

Eph 3:1-13

I. I, Paul am a prisoner for Christ. (1-12)

A. For this reason, I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you gentiles... (1)

Because he was apostle of the Gentiles, and very directly as a result of his stand for the equality of Jews and Gentiles in the people of God (see Acts 21:17-34, 22:21-24, 26:12-23), he was in prison. For the sake of the Gentiles he had been imprisoned, and even now his confinement was to their advantage. (verse 13). – Foulkes en loc.

On “For this reason” – Paul most likely was beginning a prayer for the Ephesians regarding the material he has just spoken of in chapter 2. The prayer in 1:15-23 is occasioned by the material spoken of that far in chapter one. It also begins with the same words “for this reason”. However, in this case, Paul breaks off into a digression, he takes up the prayer again with the same words, “for this reason” (v. 14)

... The apostle is deferring what he was about to say and breaking off into some information about what it means that he was the apostle of the Gentiles. The parenthesis appears to go on to the end of 3:13, with the main argument resumed in verse 14 with the same words as we have at the beginning of verse 1. – Morris p. 86

Eph 3:2-13 is a *Perembole*, and a digression explaining Paul’s special ministry in connection with the Gentiles. – Bullinger, *Figures of Speech*, p. 477

On “prisoner” – cf. 4:1; Phil 1:7, 13; Philem 1, 9; Acts 21:17-36, esp. 27-29

B. Digression, explaining exactly what it means to be a prisoner for Christ on behalf of the Gentiles (2-12)

1. I am a steward of the mystery now made known. (2-6)

...it [administration, stewardship] refers to the management of a household, from which it comes to signify management or administration generally. Paul is saying that God has entrusted him with the task of an orderly preaching of the gospel of God’s grace. This was something that he did characteristically, not haphazardly. It was a duty entrusted to him and one he must duly discharge. Paul took preaching to the Gentiles very seriously. It was not a task he chose, but a divine commission. – Morris p. 86.

a The mystery is being made known. (2-5)

1) You have heard of the stewardship of God’s grace which has been given to me for your sake. (2)

He was making sure that they knew of his position. Evangelizing Gentiles was not a chance occurrence that happened to take place in Ephesus, but something that would inevitably occur wherever Paul was. He had been chosen by God to evangelize Gentiles, and he was diligent in being obedient to his call. – Morris p. 86

On “stewardship” – management of a household, commission of some household business, stewardship, responsibility

- cf. v. 9; 1:10; 1 Cor 4:1-2; 9:17; Col 1:23-29; 1 Pet 4:10; 1 Thes 2:4

On “grace” – cf. 1:6f.; 2:5-8; 4:7; Rom 12:3, 6; 15:15-16; 1 Cor 3:10; 2 Cor 8:9; Gal 2:9; Acts 20:24

2) This mystery is being made known. (3-5)

On “mystery” - ...it does not denote a mystery in our sense of the term: a puzzle hard to work out. A mystery, for Paul, was something impossible for people to work out, but which God has now made known. Paul says here that it has been made known ‘by way of revelation’; that is, of course, the only way a ‘mystery’ could become known to us – Morris p. 87

Secret thoughts, plans and dispensations of God which are hidden from the human reason as well as from all other comprehension below the divine level, and hence must be revealed to those for whom they are intended; the content of that which has not been known before but which has been revealed to an in group or restricted constituency. - cf. v. 4, 6, 9; 1:9; 5:32 (cp. 5:30); 6:19; Rom 16:25; 1 Cor 2:10; Col 1:26

a) It has been made know to me; I am making it known to you. (3-4)

(1) That the mystery was made known to me by revelation. (3a)

From 1:9 we have seen that ‘revealing’ and ‘making known’ go naturally with the word mystery when it is used in connection with the gospel. For this is the truth of God which is no longer hidden, but made plain to those who are willing to receive it. – Foulkes en loc.

The particular aspect of revelation here in Paul’s mind is the fact, undisclosed by the Old Testament prophets, that the salvation of the Gentiles would involve the creation of ‘one new man’ (Eph 2:15) by the incorporation of Jewish and Gentile believers alike, on the common ground of divine grace, as fellow-members of the body of Christ. The disclosure of this truth came to Paul as his conversion when he was brought by divine call into the circle of the apostles (Eph 3:3). Ladd, Theology of the New Testament p. 385-6.

(2) I have made it known to you. (3b-4)

(a) I have briefly written about it to you (3b)

refers to the contents of the letter up to this point, cp. v. 6 with ch. 2.

(b) So that you too may understand. (4)

(i) By reading [what I have written] (4a)

(ii) By which you will be able to understand that which I understand regarding the mystery of Christ. (4b)

The revelation imparted to the apostles and prophets did not have as its purpose the creation of a spiritually elite circle of men elevated above the rank and file of believers; the apostles are recipients of revelation that they in turn might ‘make all men see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God’ (Eph 3:9). – Ladd, Theology of the New Testament, p. 386.

b) It has been made known in God’s time. (5)

(1) It was not fully made known to people in other generations. (5a)

Something new came into the world when Jesus made His appearance. ‘In other generations’ this was not known to people (v. 5), but Jesus finally brought the way of salvation that God had purposed through eternity. – Morris p. 88

(2) To the same extent that it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. (5b)

We may take the force of the 'as' to be 'in such a measure as' or 'with such clarity as' now – Foulkes en loc

That the Gentiles had their place in God's scheme of things and that they would receive blessing from God is brought out in the Old Testament. As early as the time of Abraham it was said that in the patriarch 'all the families of the earth' would be blessed (Gen. 12:3; cf. also the relevant passages cited in Rom 15:9-12). What is not made clear in the Old Testament (and was hidden 'from the ages and from the generations,' Col. 1:26) but is abundantly plain in Paul's exposition of the Gospel is that salvation in Christ means equality: Gentile believers are on the same level as Jewish believers. – Morris, p. 89

That God would bless the Gentiles, then, was not a new revelation. What then was the new revelation, the mystery hitherto concealed? It was this: that God's blessing of the Gentiles would involve the obliteration of the old line of demarcation which separated them from Jews and the incorporation of Gentile believers together with Jewish believers, without any discrimination, in the new, comprehensive community of God's chosen people. – Bruce, en loc.

- cf. Rom 16:26

On "Apostles and Prophets" – The church is built upon the twofold foundation of apostles and prophets..., the apostles representing the authority of primary witness to the Gospel facts, while the prophets represent the living guidance of the Spirit by which the facts were apprehended in ever fuller meaning and scope. – Dodd, The Johannine Epistles, p. 105.

Through these two ministries – the apostles empowered by the Spirit of Christ and the prophets inspired by the same Spirit – effect was now being given to the divine purpose which had for so long remained unrevealed. – Bruce en loc.

Apostles and prophets were of primary importance because they were the vehicles of revelation (Eph. 3:5) and thereby provided the foundation for the church (Eph. 2:20). – Ladd, Theology of the New Testament, p. 535.

- cf. 2:20

b What this mystery is: The gentiles are fellow-heirs, members of one body, and partners in the promises in Christ Jesus through the gospel. (6)

That Gospel, therefore, is the means and the only means of deep spiritual unity between men of however diverse racial, cultural or political background. – Foulkes en loc.

The point that Paul is making with some emphasis is that Gentile converts belong right up there with Jewish believers. We are not to think of 'Christian, Class 1' and 'Christians, Class 2.' Paul is saying not only that the Gentiles may be saved by the atoning work of Christ, but that when they are saved they are on the same level as Jewish believers.... The threefold expression puts emphasis on the fact that all believers belong together and that no one group has a superiority over others.... Both Jews and Gentiles depend on the promise God has made in Christ, a promise expressed in 'the Gospel.' The good news is the same for both groups. – Morris p. 89.

- cf. Fuller, The Unity of the Bible, p. 430-431

On "in Christ" – cf. Ladd, Theology of the New Testament, ch. 34.

1) Fellow Heirs

‘Fellow-Heirs’ echoes Old Testament passages that speak of Israel as receiving an inheritance from God. This is just as true of Gentile believers as of the ancient people of God. – Morris p. 89.

This ‘inheritance’ is through the ‘adoption as sons through Jesus Christ’ (1:5). The Holy Spirit is a ‘deposit guaranteeing our inheritance’ (1:14), not only a guarantee, but also a down payment, a present, partial enjoyment of the full inheritance. Paul prays that they may know the ‘riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints’ (1:18).

Addressing Jews in Jerusalem in the earliest days of the church, Peter had said, ‘You’re the sons of the prophets and of the covenant which God gave to your fathers, saying to Abraham, “And in your posterity shall all the families of the earth be blessed”’ (Acts 3:25). But now the divine plan has been revealed – that ‘all the families of the earth’ should through the Gospel not only be blessed in Abraham’s posterity but should be reckoned among his posterity, children of Abraham because they share the faith of Abraham, who ‘is the father of us all’ (Rom 4:16). Gentile believers are therefore with Jewish believers ‘fellow-heirs’ of all the blessings pledged to Abraham and his descendants – ‘heirs of God,’ in fact, ‘and fellow-heirs with Christ,’ as Paul puts it elsewhere (Rom 8:17). – Bruce en loc

- cf. 1:11-14; Rom 8:17; Gal 3:29; 4:7; 1 Pet 3:7; Heb 11:9

2) Fellow members of one body

‘Fellow members of the body’ is one word in the Greek and expresses very concisely the thought that Gentiles have their place in the body of Christ, just as Jews do. Preference is given to neither, but the two belong together. – Morris p. 89.

God ‘has made the two one’ (2:14), ‘His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in the one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross’ (2:15-16). We are both part of the one building ‘joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord...a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit’ (2:21-22).

- cf. 2:15, 16

3) Co-partners in the promises

‘Fellow-partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel’ brings out the truth that Gentiles are the recipients of the divine promise just as much as are others. Salvation is not the result of Gentiles making a big effort, which turns out to be the same as the effort made by the Jews. Both Jews and Gentiles depend on the promise God has made in Christ, a promise expressed in ‘the gospel.’ The good news is the same for both groups. – Morris p. 89

The Gentiles now participate in ‘every Spiritual blessing in Christ’ (1:3 elaborated in 1:3-14). Not only is this participation in the full citizenship of God’s people (2:19), and ‘access to the Father by one Spirit.’ (2:18), it is also participation, along with all the saints, into the newly realized victory of Christ, “God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus’ (2:6). This is participation in Christ’s victory and rule: ‘That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.’ (1:19-21)

-cf. 2:13-14; 18-19; 5:7; 2Tim 1:1; Gal. 3:6-29

2. What my stewardship entails. (7-12)

a Generally: I became a servant of the mystery according to the gift of God's grace which He gave to me according to the working of His power. (7)

On "servant" – cf. 1 Cor 3:5; Gal 1:13-16; Col 1:23-29; 1 Tim 1:12-16

On "working of His Power" – cf. 1:19-21; 6:10

b Specifically: I make known the mystery of His grace. (8-12)

1) God gave me grace to make it known. (8-9)

He could have said that Christ had called him to preach or that God had chosen him, but grace is such an important concept for the apostle that it comes as no surprise that he refers to grace as the motivation and power behind his preaching of the gospel. – Morris p. 92

a) This grace was given to me – the least of all the saints. (8a)

– cf. 1 Cor 15:9

b) His purpose in doing so: (8b-9)

(1) So that I may preach the good news of the unfathomable riches of Christ to the gentiles. (8b)

Paul is saying picturesquely that the riches in Christ that are made known by the gospel are greater than we can ever track down or search out. It is no poverty-stricken gospel that Paul proclaims, but one that is rich beyond all human need and beyond all human telling. – Morris, p. 93

On "preach to the Gentiles" – cf. Acts 9:15; 22:21; 26:17f.; Rom 11:13; 15:16-21; Gal 1:16; 2:7-9

On "riches" – cf. 1:7; Mt 13:44

- (2) So that I may clearly reveal all that is the purpose of the mystery which was kept hidden from eternity in God – the creator of all things. (9)

We have again the term [administration, dispensation] that was used in 3:2 (as in 1:10), and here its meaning must be God's 'plan' (RSV) or 'purpose' (NEB). Paul is thus expressing again the fact that his work is to show and teach the great purpose of God in Christ. It is a mystery (as he has said in verses 4-5) not at all fully communicated to men before, but by no means an after-thought in the mind of God. God is spoken of here as the One who created all things, in order to imply that this was His purpose from the beginning of the creation, though in His wisdom He chose to reveal it to man in stages. – Foulkes en loc.

On "bring to light" – As Paul fulfilled his commission by preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, as through his preaching Gentiles were brought to faith in Christ and found themselves united in church fellowship with fellow-believers of Jewish birth, the long-hidden mystery was being revealed before the eyes of men and women. For the church fellowship in which Gentile and Jewish believers were united was no mere enrollment on a register of membership; it involved their union with Christ by faith and therefore their union with each other as fellow-members of his body. The "third race" was coming visibly to life: something that had not been seen or imagined before was now a matter of experience. Before all ages God's undisclosed purpose had existed in his own mind; now its accomplishment was evident not only to human beings on earth but also "to the principalities and powers in the heavenly realm." – Bruce en loc.

The verb [should be] taken to mean 'showing forth' or 'bringing to light' God's truth. The word is in fact the natural word to use for the public disclosure of what had been kept secret. – Foulkes en loc.

- cf. 2 Cor 4:6

- 2) The ultimate purpose of God's dispensing grace to preach the Gospel. (10-12)

- a) So that the manifold wisdom of God may be made known. (10-11)

- cf. 1:8; 1 Cor 2:6-10; Rom 11:33; 1 Pet 1:12

What was hinted at in 2:7 now is expressed specifically. This great purpose of God for the Church reaches out beyond this world order and beyond the present time. It has to be declared now to all men, but the hosts of heaven also, who know the glory of God's creation, are through the Church to be enlightened concerning His work for man's salvation. – Foulkes en loc.

(1) To whom: the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms

Paul makes use again of two of the expressions he used in 1:21. Here they clearly refer to spirit beings – they are “in the heavenlies” – but the apostle does not stay to specify closely which ones he has in mind. – Morris p. 95

That the terminology designates supernatural beings is quite clear from Ephesians 6:11ff, where the believer’s struggle is against the devil and against principalities, authorities, world rulers of this present darkness, spiritual hosts of wickedness. Usually they are conceived as being evil and opposing the Kingdom of God. Sometimes, however, these spiritual powers are not cast in a evil light but are represented as created beings who apparently exist to serve the divine glory (Col 1:16). Christ is the head of all such rule and authority (Col 2:10); the divine purpose will display to these principalities and powers in the heavenly places the manifold wisdom of God through the church (Eph 3:10). – Ladd, Theology of the New Testament, p. 401-2.

There is no need to limit the “principalities and powers” in such a context as this to hostile forces. All created intelligences are in view here. – Bruce en loc. -cf. 1:21; 2:2; 6:12; 1 Cor 2:8; L&N 12.44

On “in the heavenly realms” – This term is used in 1:3, it is the location where “God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ”; in 1:20, where Christ is seated at God’s right hand in vindication of His victory over every rule and power; in 2:6-7 where we are raised and seated with Christ, it is explained that this is “in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.”; this sheds light on the present passage; 3:10 where the term either describes the location where “the manifold wisdom of God should be made known” or more likely it describes the location of the “rulers and authorities”; in 6:12, the evil forces are described as “the rulers,... the authorities... the powers of this dark world and... the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” The “heavenly realms” are therefore the location of God’s opposition; the location of His vindication and victory against the opposition (sort of a divine “I told you so”, the thought of 1 Pet 3:19-20), but more than even that, it is the realm of the fulfillment of God’s purposes, in grace and blessing to us, in glory and victory of Christ, and final glory and praise to Himself. In the heavenly realms the church is finally seen sharing in Christ’s victory and rule: “And God placed all things under His feet and appointed Him to be head over everything for the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him Who fill everything in every way.” (Eph 1:22-23)

(2) How:

(a) Through the church

Paul is now saying that it is through the group of apparently insignificant people that make up the church that God's wisdom will be displayed....Paul sees the function of the church as extending far beyond the petty concerns of this life. What God is doing in the church has its repercussions throughout the spirit world. John Stott quotes J.A. Mackay, "the history of the Christian church becomes a graduate school for angels." – Morris p. 94-5
The church thus appears to be God's pilot scheme for the reconciled universe of the future, the mystery of God's will "to be administered in the fullness of the times," when "the things in heaven and the things on earth" are to be brought together in Christ (Eph 1:9-10) – Bruce en loc.

(b) According to the eternal divine purpose which God made in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Behind all the events of this world's history there is an eternal purpose being worked out. God's is no ad hoc plan, but one conceived from eternity and eternal in its scope. – Foulkes en loc.

Before the world's foundation he chose his people in Christ and destined them in love to be his sons and daughters; before the world's foundation, too, he cherished this plan, to go into effect at the proper time, of bringing into being a community which would bear practical witness on earth to his reconciling work. – Bruce en loc.

- cf. 1:4, 5, 9, 11

b) In Him we have boldness and freedom of approach with confidence through faith in Him. (12)

The word boldness is basically 'freedom of speech'. It is often used of boldness before men, as in 6:20, Acts 4:31 and Phil 1:20, the absence of fear or shame. It is used of a similar absence of fear or shame in approaching God. Hebrews 4:16 and 10:19 are the clearest examples and explanations of this, which is the meaning here.... Access with confidence expresses a thought very similar to that of boldness, but it is more personal. – Foulkes en loc.

- cf. 2:18; Rom 5:2; Heb 4:16; 10:19

II. Therefore, I ask you not to lose heart on account of my sufferings for you, which are for your glory. (13)

– cf. Col 1:24; 2 Tim 2:8-10; Phil 1:12-18

“Therefore” in this verse draws a conclusion from the great truths to which the apostle has just drawn attention.

Because God has done such wonderful things through Christ, because he has demonstrated even to the spirit powers the fulfillment of his eternal purpose, the Ephesians should be encouraged and not give way to gloom. They might well have been depressed at Paul’s imprisonment and at all that he had had to suffer. They might have concluded that this new religion was unable to stand up to the might of Rome. Paul has made them see that such a conclusion is shallow and not in accordance with the facts. God has been working out a great eternal purpose, and the seemingly powerful Romans are nothing greater than players of bit parts. In their stupidity they may convince themselves that they can do as they will with the Christians, even blot out the whole Christian movement with their persecutions. But that is shallow thinking. It concentrates on what humans are doing and overlooks the far more significant fact that God is active and that he is working out His purpose through the crucified Christ and through those who have come to salvation through faith in Christ. Morris p. 98

For Paul the great thing about suffering is that it is not aimless, not futile. It is not the result of blind chance. It is not the torture inflicted by an unfeeling Fate. Suffering can come only as an all-powerful and all-wise Father permits. Therefore suffering, for the Christian, is always meaningful. Paul can speak of his sufferings as having ‘fallen out...unto the progress of the gospel’ (Phil 1:12). Something like this will be the meaning of his reference to himself as ‘the prisoner of Christ Jesus in behalf of you Gentiles’ (Eph 3:1; 4:1), and to his tribulations as the ‘glory’ of his converts (Eph 3:13). – Morris, The Cross in the New Testament, p. 268