



Paul and the Truth (3:1-13)

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As I begin, let me add my personal good wishes to all of you who are mothers, and to say that I hope your Mother's Day is an excellent one. You may or may not know that many people had a hand in establishing the holiday in America, but one of the people who had quite an influence in the process was Julia Ward Howe, the author of *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*, who was one of the first to suggest the idea of Mother's Day in the United States.

The cause was taken up soon afterward by Anna Jarvis, daughter of a Methodist pastor. Jarvis felt the scars of the Civil War could be healed by mothers—and by honoring mothers. She died in 1905 before her dream of establishing a holiday could be fulfilled. But her daughter, also named Anna, took up the cause as well, and eventually the holiday was established. One day a year seems a small tribute to pay to those to whom we all owe so much. My own mother has been with the Lord now for nine years, and not a day goes by that I don't think of her, and with many of those thoughts I offer a prayer of gratitude to God for all she was to me. So, happy Mother's Day!

For some time now we have been working our way through the epistle to the Ephesians and in our last session we looked at the first seven verses of chapter 3. Today we're going to go there again and add verses 8-13. In the process we will do something of an overview of the first half of chapter 3.

Before we do that, however, I want to say a word about something that is easy to overlook here. We don't want to minimize the circumstances that lay behind the writing of this passage.

There are twists in this passage that are quite amazing. In Paul you have a man who is imprisoned, chained to a Roman guard every day of his life. He is writing to a group of Christians in the city of Ephesus who are free as birds. He can't do anything on his own. They live in one of the great cities of the age, a city that is modern, clean, and prosperous, and they can come and go as they please.

Yet Paul the prisoner is writing to the free Ephesians and trying to cheer them up. That is not what we might expect to find here. Paul is concerned for their ability to cope with his imprisonment. It all suggests a very strong bond of affection between Paul and these people.

But Paul wasn't just a prisoner; he was in jail in a miscarriage of justice, and he was a man with a history of afflictions. By this time, he had been beaten repeatedly by magistrates of various cities. He had spent a day and a night bobbing up and down in the Mediterranean because the ship he was traveling on had been wrecked, and only with great difficulty had he been enabled to survive long enough to make the trip to his Roman imprisonment.

Yet Paul is writing these Ephesian Christians to explain why he has to go through all this and to encourage them. In our passage for today, he explains that it was because of his passion for the truth—specifically for the truth of the gospel. That gospel was the joy of his heart. It gave him consolation in his confinement. It gave him the freedom to reach out and bless people who were concerned for him, as we will see in the punchline of the passage in verse 13.

For now, let's look at the text, beginning in verse 1.

Scripture: Ephesians 3:1-13

¹For this reason I Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles, [bend my knees in prayer].

²You have heard (have you not?) of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you: ³ that by a revelation the mystery was made known to me, as I wrote before in brief. ⁴(By reference to what I wrote before you can discern, as you read, my insight into the mystery of Christ.) ⁵In other generations this mystery was not made known to the children of men as it has now been revealed in the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets—⁶namely, that the Gentiles should be fellow-heirs, fellow-members of the body, and fellow-partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. ⁷Of this gospel I have been made a minister according to the gift of God's grace given to me according to the operation of his power.

⁸ To me, the least of all saints, this grace was given—to bring to the Gentiles the good news of Christ's unfathomable riches, ⁹ and to make everyone understand what is the strategy of the mystery that was hidden from eternity in God, the Creator of all things through Jesus Christ, ¹⁰ so as to show how God's manifold wisdom might now be made known through the church to the principalities and the powers in the heavenly realm.

¹¹ Thus was formed the purpose of the ages in Christ Jesus our Lord, ¹² in whom we have our freedom of access with confidence through faith in him. ¹³ Therefore I beg you not to lose heart at my afflictions on your behalf; they are indeed your glory.

Let me just mention in passing a word about that last phrase. Paul says that his sufferings should not cause the Ephesians to lose heart or abandon the faith. In fact, Paul's sufferings came about because he preached to them and the other Gentiles of the world. If Paul hadn't preached, he wouldn't be in jail; but then the Gentiles would not be converted, either. Paul had put himself on the line for their sakes. That proved that he thought they were worth saving, and that ought to encourage them.

Paul and His Holy Passion, the Truth

In this first half of Ephesians 3 we gain an appreciation for what a remarkable man Paul was. As he writes these words we see how important God's truth was to him and why he was willing to endure terrible sufferings with a smile on his face. What we see here is Paul relating to the truth in four ways. First, we see...

Paul as a Prisoner for the Truth

We talked about this last time. In verse 1 he calls himself "a prisoner of Christ Jesus" because in following the Lord Jesus he was wrongly arrested and incarcerated. He

spent his days chained to a Roman soldier. But he was suffering as he did because he believed in the message that he had delivered all over the Mediterranean world. A little thing like a prison sentence wasn't going to discourage him. And, of course, if Paul was chained to a Roman soldier, it is also true to say that a Roman soldier was chained to Paul. So, every day, in four-hour shifts they came to take their place next to Paul. And through his gentle proclamation of the gospel to what you have to call a captive audience he was able to infect the legionnaires of the praetorian guard with the gospel, and through them many others, even reaching into the emperor's palace. That's what you call a chain reaction!

Secondly, we see here...

Paul as a Pioneer of the Truth

Paul was the key player in unveiling the truth of the unique character of the body of Christ to the world. Nobody knew the secret until he and the other apostles and prophets made it known. In verse 5 we read, "*In other generations this mystery was not made known to the children of men.*" You could never find out from the Old Testament that God's plan was to create an entirely new entity and call it the church. It would consist of fundamentally dissimilar people. It would consist of people of different ethnicities, of different customs, of different outlooks, of different backgrounds, of different languages.

God used Paul to reveal his great plan for this age—how he put into the same group people who were Jewish by birth and who were Gentile by birth. As they learned to live in peace alongside each other, the world looked on in amazement. And so the church grew.

Thirdly, we see here...

Paul as a Partner in the Truth

He first points out...

How the truth was concealed

God, for purposes of his own, kept hidden the truth of the church as the body of Christ for centuries. It was a secret or, to use Paul's term, a *mystery* until after the day of Pentecost.

Now people often run off the rails here. Somebody will say, "Didn't God intend to bless the Gentiles all along through the coming of Christ?" Certainly he did. In fact,

he said as much in the words of the Abrahamic Covenant that really created the Jewish nation. God said, “*I will bless the one who blesses you, and the one who curses you I will curse... and in you all the nations of the earth will be blessed*” (Gen. 12:3). That last phrase takes in the Gentiles. It was always God’s intent to bless the Gentiles through his people Israel.

People sometimes object to the idea that God would choose Israel for special blessing in the world. They don’t like the thought that any one nation should receive preferential treatment from God. But if you’ve read the Old Testament, you know that God’s choice of Israel was not an end but rather a means. He chose Israel so that through them he might reach the whole world. And the good news is that his plan worked. As we sit here this morning, he has pretty much accomplished his goal. The church is deeply rooted over most of the world today. And he did it through Abraham and his descendants, of whom Paul was one.

I don’t know if it ever has caught your attention, but God placed Israel at the great crossroads of the world geographically. Israel was at the exact center of the ancient world. Their land was the bridge that you had to cross if you were traveling from one continent to the next. If you wanted to go from Europe to Africa, you had to go through Israel. If you wanted to go from Africa to Asia, you had to go through Israel. They became the great land bridge between the peoples of the world. That was not by accident. Nor was the ministry of Jesus an accident.

When Jesus began his ministry, he started by establishing his headquarters in Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee. That was by design. Capernaum was a customs post. If you came from Syria on your way down into Egypt, you had to stop the caravan in Capernaum, empty everything you were carrying out for inspection there at the border, and pay customs tax on it. That’s what Matthew was doing before he became a disciple of Jesus. He was a customs tax collector. He rubbed elbows with Gentiles every day of his life. Everybody in Capernaum was used to being around Gentiles. The Lord Jesus wanted Gentiles to come and hear him teach. They were the objects of his love, too. At least some of them came to understand this. Who was the great benefactor of the synagogue in Capernaum? A Roman centurion, who had paid for the construction of the building—a Gentile.

The Jews were chosen for ministry; they were the vehicle of blessing to the world, and it was through Abraham’s offspring that Messiah Jesus came into the world. Paul next points out...

How the truth was revealed

You see this in verse 7: “*Of this gospel I have been made a minister according to the gift of God’s grace given to me according to the operation of his power.*” The truth was revealed when God called Paul into his service and made him an apostle to the Gentiles. For the most part, the original Twelve apostles always focused on Jewish audiences. They had a limited participation in the movement to the Gentiles. So it was Paul who brought the message to the rest of the world, and it was through Paul that this great truth of the one body of Christ was unveiled.

So Paul was a prisoner of the truth. He was a pioneer of the truth. He was a partner of the truth. But in the rest of this passage, we see...

Paul as a Propagator of the Truth

He points out first...

The working of It

You see this in verse 7: “*according to the gift of God’s grace given to me according to the operation of his power.*” You see two clauses laid alongside each other. The two together show how the propagating of the truth was designed to work. Look at these two expressions side by side:

according to the gift of God’s grace
God’s work / Divine sovereignty

given to me according to the operation of his power
Man’s work / Human responsibility

In the first we see God’s work. The gospel was initiated by God. The plan was conceived by him and put into operation by him. It was all of his grace. This is divine sovereignty in action.

In the second we see man’s work. The gospel was given to Paul. It was his work to put it in front of people so that they could respond to it, always under the supervision of the Spirit of God.

You cannot leave either of these out and still have the gospel do its work. God’s sovereign design and the responsible actions of believers go together to get the job done. The truth is propagated only when both take part. So much for the working of it. You also see here...

The wonder of It

This is most notable in verse 8. We don't want to overlook the flavor of Paul's attitude here. He says, "*To me, the least of all saints, this grace was given—to bring to the Gentiles the good news of Christ's unfathomable riches.*" Now this is not false modesty. Paul's humility was not something that he wore like a cloak. It was part of him, and for good reason.

Paul became famous twice. The first time he became famous it was as a persecutor of the church. Paul had church members arrested, put in prison, and even killed in pursuit of what he thought was pleasing God. His fame was known all around Israel and into Syria because of his zeal as a persecutor. He persecuted both men and women in his misguided zeal for God.

When Paul was converted, of course, that history became a painful memory to him. I'm sure it hurt him every time he looked back and considered all the people whose lives had been harmed because of his pursuit of them. It always amazed him when he thought that one who had done so much damage to the body of Christ should be the one to reveal the truth about it to the rest of the world. He considered himself the least of all saints or believers. It simply amazed him.

And of all the ways to introduce yourself! Paul at his conversion found himself on his back, looking up into a light brighter than he had ever seen. Then he heard the voice of Jesus ask, "*Saul, Saul—why are you persecuting me?*" And right there, at the beginning of his apostleship, the Lord Jesus surfaced this most profound truth. Paul was persecuting *him*. Paul was persecuting Jesus, because he was persecuting the church. The church is his body. He feels every pain that it undergoes, and he called Paul to account for his actions, and then made him an instrument of his grace.

So, we see the working of the truth, the wonder of the truth, and then we see...

The wealth of It

Paul begins this by references to the truth's hidden resources. You see this in verse 8, where Paul describes his mission as an effort "*to make everyone understand what is the strategy of the mystery that was hidden from eternity past in God, the Creator of all things through Jesus Christ.*"

And then you see the contrast from hidden resources to open ones. Verse 10 says, "*so as to show how God's manifold wisdom might now be made known through the church.*" That is the plan. People are going to look at the church and they are going to be profoundly impressed as they see very different people encouraging each other

and praying for each other and loving each other. Just try and name any agency of government or the private sector that could pull that off. There are none. God alone in his wisdom can manage an outcome like that.

The wisdom of it

In verse 10 Paul says that God designed his plan “*so as to show how God’s manifold wisdom might now be made known through the church to the principalities and the powers in the heavenly realm.*”

Let me point out to you something about that word *manifold* in verse 10. This is the only place in the New Testament where this Greek word appears, and it is hard to know how to translate it. Some have suggested *many-colored* as a synonym, and that is probably as good a try as any I’ve seen. Others prefer to understand it as *many-sided*. The suggestion in the word is that you can’t just look at the wisdom of God from one angle. There are many aspects to it. It’s like a fine diamond. You look at it in the light and turn it just a bit and you see all sorts of reflections and colors that you didn’t see a moment before. Today, in the New Testament era, we can see aspects of God’s wisdom that people like Abraham and David really didn’t know about, because from this angle we see the staggering wisdom that produced a church with members in it from every tribe and tongue and nation.

The wisdom of God was displayed through the church. It is still being displayed through the church. Those of you who have been in our midweek Bible studies these last two years have seen in the book of Acts how when the early church was first formed the greatest threat to it was that it would be fractured into two churches: a Jewish church and a Gentile church. It was a near thing. The first Christians were all Jewish. For something like ten years the church was entirely Jewish.

And those Jewish Christians had been raised with a passionate affection for the national traditions. They were not against Gentiles becoming Christians, but some of them did think that converted Gentiles should naturally respect Jewish traditions by observing them as well. They wanted the Gentiles to become acculturated Jews in their practice of Christianity. The church had to hash this out; and the guy who was at the center of the whole dispute was Paul. He was the perfect guy for it.

He was raised in a devout Jewish home, but he was raised in a very Gentile city, in Tarsus in what is now southern Turkey. He was trained in Hebrew, the language of Scripture, but he spoke and wrote Greek, the language of Gentiles, with great facility. He received his biblical training in Jerusalem, but he was a citizen of the

world. He knew how to talk to Gentiles, and he knew that it was not God's purpose to make Gentiles into acculturated Jews in order to remain in the church. He received a revelation from God on the subject, and the letter to the Ephesians gives us the basic summary of it. God's design was for the church to become one church made up of both kinds of people. That was designed to impress the world, and it did.

But it was also designed to impress the angelic world. Verse 10 says that God created one new body of people in the church would make God's wisdom known through the church "*to the principalities and the powers in the heavenly realm.*" That reference to principalities and powers denotes the angels. The angels—both good and evil ones, I think, in this case—look at what is happening in the church and learn from it. They are amazed by it.

What angels don't learn from the church

Did you ever wonder about how angels think? I certainly have. Angels are brilliant creatures, and as those in the presence of God continually they know a lot about him. But they didn't learn about the power of God from the church. They learned that from the creation. Job 38:7 says they were present when the earth was created, and when they saw the results they sang for joy. They praised God for his power.

They must also have known something of the wisdom of God from that, but they received a major dose of his wisdom when they began to observe God's new creation, the church. The church was something new. They had never imagined that such an organism could exist until God pulled it off. Did you ever think about that? You should. The angels are observing you and me. They are interested to see Christians from many backgrounds and prejudices manage to get along and love each other as part of this marvelous institution that we call the church.

What angels do learn from the church

But what about the evil angels? The reference to "principalities and powers" certainly must refer to them, too. What did evil angels learn about God through the church?

One thing they learned was that their leader, Satan, really doesn't have much wisdom by comparison. Satan knows the Bible, of course. He understood from the Old Testament *when* Messiah would come into the world. He also understood *how* he would come—as a Man. He also understood *where* he would come—to Bethlehem

as an infant. But nowhere in the Old Testament would Satan have been able to discover prophecies of the church, the existence of Jews and Gentiles together in one body.

One writer says, "Satan could see unbelieving Jews rejecting their Messiah, and he could see Gentiles trusting the Messiah, but he could not see both believing Jews and Gentiles united in one body, seated with Christ in the heavenlies, and completely victorious over Satan! Had Satan known the far-reaching results of the cross, no doubt he would have altered his plans accordingly."¹

But he was blindsided by God's wisdom, and now the deed is done.

The opening half of chapter 3 is a great testimony of praise to God as Paul rejoices in the way that God has designed things. All the blessings that he mentions here, especially the access we have to God through Christ are all things God brought about. God wants it made clear in the gospel that human beings are not wise enough to make a way to know God on their own. He has to carry the responsibility.

I was reading one of Donald Grey Barnhouse's commentaries this week and I found a highly interesting illustration of this point. He says:

A friend of mine, an orthopedic surgeon, described how he restored the hand of a man who had lost his thumb and first finger. First the surgeon took a roll of flesh, about the size of the handle of a suitcase, from the wall of the abdomen. When this was partly cut away the stump of the thumb was attached to it and it grew to the thumb, so that a further cut left a flapping tube of skin and flesh attached to the thumb base. Then a piece of bone from the tibia was placed inside the tube, and in a few months there was a complete thumb. The process was repeated to restore the missing finger, thus the thumb and index finger were reconstructed, and 75 per cent of functional ability restored.

I asked the surgeon if it would not be possible to use bones and tissues from bodies that had been killed in accidents. He replied, "It is very rare that we can get them soon enough," and went on to explain that bones and tissues can be used if secured within a few minutes of death. Then he said, "The whole body from head to foot is filled with a host of invaders which are held back by life. The moment death comes, like a wave they sweep out to de-

stroy the body. Within two hours the pathogenic organisms have carried their work of disintegration so far that there is nothing to do but dispose of the body.”²

It takes a miracle of life to keep death’s minions away from us physically. It takes a miracle of life to take a rebel and remake him into a person that loves God and his neighbors, and to make him a part of something so much greater than himself, the institution that has already reshaped human history and will do still more reshaping in the ages to come—the body of Christ, the church.

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Notes:

1. Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Rich*. BE Series Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2010.
2. Donald Grey Barnhouse, *God’s Grace: Romans 5:12–21* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1959), 143–144.