

Ephesians Chapter Three

THE MYSTERY OF CHRIST (3:1-6)

1 For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—

- Let me introduce Ephesians 3:2-13 (which in my opinion is one of the most complex passages of Paul, and is really hard to understand):
- Paul has started praying in Eph 1:15-19a then, at the mention of God's power, digressed on the theme until this verse (3:14 reveals that he was about to say, 'For this reason I kneel before the Father...') but at the mention of being a prisoner for the sake of Gentiles he digresses temporarily once again.
- In Eph 3:2-13 he gives a theology of how he uniquely was called to reach Gentiles for Jesus and also why they should not be discouraged that he is suffering (as seen in verse 13 where he says, 'I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.')
- Here is an overview of the flow of thought from verse 2-13:
 - You can see from my writings that God gave me and the other apostles the Gospel (v2-5).
 - The Gospel essentially makes Gentiles equal to Jews, sharers in every grace of God and in their place in the church (v6).
 - I was not looking for the job, but God sovereignly chose me to get the Gospel to the Gentiles (v7-9).
 - God took a long time to get the Gospel out, but now the formation of the church through the Gospel, displays to angels how wise God is (v10-11)!
 - That's why you Gentiles can confidently approach God (v12) and not worry too much about me being in prison - after all, God is control and he will use this somehow for your good (v13).

2 Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you,

- **God has entrusted to us the Gospel Message, and our job is to get it out there. This is our sacred trust.**
 - The word 'administration' comes from the word 'oikonomia' which means 'stewardship'. God has entrusted to Paul the Gospel Message and he is trying to get it out. We are conduits of God's grace to others as we preach this message.

3 that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. 4 In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ,

- **If you want a summary of the Gospel read Ephesians 1 and 2.**
 - He refers to Ephesians 1 and 2 as the Gospel / the mystery that God has revealed to him. Ephesians 1 and 2 is what he has 'already written briefly' and what we can read and understand. It is his insight into the mystery / revelation of Christ. It is Paul's own summary of the Gospel.
- **The Gospel is self-authenticating in the heart of a Christian.**
 - He says that as you read Ephesians 1 and 2 you will be convinced that this is truth. The Christian heart has an inner witness when the true Gospel is preached. The moment a person is saved - and then they hear the Gospel expounded, the Spirit within them will witness to it. Another way of saying this is that when a person is born again the 'word of God (which means the Gospel) lives within them'. They may not know how to articulate but when it is articulated they will know that it is truth.
 - That is why Christians should never grow weary of hearing the Gospel. Every time we hear it in the power of the Spirit it hits us with fresh force.

5 which was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets.

- **The Gospel, though foreshadowed in the Old Testament, is something new.**
 - In verse 6 (the next verse) the universal availability of God's salvation through faith in Christ *to everyone* is the main revelation Paul is speaking about here.
 - God had partially revealed in the Old Testament a revelation of the church, and the availability of inclusion in it to the Gentiles, but the full revelation only became clear in the first generation of Christians - through the foundational, first-generation apostles and prophets (who then recorded that revelation as an enduring foundation that every future apostle and prophet could build on (but not change)).

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.

- **Amazingly, there is absolute equality of available privilege for all people everywhere who respond to the Gospel.**
 - The Jews were the chosen people, but it turns out they were merely the first chosen people, eventually everyone would be invited into that same position of chosen-ness.

- Gentiles were heirs together (meaning that they also had an inheritance along with the true Israel). They were equally members in the body of Christ. They equally could draw on the promised grace through Jesus Christ.
- In Christ all kinds of people are brought together. Three times the word 'together' occurs. The Gospel results in a together-ness.

UNSEARCHABLE RICHES (3:7-13)

7 I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power.

- **God, by his power, can give us a clear purpose for our lives.**
 - Paul was not seeking Christ when he encountered him in AD 34 (Acts 9). And he seemed to be shying away from ministry when God sent Barnabas to recruit him (Acts 11:22-26). God powerfully imposed his purpose upon Paul so that Paul was given a very specific responsibility.
- **Once we step out into that purpose we can expect to experience God's power.**
 - Paul's mission was clearly made powerful by the power of God. His actions were directed. His words were powerful - and were accompanied by signs and wonders.

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, 9 and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things.

- **Our God-given authority and gifting needs to be tempered by humility.**
 - Paul knew that God had chosen and empowered him for a special task, but he also knew that it had nothing to do with him. It was based totally on God's sovereign choosing of him and God's gracious empowering. This is how he stayed humble: he meditated on grace.
- **The Gospel is an invitation to something so unimaginably glorious.**
 - Firstly, it is the opening of a treasure. It is the 'boundless riches of Christ.' Think about all that Christ is (majestic and meek, human and divine, strong and sympathetic) and think of all that flows from him to us: wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, final glorification, his faithfulness, his boldness, his presence, his authority, his healing, his companionship, his power and so much more.' That is why the Gospel is well presented by this invitation:

‘Come to Christ. He is so wonderful and I could not even begin to describe how much he can enrich your life if you will trust in him!’

- Secondly, it is the unveiling of a mystery. In all the centuries before Paul’s time no-one could have guessed that God would have revealed himself in this way. Why did it take God so long? Main reason: he wanted to give human beings enough time to show them the depth of their depravity and their inability to provide salvation for themselves. Although God had revealed so much about himself through creation, it would take the coming of Jesus to make known his power to save us from sin.

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, 11 according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.

- **The church is the screen on which God displays the surprising, long-awaited wisdom of the Gospel.**
 - ‘his intent was that now’ - Paul is revealing part of what motivated God to take so long in revealing the Gospel.
 - ‘through the church’ - God did his greatest work through Jesus Christ, but he made this work known through the church. The church is God’s chosen agent of the Gospel.
 - ‘the manifold wisdom of God’ - this refers to God’s multi-faceted, multi-textured plan in getting things done. The way God has revealed himself, through creation, through Israel, through Jesus, and through the church took more than mere power for God, it took remarkable wisdom, creativity and intelligence!
 - ‘should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms’ - one reason God took so long to send Jesus is that he wanted to blow the angels away. 1 Peter 1:12 speaks of how the angels longed to look into the Gospel. Amazingly, this Gospel does not only surprise us humans but the angels too.
 - ‘11 according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.’ - God has always, for all eternity, planned this, but he accomplished it 2000 years in Jesus Christ.

12 In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. 13 I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.

- **This Gospel gives us great boldness and courage.**
 - Verse 12 - It gives us boldness in prayer.
 - Verse 13 - It gives us courage to endure our own sufferings and the sufferings of others.

BECOMING GOD-FILLED (3:14-21)

- Paul finally completes the prayer that he started to praying in 1:15-19a and attempted to restart in 3:1.
- The phrase 'for this reason' means, 'in light of everything I have said in 1:19b-3:13' (which essentially is about the great access we have to the Father through Christ, and the great treasure that Christ is to us).
- Very importantly, the prayer that follows (in verses 14 to 19) is **EMPHATIC** in the flow of this letter; it is the *summit* of the letter for two reasons:
 - This is the prayer Paul has been trying to get to from chapter 1, but he keeps feeling we're not ready to hear it until we understand some more.
 - The words 'for this reason' show that in light of the Gospel there is one great implication for us - that we get to be God-filled people (v19 sums it all up like this).

14 For this reason I kneel before the Father, 15 from whom every family [a] in heaven and on earth derives its name.

- **Our physical posture in prayer often (but not always) tells us about our heart before God.**
 - Some people bow when they pray (Gen 24:52), some kneel (Acts 21:5), some lie on their faces (Matt 26:39), some bow their head (2 Chron 29:29).
 - Our posture is not of major importance, and we should not get religious or superstitious about it. What is most important is the state of our heart that it reflects. Kneeling is a sign of awe, submission, humility, dependence.
- **Our family-ness is a result of us having the same Father.**
 - The Greek word for family is 'patria' and the word for Father is 'Pater'. In a real sense Paul refers to how the word family comes from the word father. Without a father we cannot be a family!
 - The degree that we experience God as Father is the degree that we will experience each other in the church not merely as friends, and not merely as community, but more profoundly as family. Our acceptance and being loved by the Father overflows into us accepting and loving each other as brothers and sisters!
 - Eaton translates 'every family' as 'whole family' meaning 'all God's people that he has redeemed and adopted - and of course this consists of the living and the dead, those on earth and those in heaven'.
 - The emphasis again is that both Gentiles and Jews are, through Christ, in the same family, with equal access to the same Father.

16 I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being,

- **The Father longs to strengthen us spiritually in our inner beings so that we can seek Christ and experience him more and more.**
 - Paul is going to pray that we experience Christ's indwelling, his love and his power in the following verses. But, apparently the Christian's inner being needs to be strengthened *before* we can even meaningfully experience his love and power. We see this in the words in verse 17 'so that'.
 - 'Our inner being' = our inner personality, the deepest part of us.
 - 'Out of the Father's glorious riches' = the reason Paul is so confident that God will strengthen us and recalibrate our inner being is that he is so abundantly and beautifully resourceful. When God strengthens us, or fills up our deficits, he does not lose any strength or capacity. His grace and strength is inexhaustible.
 - 'strengthen you with power through his Spirit' = Think of all the aspects of our inner being that need strength and power from the Spirit if we are to sustain the pursuit of God and his filling. We need God to strengthen our:
 - *sensitivity* to God, his presence and his thoughts about us.
 - *mind*, our ability to see all that God is for us and has for us in Christ.
 - *will*, our determined resolve to seek the presence of Jesus and find him in a greater way than ever before.
 - *spiritual appetite*, so that we long to know Christ and his resurrection power better.
 - *endurance*, our ability to persevere in our pursuit of Christ despite discouragement and setbacks.
 - *bodies*, sometimes what holds back our experience of God is sickness or tiredness and we need God to strengthen us physically.
 - 'I pray' = As we pray to the Father, the Spirit comes and delivers the answer to our prayer, the grace we need from the Father, into our inner beings.
 - We need to pray to God for this strength continually, and we need to anticipate his answering it through his indwelling Spirit.

17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love,

- **At the heart of the Christian-life and church-life is the quest to be filled by Jesus and his love.**
 - What experience is it that God wants us to have, that Paul is praying for, and that we should pray for ourselves? The answer is 'Christ dwelling in our hearts' which means 'the *abiding* (*i.e. not short-lived*) experience of Christ living in us and through us'.

- We already know that Christ lives in us at the moment of salvation (after all we are ‘seated with Christ’ and we are ‘in Christ’) but the Christian life consists of *experiencing* this more and more.
 - But Paul uses another phrase to describe the exact same thing as being full of Jesus - it is ‘being rooted and established in love.’ In other words to experience Christ being totally at home in us and through us is also to be rooted and established in his love, and to become a conductor of that love towards God and others. To experience Christ is to experience his love.
 - In order to live constantly and ever-deepeningly in this experience of knowing Christ and his love intimately, we need supernatural strengthening by the Spirit of our very capacity of mind, will, desire, appetite, endurance and body (verse 16).
- **A true experience of Christ is not something shallow but deep.**
 - This experience of Jesus and his love is not meant to be a short-lived spiritual high, but an ever-deepening, stabilising, nourishing, securing experience.
 - To experience Jesus inhabiting us speaks of security and being at ease in his presence. He lives in us; he doesn’t just visit from time to time.
 - To experience his love is to be rooted (like a tree that is nourished ever-deepeningly by water) and established (like a tree that is strong, stable, secure).
- **We have a part to play in this experiential relationship with Christ.**
 - The part we play in this quest is to ask the Father for strength to keep pursuing a deepening experience of Christ and his love (verse 16).
 - And then of course, we pursue him by faith (verse 17). Faith is trusting the revelation of God we have in his Word. This effectively means that regardless of what we experience of Jesus (and our feelings do go up and down) we continue to affirm by faith all that Jesus is according to his Word. One of the great secrets of the Christian life is to keep on affirming all that Jesus is, especially when you’re not currently experiencing Jesus in that way at all. It is as we affirm by faith all that Jesus is, that we open ourselves to actually experience Jesus in those ways. For example, you may not feel Jesus loves you, but you pray, ‘Thank Jesus that you love me.’ Or it may not seem according to your circumstances that Jesus reigns, but you pray, ‘Jesus, you reign. You’re unrivalled in power. And you’re sovereign over my circumstances. I trust you.’

18 may have power, together with all the Lord's people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, 19 and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

- **We can go on all eternity exploring the dimensions of Christ's love, so let's start right away.**
 - Verse 18 simply restates verses 16 and 17, which said that we need Holy Spirit strength (v16) to experience the indwelling Jesus, which effectively means to experience his love (v17). This verse tells us more about this love. In other words, he does not introduce a new thought but expands on this experience of love.
 - 'may have power ... to grasp ... to know' - The Holy Spirit needs to give us inner-strength and illumination that makes it possible to experience Christ more deeply.
 - 'together with all the Lord's people' - the word 'Lord' in Paul's writings almost always refers to Jesus and not to the Father. We are Jesus' people. Think about Pentecost where Jesus' people experienced the outpouring of Christ's presence and love - Paul is saying that we all, Gentiles included, get to join them in that outpouring of heaven!
 - 'how wide and high and long and deep is the love of Christ' - this refers to the mind-blowing expansiveness of Jesus' love. It is picture language and could refer to swimming in the sea, or it could be comparing Jesus' love to the massive temples that people used to visit in the ancient world (particular ones in Ephesus) in their spiritual quest. Experiencing Jesus is likened to carefully perusing every part of the most spectacular, embellished buildings of the ancient world.
 - 'knowing the love that surpasses knowledge' - Paul is saying that we cannot ultimately comprehend Christ's love, but the Spirit will try help us comprehend it anyway.
 - 'know this love' - the atmosphere that should dominate the experience of the Christian is love: love from God, love to God, God's love overflowing to each other and beyond, God's love bringing great joy, God's love overcoming fear and insecurity!

- **We cannot know Jesus in isolation to the same degree that we can know him in community.**
 - This whole passage is not being written to individual Christians, but to a community of Christians. The word 'you' which is used again and again is a plural you, meaning 'you all'. That is why it is only together with the saints that we can know Christ's love more fully.

- **To be God-filled means that the Father causes us to experience Christ in the strength of the Spirit.**
 - Until we begin to know all three members of the Trinity we haven't begun to know God.
 - Notice that the way to be full of God (verse 19) is to experience God the Father (v14), God the Spirit (v16) and God the Son (v17). It is as we know all three persons of the trinity that we can say that we are God-filled, i.e. filled with the Triune God.

- That is why another way of speaking of drawing grace from the Father, and experiencing the strength and revelation of the Spirit, and experiencing Jesus' indwelling and love is to speak of becoming a God-filled person. We see this in the final summarising sentence: 'that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.'
- Paul is praying that we would be as full of God as God is full of God. It is only in heaven that we will experience the full measure of God's infilling - but already now we seek an ever-growing foretaste of God's infilling presence and power.
- That is why we should pursue God with everything we've got - and with the strength that God provides!

20 Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, 21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

- **We can expect to see God at work in us and through us in the most amazing ways!**
 - Verse 19 has told us that one implication of the Gospel and the resulting formation of the church is that we can become God-filled people. This is our first experience.
 - But this connects with a related experience: not only do we know God's presence, we also know his active power in us and through us.
 - 'God is able to do immeasurably more than all we can ask or imagine' - this is an emphatic sentence. 'God is able' is the essential thought. But Paul puts emphasis by adding several more words:
 - Now - Right now we can expect to see God's power at work.
 - 'what we ask or imagine' which is not as impressive as ...
 - 'All we ask or imagine' which is not as impressive as ...
 - 'More than all we ask or imagine'
 - 'Immeasurably more than we ask or imagine'. He even creates a new word 'hypereksperison' which is translated immeasurably more. It basically means, 'incomprehensibly far far far far more than.'
 - This should encourage us to dream bigger dreams, and pray bigger prayers. As one theologian said, 'God is able to do more than all we ask or imagine, but still we need to do the asking or imagining.' In other words it is an encouragement that calls us to active faith, not a passive expectation that it will fall into our lap.
- **The same power that got us to this level as a church will take us to the next level.**

- 'according to God's power at work within us' - this describes how God took proud Jews and degraded Gentiles and saved both and united them in community and drew them into ever-deepening experiences of God. It took power for God to do this - and this power will still work in taking the church even further.
- **God's all-generations plan is to be glorified in Jesus and in the church.**
 - 'to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.'
 - All that God does he does through Jesus, and he is brought great honour.
 - And the main agent of his grace is the church which brings great honour to God - as it grows and develops and enriches, and as it joins with God on mission (2:10).
 - 'Amen.' This means 'yes'. Paul could not have imagined a better way for God to bring glory to himself than through Jesus and through the church - and everything inside of him says YES!