**THE MYSTERY OF THE CHURCH REVEALED**

**Ephesians 3:1-13**

We are continuing our study of Ephesians and will be looking at Ch 3. As you know by now this is a very deep book theologically. Paul has a lot to say to us, the church, about the church. As we come to Ch 3 Paul’s getting ready to say something about a subject that he’s passionate about. He refers to it as a “mystery” and says that it was revealed to Him by God. So, before we delve into Ephesians Ch 3 and learn about this mystery, I thought it would be helpful for us to review some of the events in Paul’s life – events that significantly impacted his theology as it regards the subject he’s going to talk about. It will help us understand why Paul wrote what he did to the Ephesian believers. While in seminary in my various Bible classes the professors pointed out that it is helpful when interpreting the meaning of a passage to try and understand what the original author had in mind when they wrote it. Yes, the HS inspired them, but, as human beings living in a very real context, they had something specific in mind. They had a reason, a purpose for writing what they wrote. Something motivated them. So, to understand where Paul is coming from here in Ephesians Ch 3, let’s go back to the Book of Acts.

Paul was originally known as Saul. He was a Jew and zealous for the Law. “circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.” (Phil 3:5-6) He was a devout Jew.

He persecuted Christians and was complicit in many of their deaths.

But then he had what we know as “the Damascus road experience,” blinded by the light, met Jesus, was saved, he was changed, Acts 9.

In Acts 26 Paul is relating his conversion experience to King Agrippa and this is what he says Jesus told him: “But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles--to whom I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.’” (26:16-18)

Paul was obedient to his calling. He went on 3 separate missionary journeys across Asia Minor and many Jews and Gentiles were saved thru his ministry and many churches were established. [Paul’s M.O. when he went into a new place, visited synagogue first…]

Paul’s name change, from Saul (Jewish name) to Paul (Roman name), took place on 1st missionary journey some 12 years after he was saved. At the end of his 3rd missionary journey Paul returned to Jerusalem (warned that something bad was going to happen to him there) and reported to James and the church leaders all the things that had been done among the Gentiles thru his ministry.

“And when they [church leaders] heard it, they glorified God. And they said to [Paul], ‘You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed. They are all zealous for the law, and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs. What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come. Do therefore what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; take these men and purify yourself along with them and pay their expenses, so that they may shave their heads. Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also live in observance of the law.’” (21:20-24)

So Paul agrees. He goes to the Temple with these 4 Jewish believers. While Paul is in the Temple with these guys going thru this Jewish purification process some Jews from Asia recognized him and accused Paul of defiling the holy place. They falsely assumed Paul had brought Trophimus the Ephesian, a Gentile (whom they had seen Paul with in the city), into the Temple. But Paul had not brought Trophimus. He had gone to the Temple with the 4 Jewish believers. Bottom line is the Jews stirred up a mob against Paul and tried to kill him.

The Roman guards stationed at the Antonia Fortress adjacent to the Temple intervened, rescued Paul from the mob. They brought Paul back to the barracks and questioned him as to why the mob was trying to kill him. Paul told them who he was – that he was a Jew from Tarsus, a Roman citizen and he requested an opportunity to address the people who were still gathered outside.

So in Acts 22 Paul addressed the Jewish mob: “’Brothers and fathers, hear the defense that I now make before you.’ And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew language, they became even more quiet. And he said: “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day. I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women, as the high priest and the whole council of elders can bear me witness. From them I received letters to the brothers, and I journeyed toward Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished.” (Acts 22:1-5)

Then Paul goes on to tell of his conversion experience – the light, being blinded, his conversation with Jesus, ministered to by Ananias – then he closes by saying this to the crowd, what Jesus Himself told him: “'Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’ Up to this word they listened to Paul. Then they raised their voices and said, ‘Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live.’ And as they were shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air, the tribune [Romans] ordered [Paul] to be brought into the barracks…” (Acts 22:21-24)

And from that point all the way up to when Paul is writing his letter to the Ephesians, he’s been a prisoner. Five years plus. And for what reason? For daring to preach God’s message of salvation to the Gentiles. It’s something Paul is passionate about because it’s what Jesus Himself commanded Paul to do. And all along the way resistance, resistance and more resistance not just by Jews who hated the Gentiles and didn’t see them as worthy of salvation but even by Jewish converts to Christianity who still had deeply engrained prejudices against Gentiles. You need to understand where Paul is coming from, why he is so passionate about this subject, which is what he will be talking about in Ephesians Ch 3.

READ Ephesians 3:1-13

V 1 “For this reason” – the reason he has just established, Ch 2, because we are one in Christ.

“I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus” – Notice he doesn’t say he’s a prisoner of Rome. He sees himself as a prisoner of Christ. He knows Jesus Christ is in control and that every aspect of his life is in the Lord’s hand. Paul could have been angry and bitter about what happened to him, but he wasn’t. So much of our attitude is perspective. How do you see yourself – as a victim, mistreated, mis-understood, got a raw deal, poor me – or do you acknowledge that God has directed your life and the events of your life for His purpose and your benefit? Jesus allowed this in my life for a reason!

“on behalf of you Gentiles—” Everything that Paul’s gone thru the last 5 years has been for the benefit of the Gentiles.

V 2 Paul says, “I’m assuming you’ve heard about what I’m doing, well it was because the Lord directed me to do it. He put me here. I’m a steward (a manager) of God’s grace to you. I didn’t ask for this job. God gave it to me. It’s my responsibility.”

V 3 Paul says, “God revealed ‘the mystery’ to me.” Definition of a “mystery” – truths never before revealed in the OT that became known or made clearer in the NT. Examples include (1) the incarnation (God in Christ, Christ coming in the flesh, that the Messiah would actually be God in human flesh); (2) indwelling of believers by the HS; (3) Revelation, how human history is all going to play out leading up to the second coming of Messiah, millennial kingdom, new heaven and new earth, etc.; (4) the church, body of believers, kingdom of priests, comprised of both Jews and Gentiles, no distinction, all one in Christ. This is the mystery Paul is talking about in v 3. He mentioned it back in Ch 1 when he talked about “the mystery of God’s will,” specifically, how the church was part of God’s plan and how in Christ both Jews and Gentiles get to be a part of it.

V 4, So the mystery Paul has been talking about in Ephesians, the mystery of the church and our unity in Christ, Paul says, “now that I’ve explained it to you, you can comprehend and understand it.”

V 5 The people in the OT may have been given some hints about God’s plan for the salvation of the Gentiles (Gen 12:2-3, Gen 26:4, Isa 49:6, Isa 57:19) but they didn’t fully understand the full extent of what this meant, what we can now see because of the NT scriptures. This mystery has been revealed “by the Spirit,” thru the agency of the HS to the apostles and prophets.

V 6 “This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” Hey, Gentiles, when you got saved you received the same benefits, same promises, as the Jews when they got saved! You get to enjoy the same blessings as their Jewish brothers and sisters in Christ. All made possible thru the gospel. What a contrast this is from the Gentile’s former condition, which Paul talked about back in Ch 2 when they were alienated from the commonwealth of Israel. That’s all changed!

Beginning in v 7 Paul talks about his role as a minister of the gospel and how humbled he is by it. In v 7 Paul says, “God made me a minister to preach the gospel. What an honor! What a privilege! I didn’t do anything to deserve this. I didn’t work for it. I wasn’t seeking it. God gave me the task of preaching the gospel and He gave me the power to carry it out.

V 8 “To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ,” As we saw earlier in Acts, Jesus Himself called Paul to preach the gospel to the Gentiles and to tell them about all the blessings that are theirs in Christ. Paul considers himself the least of all the saints, “chief of sinners” (1 Tim 1:15) He’s a deeply humble man. He knows it’s not about how great HE is or HIS credentials. He knows it’s all about GOD. It’s God’s grace to him.

Let me comment on “the unsearchable riches of Christ.” Do you realize all that you have in Christ? Do you recognize all the resources available to you as a believer? We talked about this earlier in our study. One of the things Paul prayed for the Ephesian believers is that they would have the eyes of their hearts enlightened, that they would know what is the hope to which he has called them, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints (Eph 1:18). If we could just catch a glimpse of all that is ours in Christ, it would change us.

My granddaughter Memphis and I were talking in the car a couple of weeks ago. For whatever reason she was curious about Robin’s and my financial situation. She asked me the question, “How rich are you?” My response was, probably not what she wanted to hear. I said, “In Jesus, Robin and I are very wealthy.” That was a true statement. You see, our bank account may be lacking at times, but our heavenly account, well suffice it to say, what we have in Christ is limitless. His resources are always there for us. The only question is can we draw from it? I’m afraid that too many Christians are like the church at Laodicea (really believers) whom Jesus describes this way, Rev 3: “For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.” (3:17) Anyway, something to think about and assess in your own life.

V 9-10 Paul is declaring something amazing here. God’s ultimate plan and purpose for the church is to be a testimony of God’s glory – His goodness and grace – to the angels and all spiritual beings. Did you know the angels in heaven are watching us? Jesus talked about this in one of His parables, Luke Ch 15, He said this: “I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” (15:10) In 1 Peter 1:12 Peter is talking about salvation and the preaching of the good news. He says these are things “in which the angels long to look.” They don’t get to experience what you and I have experienced, sinners saved by God’s grace thru faith. They’re amazed by it. I love John MacArthur’s quote about this passage. He says, “So God is the teacher, the universe is the classroom, the angels are the students, the church is the illustration, and the lesson is wisdom. And when it’s taught well by a church that is what it ought to be, the angels glorify God.”

V 11-12 One of the greatest privileges we have as believers is that we have direct access to God. We don’t have to go thru a priest. Jesus is our Great High Priest. Paul says that in Christ Jesus, thru our faith in Him, we can enter the throne room of God boldly and with confidence. God never says, “Make an appointment I’m busy right now.” God never says, “What is it now?” No, we have access to Him 24-7. All because of Jesus!

V 13 Paul addresses the Ephesian believers and says, “Don’t you feel sorry for me. What I went thru for your sake, it was well worth it! I would do it all again because of the love God has given me for you.” Paul’s perspective is heavenward. His focus is on pleasing His Lord and Savior. In Romans he put it this way: “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” (Rom 8:18) What a perspective!

Oh, that we could catch of glimpse of all that is ours in Christ – now and in the future. The mystery revealed – we Gentiles get to share in God’s plan, to be a part of His church and receive all the blessings He’s promised. If you are a Gentile hearing or reading what Paul has been saying so far in this letter to the Ephesians, you can’t help but get excited. It’s a cause for celebration! It’s a reason to sing…