

WHO AM I?

Ephesians

CHRIST-CENTERED MINISTRY

INTRODUCTION

Ephesians 3:1-13

Have you ever been interrupted in prayer? Many things can cause this—babies crying, microwaves dinging, phones buzzing, doorbells ringing, or sirens sounding. Sometimes my wandering mind just goes elsewhere. I can begin to pray, and then all of a sudden I remember something I need to do or I get lost thinking about a ball game or some problem in the church. Before I know it, I have chased a rabbit for several minutes.

Staying focused in prayer is a challenge at times. I have found that prayer walks and Scripture meditation and memorization are helpful for me in persevering in prayer. Paul appears to begin an intercessory prayer for the church in Ephesians 3:1, but then he goes on a holy rabbit trail and does not pick up the actual prayer until 3:14. Perhaps his digression is prompted as he reflects on his position as “the prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles” (3:1). Realize though that Ephesians 3:1-13 is more than a digression. The passage is part of God’s inspired Word and contains central themes in the book of Ephesians. Paul speaks of his sufferings, the incorporation of the Gentiles into the people of God, the cosmic nature of the church, the proclamation of the riches of Christ, believers’ access to God, and more.

In addition to these key themes, we also find powerful personal application for our own lives. Paul’s life serves as an example to believers. Like the Ephesian church, we are also called to love the church and fulfill her mission of making Christ known to everyone. We should acknowledge and appreciate Paul’s unique role in redemptive history, but we should not distance ourselves from his mission. God gave Paul the ministry of proclaiming Christ and explaining the unfolding plan of God to people; we as believers have that same purpose. If we accept that this passage has such application for our lives, then it is appropriate to see this passage as a “missions text.” Like the parallel text in Colossians 1:24-29, this passage contains missional language. We read of the Gentiles or “nations” (Eph 3:1,6,8; see Col 1:27-28), suffering for the sake of the mission (Eph 3:1; see Col 1:24), the administration of grace given (Eph 3:2; see Col 1:25), the revelation of the mystery or the plan of God (Eph 3:4-6; see Col 1:26-27), and the proclamation of Christ who is at the center of the plan (Eph 3:8; Col 1:28).

This passage is saturated with Paul’s passion for the nations to worship the reigning Christ. Spurgeon said in a sermon, “Every Christian here is either a missionary or an impostor. . . . You either try to spread abroad the kingdom of Christ, or else you do not love him at all. It cannot be that there is a high appreciation of Jesus and a totally silent tongue about him” (“A Sermon and a Reminiscence”). Indeed. While not everyone will serve the nations in the same way, every Christian should assume the posture of a missionary and testify to the grace of Jesus.¹

¹ Merida, Tony. *Exalting Jesus in Ephesians (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary)*. B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

OPEN IT

1. What subject in school or life skill has always been hard for you to understand or grasp? What about it makes this so?

READ IT

Ephesians 3:1-13

EXPLORE IT

2. How does Paul describe himself?
3. What does Paul say was hidden for ages?
4. Through whom would God make his wisdom known to rulers and authorities?
5. How does Paul describe our access to Christ in verse 12?

APPLY IT

In the second half of Ephesians 2, as we saw in the last chapter, he painted a vivid contrast between the double alienation the Gentiles endured before Christ (from God and from Israel) and their double reconciliation through Christ. For by his death, Christ demolished the Jew–Gentile and God–human barriers and is now creating in relation to himself a single, new multicultural human society, which is both the family God loves and the temple he lives in. Paul's Gentile readers must have read this exposition of the gospel of peace with joyful amazement. Now, abruptly, he turns their attention away from themselves to himself. In doing so, he styles himself I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles.

Humanly speaking, he was not Christ's prisoner but Nero's. He had appealed to the emperor, and so to the emperor, he had been committed for trial. But Paul never did think or speak in purely human terms. He believed in the sovereignty of God over human affairs. Therefore he called himself a prisoner of Christ Jesus or a 'prisoner for the Lord', so convinced was he that the whole of his life, including his tiresome imprisonment, was under the lordship of Jesus. He may also have thought of himself as 'Christ's prisoner' much as he thought of himself as 'Christ's slave', in which case his self-description expressed a 'combination of external and internal captivity'.

- 6. Paul speaks that he is a prisoner for Christ Jesus. Is this label for a select few or for all believers? How might our answer affect our mindsets on life?**

Paul is able to find solace and peace even in the most troubling of times because he knows he is exactly where God wants him to be doing exactly what God wants him to be doing. John Macarthur reminds us when commenting on this passage that:

Every believer is a steward of the calling, spiritual gifts, opportunities, skills, knowledge, and every other blessing he has from the Lord. Everything we have belongs to the Lord, and we are therefore entrusted as stewards to manage our lives and everything we possess in behalf of the One to whom they belong.²

- 7. Where has God uniquely placed you and to whom has he called you to serve? What gifts has he given you to accomplish this ministry?**

² https://www.preceptaustin.org/ephesians_31-3

8. **Take a couple moments and evaluate, are you being a good or bad steward of the grace that you have received and are commanded to share with others? If not, what things are keeping you from fulfilling all that God is calling you to?**

Mystery Theater!!!

But what is the “mystery” previously hidden that Paul wants the Ephesians to know? “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” (Eph. 3:6). Here Paul expands what he has already written about the sacrifice of Christ eradicating the distinctions between Jewish and non-Jewish people. Because the blood of Jesus makes atonement for the sin of all believers, all have equal access to the Father. So Paul says we are now “sharers together in the promise.” This is the apostle’s affirmation that God’s covenant with Israel (to be their God and for them to be his people) now extends to all who are in Christ Jesus.

The usual way that we think of the “mystery” committed to Paul and the other apostles relates to the unveiling of the Messiah. For centuries the Jews had wondered, “Who will it be? When will he come? What will be the nature of his reign?” The mystery of the Messiah was almost always considered in terms of something once hidden later being revealed for the benefit of the covenant people. But Paul says that the full mystery of the Messiah cannot be conceived unless we consider that the Messiah comes not only for the personal benefit of the Jews, but also for the nations. The real mystery of the Messiah is that he comes simultaneously as Lord of my soul and Lord for all nations.³

9. **Put this “mystery” that Paul is speaking about in your own words. How could the church in Ephesus have struggled with this mystery? How does this truth impact your understanding of the gospel when it comes to those around you?**

³ Chapell, Bryan. Ephesians (Reformed Expository Commentary) (pp. 139-140). P&R Publishing. Kindle Edition.

10. How does the mystery of the gospel revealed to Paul (3:3-5) challenge our understanding of the depth and breadth of God's grace and love for us?

I Can't Believe I Get to Do This!

The apostle speaks of himself in the present tense, saying that he has been given the grace to preach to the Gentiles even though "I am less than the least of all God's people" (Eph. 3:8). There are those who say that this is a bit of pious hyperbole. Paul is not still the least of all the saints. He is an apostle, a scholar, a missionary, a faithful servant, and a willing sufferer for Christ. Surely there are worse Christians than he! But such assertions expose a worldly way of reckoning our status before God that the apostle will not accept. If our best works merit us nothing, and therefore all of Paul's righteous deeds and sacrificial actions are not to his credit, then the only entries on Paul's spiritual ledger are those of debt. Without his good works counting to his credit, all that Paul still has in his personal account are such things as holding the cloaks of those who stoned Stephen and personal persecution of those who named Jesus as Lord (Acts 9:4). Only demerit is in Paul's account. There is no good that he can provide to cancel it, and yet to such a one "grace was given . . . to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ" (Eph. 3:8), and "to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things" (Eph. 3:9).

By juxtaposing his human status and his divine task, Paul makes the effect of Christ's sacrifice and the greatness of God's grace all the more obvious. Paul should have the least status, the least privilege, the greatest debt of any Christian, and yet God has called him to preach to the nations. The unsearchable riches of Christ (the word "unsearchable" implies "inscrutable" or "incomprehensible") that Paul is called to proclaim are evident in their application to his own account. The greatness of his debt makes the magnitude of Christ's riches all the more plain. That is why Christian maturity is never afraid of repentance and, in fact, desires it. Seeing our sin for its true magnitude makes the grace of God all the more great and precious to us. That is why, as the apostle Paul approaches the end of his life, he emphasizes his sin all the more, saying not only that he is the least of the saints, but that he is the chief of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15). Being enraptured with grace is the nature of Christian calling. Such awe of grace certifies our calling as genuine and energizes it in the face of sacrifice. The truly called are so enraptured by the grace of God toward them that the attacks of others, the difficulties of their circumstances, their lack of worldly comfort, and their lack of recognition in the world do not dissuade them from the joy of proclaiming Christ.⁴

11. Why is it important for every servant of God to remember their sin as they serve? What can happen if they don't? Is there ever a time where we can take this principle too far?

⁴ Chapell, Bryan. *Ephesians (Reformed Expository Commentary)* (pp. 142-143). P&R Publishing. Kindle Edition.

- 12. Paul says that he can only do what he does through God's power "working through him". Where are you seeing God's power at work in your life?**

Paul declares that in Christ are "unsearchable riches" in which Steve Cole declares, "The fact that Christ possesses in Himself unfathomable riches and that He gives these riches to all that call upon Him means that He can and will supply our every spiritual and personal need. He allows trials into our lives to drive us to a deeper experience of His all-sufficiency for our needs. Are we depressed? He is our joy! Are we discouraged? He is our hope! Are we troubled, anxious, or fearful? He is our peace! Are we weak? He is our strength! I could go on and on ..." ⁵

- 13. How do we go about preaching about these riches to ourselves and share the light of these riches with others around us?**

⁵ Sermon by Steve Cole found @ <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-20-unfathomable-riches-christ-ephesians-38>

Church: There Is More Than Meets the Eye!

Here in Ephesians 3:10-11, Paul adds another amazing point to our theology of the church with this third purpose clause. The apostle tells us that the church has implications that reach throughout heaven and the entire spiritual realm. The church—made up of Jews and Gentiles—is making known the manifold wisdom of God to “the rulers and authorities in the heavens.” I agree with O’Brien, who says that these “rulers and authorities” are probably both bad and good heavenly beings, “although the apostle’s particular concern is obviously with hostile forces” (Ephesians, 246–47).

It seems to me that the angels look on at grace and marvel while demonic forces look on in fear and tremble. The evil forces have already been defeated at the cross, and they await their final subjugation. The existence of the church is announcing that their rule is coming to an end once and for all... God uses it to proclaim to heavenly beings. His grace and glory are displayed in a diverse people—a many-colored fellowship, a multicultural and multiethnic fellowship—who have been called, redeemed, forgiven, made alive, and united in Christ. The angelic host look on at the reconciling work of Christ, “which is the model for the reconciling of the universe when everything in Heaven and earth will be brought together in Him.”⁶

- 14. How does knowing that God uses the church to reveal his plan to angels and demons elevate the role the church plays and your place in it?**

⁶ Merida, Tony. *Exalting Jesus in Ephesians (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary)*. B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

In Paul's day, the people believed that heavenly powers* were angelic representatives of earthly rulers who could control access to God's throne. They felt afraid that they might not have God's ear and help. But Paul says that these believers actually do have power to approach God because those rulers and authorities don't have ultimate control—God does. And because each believer has been made holy in God's sight through Jesus's redeeming* work, their sin won't block them from having God's ear also. They are clear to come before God without fear* or hesitation. Yet at the same time, accessibility to God doesn't diminish His greatness and holiness. It's only through being redeemed and forgiven that we are entitled to approach Him. Paul used the word boldness because it referred to the free speech every citizen in the Roman state had. They had the freedom to say whatever they wanted without fear of being arrested. In much the same way, you and I have complete freedom to tell God everything—without fear of being told God won't hear us. We don't even need someone to relay the message. We can approach God because Jesus is our intermediary who opens the door for our approach to God's throne and His attention.⁷

15. The ability to approach God means we can have a relationship with him, but what does that look like? How do we build and maintain a relationship with him? What has worked well for you?

16. In what ways do the truths of this passage give you greater boldness and confidence when it comes to approaching God and keep you from losing heart?

⁷ Miller, Kathy Collard. Paul and the Prison Epistles (The Smart Guide to the Bible Series) (pp. 90-91). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.
This study was compiled and questions were written by Tim Badal (Sugar Grove Campus)—www.villagebible.church/smallgroup