

1. Paul's apostolic burden 3:1-13

The structure of chapter three needs to be noted. Paul evidently intended to begin his intercessory prayer in v. 1, but reference to his imprisonment for the sake of the Gentiles drew him into a parenthetical discussion of his ministry to them. It is clear that v. 14 resumes where v. 1 left off ("For this reason, I Paul [v. 1]. . . For this reason I bow my knees before the Father . . . [v. 14]").

a. prisoner for the sake of the Gentiles 3:1-2

Paul claims to be a prisoner, not of the Jews, not of the Romans, not of Nero, but of Jesus! Just as he is Christ's servant, apostle, and minister, so he is his prisoner. Jesus is Lord of his life even in prison. In all relations and in every circumstance, he belonged to Jesus. Paul refused to let his faith, love, and commitment diminish simply because he was the object of considerable adversity (cf. 2 Tim. 2:8-10).

When Paul says he is a prisoner "of Christ Jesus it is for the sake of the Gentiles," see Acts 21:17-28; 22:21ff.; 25:11; 26:16-18; 28:16. It was fanatical Jewish opposition to his mission to the Gentiles that led to his incarceration.

In Acts, Luke explains that what prompted the Jews to stir up the crowd against Paul was his reputation for "teaching men everywhere against the people and the law and this place" (the temple). How can he have acquired such a reputation? Doubtless by teaching exactly what he has just taught in Ephesians 2, namely that by abolishing the divisive elements of the law Jesus was creating a new people and building a new temple. So he was arrested (Stott, 115). As Snodgrass notes, "the only reason why Paul was in prison was because he thought Gentiles had the same access to God that Jews did. If he had been content to be a Jewish Christian with a mission to Jews or if he had been willing to keep Gentiles on a lower plane [or in a subordinate position], he would not have been in jail" (159).

Paul had raised a gift from the Gentile churches and had personally taken it to Jerusalem to help alleviate the suffering of the Jewish people.

Paul's imprisonment had been going on now for about five years. During those years, Paul easily could have grown bitter towards the Jews who had falsely accused him, and even toward God, who had allowed this to happen.

The teaching that God promises health and wealth to all of His children is heresy. But, although most of us don't buy into that error, we often think that if we walk obediently with the Lord, He will reward us with protection from trials. Or, when trials come, some teach that it is okay to get angry with God. The assumption behind this is, "I don't deserve this kind of treatment!" There was once a booklet from the ministry that publishes "Our Daily Bread" titled, "Forgiving God"! That's a blasphemous title, because it implies that God did something wrong! It was about a woman who had lost her four-year-old, and how she had to learn to forgive God for this tragedy! But, if Job (the most righteous man on earth) did not need to forgive God for taking all ten of his children in one accident, then neither do we need to forgive God, no matter how difficult our trials. He never treats us unjustly or sends trials into our lives without a loving purpose on His part.

Paul was suffering unjustly from a human perspective. He had not done anything wrong. He was suffering because he had gone to a lot of personal bother to do something good.

Also, Paul was not suffering because he denied the truth, but rather because he boldly proclaimed the truth. You can dodge a lot of hassles as a preacher if you tiptoe around difficult doctrines and just preach "nice" messages that make everyone feel good.

The words translated "if indeed" (cf. Eph. 4:21; Gal. 3:4; 2 Cor. 6:3; Col. 1:23) could be rendered "inasmuch as and do not express doubt but rather confident assumption or certainty ('you must surely have heard')."

The "stewardship" of God's grace given to Paul = his "gracious assignment," i.e., the task or duty that was bestowed on Paul by God's grace (cf. Col. 1:25). "Paul esteemed the office of a messenger of Christ as a manifestation of the undeserved kindness of

God towards him" (Hodge, 159; cf. Rom. 12:3; 15:15; 1 Cor. 3:10; Gal. 2:9). Do we view opportunities for evangelism as gifts of grace, entrusted to us by God, for which we should give thanks or as burdens from which we shrink away?

b. the mystery: Gentile equality 3:3-6

Paul had earlier mentioned the divine "mystery" (1:9-10). "There it referred to God's all-inclusive purpose which has as its ultimate goal the uniting of all things in heaven and earth in Christ. Here, a more limited dimension to the mystery focuses on Gentiles, along with Jews, being incorporated into the body of Christ and thus participating in the divine salvation" (O'Brien, 228).

1) the meaning of the mystery was made known to Paul according to divine revelation v. 3a

This probably refers to Paul's revelatory experience on the Damascus road where "God . . . was pleased to reveal his Son in me" (Gal. 1:12,15-16). The correct translation is "according to revelation" not "by revelation." Paul's point is that divine revelation provides a standard for the evaluation of what he says; i.e., it is the ground or basis on which Paul became acquainted with the mystery.

2) he earlier had referred briefly to it v. 3b

Although some point to Col. 1:25-27, Paul probably has in mind Eph. 1:9-10 and especially 2:11-22.

3) a careful reading of those comments will enable the Ephesians to understand Paul's insight into the meaning of the mystery v. 4

Here we see a reference to the ancient practice of the public reading to the entire congregation of the NT documents. Whereas earlier Paul had prayed that all believers might have spiritual 'insight (1:17-18; Col. 1:9), here he refers to that exceptional "insight" given him by God which he now wants them also to grasp.

The "mystery of Christ" (1) is it the mystery which is (or about) Christ; i.e., he is its content; or (2) the mystery which is found or disclosed in Christ; or (3) the mystery

which comes from Christ by revelation? Probably all three, but with emphasis on (1) and (2).

Some have argued that Paul would never have written v. 4, that it sounds, boastful, elitist and self-serving, something incompatible with his humility. They insist that only an admiring pupil or disciple would have used such words (thus supporting the theory that Ephesians is pseudonymous). But Paul is not boasting about his knowledge, as if he were ultimately responsible for it. He is simply saying that the teaching he now sets before them came to him by God's gracious revelatory activity and is asking them to judge for themselves the validity of his claim.

4) this mystery was not known in the OT age as it now is in the NT age v. 5

Notice the three contrasting elements in this verse:

* "in other generations" / "now"

* "was not made known" / "has been revealed"

* "the sons of men" / "his holy apostles and prophets"

As an "apostle" Paul was responsible for establishing churches among the Gentiles. As a "prophet" he was the recipient of revelation concerning how Gentiles are now fellow-heirs with Jewish believers in the church.

The original text indicates that both "his" (a reference to God, since he is the one who "revealed this truth") and "holy" qualify only the word "apostles" and not "prophets." Some have found difficulty with Paul's description of the apostles, himself included, as "holy." But in v. 8 Paul is quick to point out that he is "the very least of all the saints." Furthermore, the word "holy" is typically used not to venerate someone as special or elite but of all believers to indicate their separation or consecration unto God. Also, does the phrase "in the Spirit" qualify only "the prophets" or does it modify the verb "revealed?" Probably, the latter, as Paul is describing how or by whom the revelation was made (see Eph. 1:17 where a close connection between the Spirit and revelation has already been made).

On this point, see Rom. 16:25-27; Col. 1:25-27. Certainly there are OT texts which speak of the Gentiles being saved (see Gen. 12:3; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14; Ps. 22:27; 72:8-11; Isa. 11:10; 42:6; 45:22; 49:6; 54:1-3; 60:1-3; Hosea 1:10; Amos 9:11; Mal. 1:11. In what sense, then, could Paul say this was a 'mystery that has only recently been revealed? Verse 6 contains the answer.

5) the mystery is this: Gentiles are now equal with Jews in the church v. 6

Gentile salvation was never a mystery, but Gentile equality certainly was! All three adjectives in v. 6 begin with the prefix 'with:

* "fellow heirs"

* "fellow members of the body" (this word appears nowhere else in all of Greek literature; many believe Paul himself coined the term for use in this context)

* "fellow partakers"

When we add to this that Gentiles have already been described as "fellow citizens" (2:19) we see that the mystery is that God's purpose has always been to create one new man, one new people, one new "body" (the church!) in which Jew and Gentile would share equally as fellow-members and fellow-heirs and fellow-partakers of the 'promise given to Abraham and the patriarchs (see Eph. 2:12,19). The mystery is "the complete union of Jews and Gentiles with each other through the union of both with Christ" (O'Brien, 236). The focus of these "with words," as Lincoln points out, is not to say that Gentiles have been "added to an already existing entity; they are fully equal joint members, totally necessary for the life of the body, which without them would not exist" (181). It is only in Christ and through faith in the gospel that this comes to pass. On this, see again Gal. 3:16,29.

c. the nature and purpose of Paul's ministry 3:7-12

1) its nature v. 7

a) it is according to the gift of God's grace v. 7a

The gift actually consists of God's grace, i.e., the endowment of gracious ability and

desire which enabled Paul to fulfill his apostolic vocation as preacher to the Gentiles.

b) this grace was given by the working of God's power v. 7b

Cf. Eph. 1:19-20. Grace operates and flows out of divine power. This power was operative in Paul not simply at the time of his original commission as an apostle but continued day by day as he experienced the energizing presence of divine power in the fulfillment of his missionary calling. Says O'Brien, "it was not only in God's initial call but also in the subsequent enabling that he knows of the divine power operating mightily within him" (239). See 1 Cor. 15:10 ("But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me"). Everything Paul has become and achieved in his ministry is "not his own doing, but the result of God's grace - God's choice of him, God's call to him .

2) its purpose vv. 8-12

a) its immediate purpose: to preach the riches of Christ and to bring light to the mystery vv. 8-9

1 to preach the unsearchable riches of Christ v. 8

Paul's amazement that this incredible privilege was granted him leads him to use a striking expression "in which he neither indulges in hypocrisy nor grovels in self-deprecation but reflects how deeply conscious he is of his own unworthiness and of Christ's overflowing grace" (O'Brien, 240). He isn't content to use the superlative form ("least") and thus creates a comparative of a superlative: "leaster!" "A good indication that his modesty was neither sham nor morbid is that it did not hinder him from taking responsibility as an apostle" (Stott). As badly as he felt about his former persecution of the church, he did not let it paralyze him in shame: he preaches!

What does he preach? The unsearchable riches of Christ! Are these riches something Christ possesses (and subsequently bestows to believers; see Eph. 1:3-14), or is Christ himself the riches Paul proclaims? On either view, they are lavishly given to those who

are "in Him!" The adjective "unsearchable" (= unfathomable or beyond the grasp of mere human understanding; i.e. incomprehensible; untraceable; inexhaustible; illimitable; inexplorable; inscrutable) is found in the NT only in Rom. 11:33. But see the LXX of Job 5:9; 9:10 where it refers to the wonders of God's creation and providential work. It "suggests the picture of a reservoir so deep that soundings cannot reach the bottom of it. No limit can, therefore, be put to its resources" (Mitton, 124).

2 to bring light to the mystery v. 9

This is an advance on merely preaching. V. 9 is not simply a repetition of v. 8. and that the object of this enlightening is "all people." Paul's point is that he has been called and empowered to enlighten and illuminate others concerning how God has chosen to accomplish his eternal purpose in Christ. Note also that this mystery had been hidden "in God," i.e., God had kept the mystery inaccessibly hidden within his own heart until the time for its disclosure had come.

b) its ultimate purpose: to make known God's wisdom vv. 10-12

God's ultimate aim is that his own "manifold wisdom" might be made known "through the church." The word translated "manifold" (NASB) was used to describe everything from the intricate and colorful design of flowers, to embroidered cloth, to woven carpets, and even crowns with their exquisite jewels. It could be rendered "richly diversified," "multifaceted," "highly variegated," "infinite diversity," etc. God's saving wisdom is gloriously intricate in its design and its effect. It is the very antithesis of boredom and routine. In the present context, this multifaceted wisdom has particular reference to God's richly diverse ways of working which led to a multi-ethnic community being united as fellow-members in the body of Christ.

To whom in particular does God want this made known? To "rulers and authorities in heavenly places," i.e., angelic beings, primarily demonic spirits (see Eph. 1:21; 6:12; Col. 1:16; 2:10). In this way these fallen spirits are provided with a tangible reminder that their authority has been decisively broken and that they, indeed all things, have been made subject to Christ. Note: the purpose for the church extends far beyond its

internal ministries. God intends for the church to serve a larger, indeed cosmic, purpose in spreading his glory.

By what means does God intend to accomplish this? "Through the church", not nature, nor other angels, not the animal kingdom, but through the church! It is through the very existence of this new multi-ethnic, trans-cultural community of believers in which Jew and Gentile are co-heirs of the promises that God makes known his wisdom. No other organization on earth, neither government nor educational institutions nor civic clubs can accomplish this purpose. What, then, becomes of the display of God's wisdom when the church remains internally divided and externally segregated?

Note also that Paul never says that the church is given the task of "preaching" to the "powers." He simply says that the wisdom of God will be made known through the church. As Arnold explains, "the church visibly testifies to God's wisdom by its very existence" (63).

The existence of the church, therefore, "demonstrates to the 'powers' that they are in fact powerless to impede the progress of the gospel to the Gentiles and consequently destroy the church, the body of Christ, which they thought they had already once destroyed on the cross [see 1 Cor. 2:6-8]. The purpose of 3:10 in the context of the entire epistle is primarily for the comfort of the readers. Plagued by a fear of the 'powers,' the readers would find great encouragement in knowing that the 'powers' can see that they have been devastatingly foiled by the emergence of the body of Christ, the church. This would also give the readers added assurance of victory over the 'powers' as they engage in spiritual warfare and await the consummation of the age to come" (Arnold, 64).

Also, note Paul's emphasis on the boldness and confident access that we have in prayer through Christ. Martyn Lloyd-Jones writes (The Unsearchable Riches of Christ [Baker], p. 96), "Of all the blessings of Christian salvation none is greater than this, that we have access to God in prayer." "Boldness" means that we can come before God without fear of rejection or penalty. "Confidence" implies familiarity. If you were an aide

to the President, the first time you approached him in the Oval Office, you probably would be a bit hesitant and unsure of yourself. But after you've gone there a hundred times, you'd enter with confidence. "Access" means that you have the privilege of admission. If you have access to an exclusive club, the person at the door knows you and lets you in, whereas he will stop someone without access. We have boldness and confident access to God in prayer.

How is this possible? Paul mentions it twice: "in whom," and "through faith in Him." It is only in Christ and through faith in Christ that we can approach God's holy presence to ask Him for what we need to further His kingdom. Prayer is our means of seeing God's eternal purpose enacted on earth.

v. 12 (now our access is accentuated as "bold" and "confident;" i.e., fearless and unrestricted, with all assurance that our presence is joyful to God; cf. Heb. 4:16. This is no fearful approach, there is no hesitancy on Paul's part.

The word translated "boldness" was used in classical Greek for "freedom of speech," i.e., the democratic right to say anything one wanted to say (hence, openness or frankness of speech). It came to be applied in the NT both to the open and frank proclamation of the gospel and to our subjective attitude in approaching God because of that gospel.

We should also observe that our access is, literally, "through the faith(fulness) of him," a likely reference not to our faith in Christ but to Christ's own faithfulness which serves as the basis on which we may confidently enter God's presence. Although our faith in his faithfulness would not be a wrong understanding.

d. concluding exhortation - 3:13

Neither the object of "ask" nor the subject of "lose heart" is expressed, leaving the following possible translations:

* "I ask that you not lose heart"

* "I ask God that I not lose heart"

* "I ask God that you not lose heart"

The first is most likely. Paul's arrest and imprisonment and the hardships he suffered appeared to be a terrible setback to the gospel and the proclamation of Gentile equality with Jewish believers. It was understandable that Paul's readers might be disheartened to hear of his plight. But Paul viewed his suffering in an entirely different light. He saw it as actually contributing to their "glory (doxa)!" How so? Elsewhere Paul speaks of his suffering leading to salvation (2 Cor. 1:6) and life (2 Cor. 4:12) for others. In other words, his suffering provides a platform on which God's grace in Christ can be more loudly and visibly proclaimed; it serves notice to the world that there is something, indeed someone, who is greater and more worthy than worldly and physical comfort. As Paul said in 2 Tim. 2:10, "Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory."

Because we are at the center of God's eternal purpose, we must not lose heart in trials (3:13).

Paul's focus was not on himself, even though he was the one in prison, but on these Ephesian believers. He didn't want them to become discouraged on account of his trials, because they would result in the Ephesians' ultimate glory. In Romans 8:18 Paul wrote, "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us." As he goes on to share in that chapter, God works all things together for our good, using even the trials to conform us to the image of Jesus Christ. So even if persecution comes against us, we should not become discouraged, but rather remember that we are at the center of God's eternal purpose. Our good and ultimate glory are included in His purpose. The greatness of the cause is worth the hardship of the suffering.