus Christ. At the same time, he is not afraid to present his apostleship because it shows that the authority of his words is from God.

In verse 1, he uses the phrase, “I, Paul”. He has already introduced himself in the beginning of his letter as the apostle Paul. He brings it up here again to remind the Ephesians who it is that is praying for them; that he has written these wonderful things regarding the Gentiles with the authority of an apostle of Jesus Christ. With this fresh in their minds he tells them that he is “the prisoner of Jesus Christ”. This is a difficult thought: that someone with God given authority to distribute the Gospel message, would be a prisoner.

It is telling of Paul’s thinking that he refers to himself as a “prisoner of Jesus Christ”. Technically, he was a prisoner of Nero, the current emperor of Rome. Paul wrote this letter from a Roman prison. But Paul always looked at his life in relation to Jesus. He was a prisoner because he followed Jesus and proclaimed the Gospel. He always considered himself in terms of a servant, slave, or prisoner of Christ. He had died to the world, he belonged to Christ; therefore, anything that happened to him happened through Christ.

Paul continues by saying that he is a prisoner “for the sake of you Gentiles”. We learn about these things in the book of Acts. It is in chapter 9 that Paul meets Jesus while Paul is traveling to Damascus. The Lord sends His prophet, Ananias, to Paul with a message and reveals His plans for Paul.

Acts 9:15-16

But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name’s sake.”

Paul was specially commissioned by Jesus to be an apostle to the Gentiles. He worked according to this commission for many years and with much suffering. Then we read in Acts chapters 21 and 22 how this landed him in much trouble with some of the Jews and ended up with him being in prison. The reason the Jews gave him trouble was because of his relationship with the Gentiles.

Jesus had given Paul his assignment for the sake of the Gentiles. Now, because of his faithfully carrying out this assignment, he was in prison. Paul was certainly a “prisoner of Jesus Christ for the sake of you Gentiles”.

It is when he writes this that other thoughts come to him and he needs to diverge from his topic and give more explanation. The beginning of verse 2 is translated in different ways, but the basic idea is that Paul knows that the Ephesians *are* aware of his special calling. We also see here that Paul was very aware of his calling. He refers to it as a “stewardship” or a “dispensation” of God’s grace. God dispensed grace on Paul, He made Paul a steward of His grace. In other words, He showed Paul great, unmerited favor by making him an apostle to the Gentiles. Paul was made responsible for spreading the Gospel to the Gentiles as an apostle. There were certainly others who spread the Gospel to the Gentile nations, but Paul was to do so as an apostle.

We see here the wonderful grace of God. He provided someone with the powerful gift of apostleship to go to those who were outside of God’s covenants and outside of God’s covenant people. Paul recognized that it was unmerited favor that made him that apostle; he was fully aware that he didn’t deserve that office or the revelation of the mystery that God chose to reveal at that time in history.

In verse 7, he speaks of being made a minister of this mystery. He didn’t claim this ministry himself. Paul says he has this ministry as a gift of God’s grace. So, the ministry was not given to him by man, but by God. It is because he knows that he is an apostle by the power of God that he is not afraid to claim it. He is giving the glory to God, not himself. Additionally, that kind of gift (just like any other spiritual gift), should not be hidden under a basket.

In verses 8 and 9, we catch the complete amazement that Paul has; that he has been given this grace. We see this in the phrase “the very least of all saints”. This verse is translated in several different ways because Paul actually made up a word to describe himself and it is a word that is impossible to be: leaster. Leaster would be “less than the least”. If something is the least, there is nowhere else to go that is lower; yet this is the way that Paul described himself.

This is not some false modesty on Paul’s part or even some whining about his circumstances. This is the way he viewed himself. Think about how devoted to Jesus Paul was. Think about how much Paul loved his Saviour. Paul probably had a better grasp of what it meant to be saved than anyone else, of what torment Jesus saved him from. Yet Paul knew what he had done to Jesus. When he persecuted Christians, he persecuted Christ Himself. He had blasphemed the very One who deliberately saved him from hell. Paul knew he was forgiven, but he carried the pain of hurting his beloved Jesus.

And what good news he got to bring to the Gentiles and to all of us. He got to go to those who had absolutely no hope and not only tell them about the “unfathomable riches of Christ”, but he got to tell them that they could be heirs and recipients of these riches. He got to tell them the mystery, that all along, God had a plan to include them in His Kingdom. That all along, God was going to create a new people of both Jews and Gentiles. He got to tell them that they were a part of revealing God’s wisdom to powerful beings; God’s wisdom that they could not comprehend on their own.

Paul is an apostle, but in verse 13 he reveals his pastor’s heart. He is concerned that the Ephesian Christians might become discouraged by learning that Paul was in jail. If God’s apostle Paul could be jailed, how would they stand a chance? Also, the Ephesian Christians loved Paul, they would be sad on his account; because of his suffering. Paul gives them encouragement. He asks them to not be disheartened.

He has already explained that he was a prisoner of Jesus Christ; What could possibly harm him now? He was right where he wanted to be; Perhaps he didn’t want to be in a prison in particular, but he was safe in the arms of Jesus. He was there because he had been doing exactly what Jesus wanted him to do. He was suffering for Christ and not for something he had done wrong. Remember that Jesus promised blessing to those who suffer for His name’s sake. They must also keep in mind that nothing is beyond God’s control; if something happens, it works toward the fulfillment of His plan.

Paul was also happy to suffer on behalf of the people he was writing to. His imprisonment was a small price to pay for the honor of bringing them the good news of the Gospel and all the riches of Christ. Additionally, Paul’s suffering is glory for the Ephesian Christians. Because of Paul’s willingness to suffer, they have received salvation, and all those who are saved look forward to glory in Christ.

It would be unfortunate to consider all these things about Paul and not learn anything for ourselves. As Christians it would be good for us to take Paul’s way of looking at things and apply them to our lives. After all, Paul himself tells his readers to use him for an example. Perhaps one of the most important things to consider involves suffering. Remember everything that Paul endured: beatings, hunger, shipwreck, imprisonment, stoning, loneliness, and a constant thorn in his flesh. No where does he complain, or question what is happening.

As I was preparing this sermon, considering Paul’s life, I thought about this past weekend. It was busy; a viewing, 2 funerals, Sunday service and a Sunday School lesson. There were also obligations a couple days before the weekend and for a couple days after. Right about Thursday, I came down with a cold. Kept it all weekend. Now, the natural thought is “Why did I get a cold? I have a lot to do and, after all, it is work for the Lord. I should be protected from such things.”

Of course, the natural thoughts are the wrong thoughts. This is a fallen world; I can expect to get sick and I can expect to get sick at inconvenient times. Can the Lord keep these things from me? Absolutely. But because I belong to Jesus, I know that if I’m sick it’s because He has allowed it. He hasn’t caused it, sickness exists because of sin, but He allows it.

This kind of thinking is for all Christians. Things go wrong because we live in a world sick with sin, even our own hearts tend toward evil. We must learn to look at all Christian suffering as being for Christ. Any suffering we endure while clinging to our faith in Jesus brings glory to God. The forces of evil can’t understand it.

Think also about Paul’s amazement at His own ministry. Who of us shouldn’t also look at our own ministries with amazement? Consider our lives before we were blessed with salvation, and really, even after we were saved. Why would Christ want to use any of us?

Bear in mind that when we became Christians, we surrendered our lives to Christ. Not that we always manage to hold up our end, but that is what we should strive for. When we have given our lives to Christ, we have taken His yoke upon us, we bear the burdens He gives us, we submit to His directions. But it is an easy yoke, it is a light burden and no matter how difficult it becomes, He helps us bear it. God loves us, Jesus loves us; so, while this life isn’t easy, it brings God glory and brings us into unimaginable riches and joy.

Prayer

Help us, LORD, to be like Paul; to see everything through the lens of eternity, to see everything in the light of Jesus, to see that our lives are to bring God glory by obedience. Help us to see suffering as Paul does; it is simply the pathway of this life, yet God uses it for the good of His children.

LORD, it would be wrong for us to seek out suffering; we do not ask for it. We ask that You would see fit to spare us from it. But we leave it to You, if in accordance with Your will, You would choose it for Your glory and our good.

Now LORD, we praise You for the gifts that You have given us. We thank You for the ministries that You have given us; guide us that they would be used for Your church. We thank You for salvation; Jesus has saved us from eternity in hell, what more could we ask; yet You bestow upon us riches.

It is in the name of our Saviour Jesus we pray

Amen