

THE MANIFOLD WISDOM OF GOD

Ephesians 3:1-13

Key Verse: 3:10

“His intent was that now through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms....”

In chapter 2 Paul reminded the Gentiles of who they were before knowing Christ, what God had done for them through Christ, and who they are now in Christ. In the past they were excluded, foreigners and strangers. But now, by the blood of Jesus, who is our peace, they were fellow citizens of God’s people and members of God’s household, being built together. This was only by God’s grace to them in Christ. In chapter 3, Paul begins to share God’s grace to him personally. He tells us that God’s grace was given to him in two ways. First, it was through his understanding of the mystery of Christ (2-6). Second, it was through his commission as a preacher of Christ’s grace to the Gentiles (7-9). Then he explained the ultimate purpose of God’s grace from a cosmic viewpoint (10-13). When Paul thought about God’s grace, his suffering as a prisoner in Rome was glorious. When we feel like prisoners of our situations, it is hard to recognize God’s grace. But Paul felt God’s deep grace upon him and shared it, even as a prisoner. We often think of God’s grace in terms of receiving something from God, spiritually or materially. But Paul’s understanding of grace was much deeper. God’s grace was not just to benefit him personally; it was given to the church as a whole for a clear purpose that brings glory to God. We all want to improve our church. That is good. In doing so, it is important to deeply understand God’s grace and its purpose. Let’s think about how, and for what purpose, God’s grace was revealed through the gospel (1-6), and through the church (7-13).

I. Through the gospel (1-6)

The words “For this reason,” in verse 1 refer back to 2:19-22 in which Paul declared the Gentile believers’ new identity as God’s people in Christ. Based on this identity, Paul wanted to pray for them (14). But before doing so, he first explained how he was related to them in the grace of Jesus. He identified himself as **“a prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles”** (1). Literally, Paul was a prisoner of the Roman Emperor. He could

THE MANIFOLD WISDOM OF GOD

have been very sorrowful, lonely, anxious and bitter. But we find no hint of these things in him. Rather, he was full of God's grace. He believed that God was reigning over him and over all things. He believed that God was working for the good of those who love him (Ro 8:28). He realized that his imprisonment was related to God's mission to be a shepherd for the Gentiles. His faith in God's sovereignty and good purpose set him free to write this beautiful epistle to the Ephesians. Sometimes, we feel like prisoners in our given situations. Students can feel bound by their professors, workers by their employers, parents by their children, and vice-versa. We can feel helpless, frustrated and too burdened to do anything. But in these times, let's remember that God reigns and always works for good.

In verse 2 Paul began to share his personal experience of God's grace: **“Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you....”** Paul assumes that his readers know about him. A few years before, he had lived in Ephesus and taught the word of God daily. He was a great shepherd. But now, he was a prisoner in Rome. Hearing of this, the Ephesians could have been discouraged. So Paul encouraged them to think about the administration of God's grace that was given to him for them. Here, the word **“administration”** has the same Greek root as our word “economy;” it means “stewardship.” This is the responsible overseeing and protection of something very valuable. Paul received the gospel from Jesus and passed on the gospel to the Gentiles (1 Cor 15:3). Jesus told us that the qualities of a good steward are faithfulness and wisdom (Mt 24:45). As a steward of the gospel, Paul “guarded” it, “defended” it, and “entrusted” it to reliable people (1 Ti 6:20; 2 Ti 1:13-14; 2 Ti 2:2). He preached the gospel in season and out of season (2 Ti 4:2), with a life-giving spirit. In Acts 20:24 he said, “However, I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace.”

In verses 3,4,6 and 9 Paul repeats the word “mystery,” which means a hidden thing or secret. The city of Ephesus was filled with mystery religions. They claimed to have some knowledge of salvation that was revealed only to their initiates. This secret knowledge made them proud and exclusive. Paul does not use this word as they did—to mean something dark, obscure or incomprehensible. It refers to a truth undiscoverable by human reason alone, which has now been revealed to everyone by the coming of Jesus Christ. Paul

THE MANIFOLD WISDOM OF GOD

received this mystery by revelation from Jesus Christ. It was not Paul's idea, but the word of God to him. Paul shared this revelation in his writing to the Gentiles. In reading it, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they would be able to understand this mystery. This mystery had not been made known to people in other generations, as it was in Paul's time. The gospel was kept hidden in God for a long time (9b), but was revealed to Paul and to God's holy apostles and prophets—people specifically chosen by Jesus for this purpose. In verse 9 Paul says that this gospel was made plain to everyone. Now we all have the gospel, recorded in the New Testament, and we can all understand the mystery of God. There is no more need of apostles or prophets to reveal it to us. In fact, the gospel became “the gospel,” not “a gospel.” If anyone adds to, or takes away from “the gospel,” they are preaching a different gospel. Paul said, **“But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God's curse”** (Gal 1:8).

How, then, can we understand the mystery of Christ, which is the gospel? Paul said, **“In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ...”** (4). Here we learn the importance of reading the Scriptures. When we read the Bible, the Holy Spirit helps us to understand the meaning of the gospel. The Bible is the greatest mystery book. People like mysteries. So, many read novels about “Sherlock Holmes,” or watch “CSI,” or “Inception.” Usually we are escaping reality. After we find out “who did it,” the thrill soon wears off, and we have no practical wisdom or strength to solve our real problems. But if we read the Bible, we can know the mystery of Christ, find salvation for our souls, eternal life, and the unsearchable wisdom of God to live victoriously. John Wanamaker (1838-1922), a wealthy businessman, invented the concept of the department store. He also invented the price tag. Before that, most buying was done by haggling. A devout Christian, he believed that since everyone was equal before God, everyone should be equal before price. He said: *“I have, of course, made large purchases of property in my time, involving millions of dollars; but it was as a boy in the country, at the age of eleven years, that I made my greatest purchase. In a little mission Sunday school I bought a small red leather Bible for \$2.75, which I paid for in small installments. Looking back over my life, I see that little red Book was the foundation on which my life has been built and the thing which has made possible all that has counted in my life. I know now that it was the greatest investment and the most*

THE MANIFOLD WISDOM OF GOD

important and far-reaching purchase I ever made."¹ Once, Abraham Lincoln, while reading the Bible, said to his close friend, Joshua Speed: *"take all of this book upon reason that you can, and the balance on faith, and you will live and die a happier and better man."*² The Bible has the marvelous secret of the kingdom of God. But to discover this, we need to read it. Carrying the Bible, or having a Bible app is not enough. We must read the Bible. If we delight in God's word as much as we delight in our favorite books or hobbies, we can surely find the greatest treasure and learn how to live victoriously.

What are the specific contents of this mystery? Let's read verse 6. **"This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus."** This verse has deep historical meaning. When God gave his promise to Abraham, he said, **"...and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you"** (Gen 12:3). God said to the Israelites, his chosen people, **"...you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation"** (Ex 19:6). God's intention was to bless all peoples on earth through his chosen people. The Israelites received God's blessings, but did not pass them on to the Gentiles. They made themselves the religious elite. Jesus fought against this mentality during his earthly ministry. Jesus began his messianic ministry with an inaugural address based on Isaiah 61:1-2: **"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor"** (Lk 4:18-19). As Jesus preached the gospel, many tax collectors and wayward women came to Jesus. Jesus forgave their sins and accepted them. Paralytics, lepers, the demon-possessed, the blind, the lame, and all kinds of sin-sick people came to Jesus. Matthew compared them to bruised reeds or smoldering wicks (Mt 12:20). It is hard for most of us to bear such people. But Jesus did not look down on them or ignore them. Jesus welcomed them and healed them one by one out of his great mercy. So they were included as members of God's household. When Jesus died on the cross, it was not only for the Jews, but also for the Gentiles. After his resurrection, Jesus commanded his disciples to preach the gospel to all nations (Mt 28:19).

¹ <http://www.sermonindex.net/modules/articles/index.php?view=article&aid=14064>

² <http://lincolncottage.wordpress.com/2009/11/05/lincolns-own-reading-list-summer-autumn-1862-63-and-64/>

THE MANIFOLD WISDOM OF GOD

When the gospel was freely preached to the Gentiles in this way, the Jews had a very hard time to digest it. Even Peter, Jesus' top disciple, could not imagine sharing the gospel together with the Gentiles. So Jesus gave him a vision in which all kinds of animals, reptiles and birds were let down on a sheet before Peter. Then Jesus said, **“Get up, Peter, kill and eat!” But Peter replied, “Surely not Lord. I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.” The Lord answered, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean”** (Ac 10:11-15). The Jews never imagined that the Gentiles would be heirs together, members together, and sharers together with them of God's blessings. Yet the word “together” is repeated three times in verse 6. It emphasizes that the Gentiles were equally included with the Jews without any hierarchy or distinction. This was revolutionary. Throughout history, people elevate themselves above others through human criteria. It leads to prejudice which easily carries into the Christian fellowship. The person who has mastered a field of study feels very superior to the one who struggles with basics. One who has a successful career looks down on the one who is unemployed. One who enjoys a certain political or social status in the world carries this into the church and so begins to despise others. We subtly create “second class” members in our minds based on human criteria. But Jesus destroys all human prejudices and barriers. Through the gospel all people on earth can be heirs of God's kingdom together, members of God's household together, and sharers together in the promises in Christ Jesus. Here we learn that receiving the gospel does more than give us personal salvation. It joins us as members of God's household with many other people from every background. We need to accept and love all of God's people through the gospel. This is the mystery of the gospel. I pray we may all understand it.

II. Through the church (7-13)

In the first part Paul shared his understanding of the mystery of the gospel. In verses 7-9, he shares how he was commissioned to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. Look at verse 7. **“I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power.”** Paul did not become a servant of the gospel by his own will. In fact, he had strongly opposed the gospel, and worked hard to destroy the church of Jesus. But the Risen Jesus met him and overpowered him with his shining glory. He was taken prisoner by Jesus. Jesus forgave all his sins and made him his

THE MANIFOLD WISDOM OF GOD

servant to proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles. It was totally Jesus' grace, and the working of Jesus' power (7). How did Paul regard himself and his mission? Look at verse 8. **“Although I am less than the least of all the Lord's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ....”** Paul knew God's grace was accompanied by God's purpose. So he humbly carried out his mission. The more Paul understood God's grace, the more he realized that he was less than the least of all the Lord's people. This was not false humility; it was his genuine understanding of God's grace.

Paul's mission was to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ. Whenever he thought about this, he was overwhelmed with a sense of glory and awe that he had received such a mission. He did not feel burdened, but highly privileged and thankful to God. So he said, **“to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ.”** What are the boundless riches of Christ? Imagine that you have one million dollars in your bank account. Now multiply this by one million. It is such a huge amount we cannot fathom it. Still, this would be a drop in a bucket. This shows the meaning of “boundless;” it is infinite. The love of Christ never ends. The grace of Jesus' forgiveness never runs out. The joy and peace that Jesus gives multiplies into eternity. The power, wisdom and glory of Jesus are endless. Jesus' patience, kindness, mercy and all his virtues are infinite. In light of knowing Jesus, Paul had a sense of glory regarding his mission. We know the same Jesus, and have received the same mission; we should have the same sense of glory. With a sense of glory, Paul wanted to make the gospel plain to everyone (9). It was because he knew God's heart. God wants all people to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Ti 2:4). This is why we preach the gospel to everyone.

In verses 10-12, Paul explains God's purpose for the church. Let's read verse 10: **“His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms....”** Here the word **“manifold”** means **“much variegated, marked with a great variety of colors, of cloth or a painting.”** We can think of the church as a tapestry or a mosaic. As the church comes into being by the work of God—composed of people of every color, nation, personality and background—the nature of God's wisdom is revealed. It is not just abstract. It takes shape in reality through the lives of people. God is the master Weaver or

THE MANIFOLD WISDOM OF GOD

Painter who draws into his work all different kinds of people. People who had been without meaning or hope become essential to God's work like color highlights in array that reveals God's unsearchable wisdom. If we look at this tapestry from behind, where the threads are being woven into the whole, it looks disorganized and ugly. But when we see the front from a distance, the stunning beauty and impenetrable mystery of it leave us in awe. The Bible calls believers "saints." We may look weak, insignificant and unimpressive. Yet to God we are most valuable and indispensable parts of his work and history. We do not have this beauty or value by ourselves alone, but as we are woven into the larger tapestry of God's church.

In explaining verse 10, John Stott described God's work in the church in terms of a drama. He said, *"It is as if a great drama is being enacted. History is the theater, the world is the stage, and the church members in every land are the actors. God himself has written the play, and he directs and produces it. Act by act, scene by scene, the story continues to unfold. But who are the audience? They are the cosmic intelligences, the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms. We are to think of them as spectators of the drama of salvation. Thus, the history of the Christian church becomes the graduate school for angels."* This drama reveals God's ultimate victory over his enemies. As the rulers and authorities in heavenly realms who oppose God look on, God shows them through his church his victory over sin, death and the devil. God fulfills his original creation purpose in a mighty triumph over his foes. The church triumphs because of the living God. God's victory was accomplished when Christ said, **"It is finished."** And this victory is being displayed through the church (11). The church has been persecuted, and often seems weak or on the verge of disappearing. When Paul wrote this letter, the Roman Empire ruled the world and seemed everlasting. But within 250 years of this letter, the Roman Empire was overpowered by Christian influence. Now it is nothing but ruins. However, the church of God has continued to grow from generation to generation, until it has become so vast that only God knows how big it is. It is like the mustard seed that grows to become the largest garden plant. How is it possible? It is God's work through his people for his own eternal glory.

God's people can have assurance of final victory, as well as a great immediate privilege. It is fellowship with God himself. Look at verse 12. **"In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and**

THE MANIFOLD WISDOM OF GOD

confidence.” Through Jesus we can come to God freely with confidence. We can have intimate fellowship with God. Whenever we come to God, he hears our prayers, answers us and blesses us out of his boundless riches. When Paul thought about this awesome God and his great plan for the church, he was not discouraged in his prison cell. Rather, he was greatly encouraged because his suffering for the Gentiles was being used in God’s divine drama. So he asked them not to be discouraged (13).

Today we have learned how God’s grace is at work through the gospel to bring together every kind of people into his household. We have also learned how God’s grace is at work through the church to reveal the manifold wisdom of God for his ultimate victory and glory. Yet, in our time, it is popular to speak disparagingly of the church. Many people say, “I like Jesus, but I don’t like the church.” They want to live a “Lone Ranger” kind of Christian life all by themselves. This stems from a shallow sense of God’s grace and ignorance of the purpose of his grace. God is always at work in the lives of his people and in his church for his own glory. We are the pieces of God’s tapestry and the actors in his divine drama. Let’s listen carefully to our Director, God as he speaks to us through his word. Let’s kneel down in prayer until this grace enlightens our souls and we realize who we are in Christ and our role in God’s church. Let’s see how God is weaving our personal stories into his divine drama for his glory.