

Ephesians 3:1-13
(Isaiah 56:1-8; Matthew 24:3-14)
“Mystery and Ministry”

Introduction

We have been studying the apostle Paul’s Ephesian letter since last summer, taking a break for the season of Advent and the celebration of Christmas, and returning to it this morning. It is often claimed that its theme is the church, and it is certainly a letter written to the church and tells us things crucial to our understanding and pursuing the church’s mission. However, I hold with those who see its central theme as addressing a Christian’s vocation. The letter falls into six chapters. The first three describe the nature of that calling. Then, at the beginning of chapter four, Paul writes these words: “I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called” (4:1). And in the second half of the letter, he describes what it looks like to follow Christ.

In the final verses that we studied before our break, Paul described Christ as tearing down “in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility” between Jew and Gentile, and creating “in himself one new man in place of two, so making peace [so that he might] reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility” (2:14-16). This is not merely an implication or application of the gospel. This is at the very heart of the good news, and Paul repeats it over and over again throughout his letters. The gospel is not just for Israel, but for all the nations.

The verses before us this morning seem to be an inspired diversion from what Paul started to say in verse one. He seems to have had in mind the theme he returns to in verse fourteen, which is his prayer for his readers to know the reality of the riches of the gospel. Each verse begins with the words, “For this reason.” However, in our first verse, Paul refers to himself as writing from prison, and implies that his imprisonment is precisely because of his ministry to the Gentiles. If you remember from the book of Acts the accusations brought against Paul in Jerusalem, they centered on his having brought Gentiles into the Temple – a false charge, but one that triggered his arrest. This thought inspires him to explain more deeply how very crucial to the gospel is this mission to all nations, entrusted through him to us.

So he again takes up the theme of God’s grace in sending his good news, not just to Israel, but all the nations. And we should be grateful for this diversion, for in these verses, Paul takes us deeper into the theme of this letter, which is *our true vocation in Christ Jesus*. He speaks again, as he already did in chapter one, of the mystery of his plan for human history, as well as for the cosmos. And then he shows that this revealed mystery has been entrusted to us, so that we might declare it to all.

We will simply follow Paul’s outline, looking first at the great mystery of God’s plan for humanity (3:1-6), and then we will look at the ministry that flows from this

revealed mystery, and that has been entrusted to each one of us who is a disciple of Jesus Christ (3:7-13). One other reminder before we look at the text. In the New Testament, the word mystery (a direct transliteration of the Greek word *mysterion*) does not mean something hidden, but rather something that had previously been hidden but had now been revealed. When, for example, Alexander the Great called his officers together to explain his plan of battle, those sessions were called *mysterion*, the revelation of his battle plan to those entrusted with waging it.

Body

1. God, in his grace, has revealed the great mystery of his plan – cosmic in scope – the good news of uniting all things in Christ (3:1-6).

This divine mystery was revealed by the risen Christ to his apostles, who then passed it on to us (see Matthew 28:18-20, Acts 1:6-8).

The first question is, how was this mystery revealed, and why should I believe it? Paul says, “The mystery was made known to me by revelation” (3:3). And, furthermore, it has “now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit” (3:5). In other words, God entrusted his plan to those charged with pursuing it. Jesus began revealing the plan between his resurrection and ascension in his teaching and especially in the commissioning charge that summarized his teaching. “Make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:18), and “You shall be my witnesses, beginning in Jerusalem ... and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

Jesus promised that he would send his Spirit, who would lead his followers into all truth (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:13). After Pentecost, the apostles, including Paul, received through the Spirit a deeper understanding of how the Scriptures were to be understood in light of Christ, and of the implications for ministry and mission. And here is the key: they passed on this good news, the revealed mystery of God’s deepest purposes in history, to you and me. We will come back to this.

This divine mystery reveals God’s good news of our union with Christ and with one another, regardless of status, wealth, education, ethnicity, or anything else that would separate God’s people from one another.

But, what is the substance of this good news? Why does Paul describe it as “not made known to the sons of men of other generations as it has now been revealed” (3:5)? Didn’t Israel know that God’s promise to Abraham was that through him all the nations would be blessed (Genesis 12:3)? Did they not realize that they were to be a light to the nations (Isaiah 49:6)?

Yes, of course they did. But here was their misunderstanding: They thought that the nations would be saved by becoming Jewish proselytes, by

undergoing circumcision, by accepting the dietary and other cultural and religious distinctives that set a person apart as being Jewish rather than Gentile. It is this view that Paul is often addressing and rejecting when he tells us that we are not under law but under grace. We are not saved, we are not joined to the true Israel of God (see Romans 11), by becoming culturally Jewish, but through faith in Messiah Jesus. And even more astonishing to Paul's fellow Jews was his claim that they, too, must also now come to God, not through the sacrificial system or by virtue of being Jewish, but through faith in Messiah Jesus.

Thus it was crucial for Paul, and is crucial in every age including our own, that we understand God's love for every ethnic group, every language, every people, every nation. The gospel is God's appointed means of saving all. That is the great revealed mystery.

2. God, in his grace, has entrusted this good news – cosmic in scope – to us his people, to be declared to the nations (3:7-13).

The ministry of this good news is entrusted, not only to apostles, but also to all of us in Christ Jesus (see 4:11-12).

I said that this good news has not only been entrusted to the apostles and prophets, but through them to all of us. Where do I get that? Where is that in our text? It is coming soon, just a few paragraphs later in this letter, when we read, "And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry" (4:11-12).

You may ask, "Where am I in that list?" Roman Catholics have distorted the biblical meaning of the word "saint," and Protestants have distorted the meaning of the word "minister." According to the Bible, all God's people are saints. It does not mean someone who is extraordinarily holy, but rather someone whom the Lord has set apart to be his own. So, Paul always calls all the Christians to whom he is writing, "saints." And, unlike Protestant churches who call their pastors "ministers," every Christian is a minister, not just those of us who have been ordained. Which means that God entrusted the good news to his apostles so that they might hand it on to us, and that we might, through the work of ministry, hand it on to others.

The ministry of this good news of God's love for all, of the genuine offer of his grace to all, the refusal to define any group of people as beyond the pale of God's grace, lies at the heart of the vocation of every Christian, whatever we may do for a living. We are, at the very least, and it is actually the most important thing that we can do, called to live in such a way that those who know us and who observe us day after day will have reason to believe that the gospel is true.

The ministry of this good news reveals God's wisdom in an ever-widening circle: first to the church, then to the nations, and finally to unseen rulers and authorities.

So do you see how this revealed mystery of God's plan of salvation has Christ at its center, and then moves out in ever widening concentric circles? Christ by his Spirit reveals it to his apostles, they reveal it to the church – to you and me – and we reveal it to the world around us. Now here is the big surprise, and the reason that I emphasized that the gospel is cosmic in scope. Paul writes,

So that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was according to the eternal purpose that he [God] has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord”(3:10-11).

Do you realize that we are not the only show in town? Imagine discovering the work of a great painter like Michelangelo, and presuming that you have discovered his only work of art. God creates: This vast and glorious cosmos is immeasurably immense. The instruments available to science at present cannot yet reach out to its edge. And this is simply our cosmos. Who knows how many multiverses there are and yet shall be, unknown and unseen by us, in which we live and move and have our being?

The Scriptures give us every reason to believe that this is so, through such hints and intimations as this: unseen rulers and authorities in the heavens – which in biblical cosmology means in the atmosphere around us – are watching the utterly unique story of God's redemption of rebellious humanity in order the better to understand God's wisdom.

Conclusion

And so, Paul concludes, “we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith” in Christ. Such a God is able to use even our sufferings to get glory for himself and for his people. Paul writes, “So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory” (3:13). Whatever may be causing you confusion or anxiety and fear today, whatever may be breaking your heart, hear the great good news of the gospel of God's grace. God is gathering his family from every people group on earth, and invites you and me to be part of that ingathering. All else will finally pass away, but the one who does the will of God will never pass away. In Christ Jesus, the best is always yet to be.