

The Church, in God's Eternal Program and Purpose

Ephesians 3:1-13

Ephesians 3:1-13 – *“For this reason I Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles, if indeed you have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given to me for you, how that by revelation He made known to me the mystery; (as I have briefly written already, by which when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ) which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it is has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets, that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel of which I became a minister, according to the gift of the grace of God given to me by the effective working of His power. To me, who am less than the least of all saints, this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make all see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God, who created all things through Jesus Christ; to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places, according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through faith in Him. Therefore I ask that you do not lose heart at my tribulations for you, which is your glory.”*

Background Notes

In the broad outline of Paul's epistle to the Ephesians, chapters 1 through 3 are primarily doctrinal in nature, and chapters 4 through 6 are primarily practical applications that are based on that doctrine. In the first half of Ephesians 2, the doctrine focused on believers as individuals - what each one of us was apart from Christ, and then what each one of us has become in Christ. We were dead in trespasses and sins. We followed the course of this world. We were pawns of Satan, whether we realized it or not. But in Christ, we've been saved, and we've been given the spiritual position of being exalted and enthroned with Christ! In the second half of Ephesians 2 the focus shifted to our corporate position. Together as believers we form the Church, which is the Body of Christ and the Temple of the Holy Spirit. The Church as the Body of Christ is composed of all believers, Jews and Gentiles. This is the great theme of the letter to the Ephesians.

The first half of Ephesians 3 elaborates further on this great theme, telling us how the Church, the Body of Christ, fits into God's eternal program and purpose.

Doctrinal Points

1. Believers are an essential part of God's eternal program.

a. The revelation of God's eternal program (v1-6).

What is God's eternal program? In verse 3, Paul says that he had already written about this program in chapters 1 and 2. In fact, Ephesians 1:22-23 sum up God's eternal program concisely: *"God has put everything under the dominion of Christ and appointed Him as Head over all things to the Church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills everything in every way."* What a program!

In chapter 3 Paul refers to this great program as a mystery that was revealed to Paul by God Himself: *"How that by revelation He made known to me the mystery as I've briefly written already"* (v3). In the New Testament, a "mystery" was not something strange or mysterious – rather, it was truth that was concealed in the Old Testament, but was now revealed in the New Testament. Verse 5: *"which was not made known to men in other generations, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets."*

Paul begins to give the specific details of this mystery of the Church in verse 6: *"That the Gentiles should be fellow heirs of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel."* Wait - wasn't this truth known in the Old Testament? No. The fact that blessings would come to the Gentiles through Israel is certainly taught in the Old Testament. In the Abrahamic Covenant God promised that all families of the earth would be blessed through the Jewish people (Genesis 12:3). And Isaiah 49:6 says that Israel would be a light to the Gentiles and the means of taking the message of salvation to the Gentiles. But the truth that all believers, both Jews and Gentiles together, would be fellow heirs in Christ and brought into one Body, the Body of Christ the Messiah - that is not taught in the Old Testament. That truth is New Testament revelation of God's eternal program.

b. The proclamation of God's eternal program (v7-9).

God, in His grace, gave the apostle Paul the primary responsibility of communicating to us what God had revealed about His program. Verses 8-9: *"To me, who am less than the least of all saints, this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make all see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God, who created all things through Jesus Christ."*

Notice that the great responsibility of communicating God's eternal program had a humbling effect on the apostle Paul. This should be true in our lives, too, as we realize the awesome responsibility we have to communicate the gospel, the truth of God. And just as God gave Paul the power to do the job, so the Lord will give us whatever power is needed to do the job He calls us to do.

2. Believers are an essential part of God's eternal purpose.

a. Angels in God's eternal purpose (v10-11).

"To the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places, according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord" (v10-11). Who are the *"principalities and powers"* (or *"rulers and authorities"*) that are mentioned here? These are angels – both good angels and bad angels. In Ephesians 1:21 *"principalities and powers"* is used in regard to good angels. In Ephesians 6:12 the same words are used to for evil angels. So, God has chosen the Church to be His object lesson and the channel by which His wisdom is displayed to the intelligent universe, both now and forever. What an object lesson for angels!

Sometimes we get the idea that angels know everything, and that they can read our thoughts, but that's not biblical. Angels are not omniscient. 1 Peter 1:12 indicates that the good angels love to see and learn what God has revealed. Angels did not know of the Church as the Body of Christ until the Church was born.

Think of how *"the manifold wisdom of God"* is being observed by the intelligent universe right now, as we, the Church, the Body of Christ, worship and serve the Lord! God's *manifold wisdom* (v10) suggests intricate pattern and beauty in God's eternal purpose for the Church - the Church that He is fitting together by His sovereign wisdom.

What have the angels observed and learned about the wisdom of God from your life this past week? What have the angels observed and learned about God's plan and purpose as His people worship together and celebrate the Lord's Supper? The Church, the Body of Christ, is God's great object lesson to the angels.

b. Human beings in God's eternal purpose (v12).

"In whom we have boldness and access with confidence through faith in Him." Another aspect of God's eternal purpose in forming the Church as the Body of Christ is that we are drawn closer to God and can come to Him with confidence.

Here's an illustration of that wonderful truth. Some of you remember my father-in-law, John Smart, who was one of the founders of Emmaus Bible College. He was a very dignified man, elder-statesman-like in his demeanor. Before I married Margie, there was a respectful distance between me and the man who was to become my father-in-law. I certainly didn't feel like I had *"boldness"* and *"confident access"* in his presence! But our relationship was totally different once I became part of his family! Now I didn't have to knock on his door to enter his house. I felt relaxed and at ease with him, and I could speak confidently with him.

God wants us to have this same kind of close family relationship with Him - and it is now possible through Christ. And God's plan for family closeness was no spur-of-the moment idea or ad hoc plan! This relationship was part of God's eternal purpose.

Practical Application

Let's have the same view of prison that Paul had!

Verse 1: *"For this reason, I Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles."* The apostle Paul was a prisoner in Rome when he wrote this letter to the Ephesian believers. He was under house arrest, chained to a Roman guard, awaiting trial before Caesar. But notice that Paul did not consider himself a prisoner of Nero, or a prisoner of Rome. No – he called himself a prisoner of Christ Jesus! The apostle Paul knew it was not by "chance" or by "accident" that he was a prisoner, because God is in complete control of all our life circumstances. Paul knew that God *"...works out everything in conformity with the purpose of His will..."* (Ephesians 1:11).

"Therefore I ask that you do not lose heart at my tribulations for you, which is your glory" (v13). In essence Paul was saying, *"Don't think that God has lost control of the situation because I'm here in prison. No way! God is working all of this out according to His eternal purpose – and that includes your glory, my dear brothers and sisters!"*

Do we have that same view? When life gets difficult, do we feel trapped, or imprisoned, or that we're victims of circumstance? Or do we understand that God is in control and we're not trapped by our life situation – that we're "prisoners of Jesus Christ"? What a great attitude the apostle Paul had! Let's have the same view of prison that Paul had.