

VI. Lesson 6 Paul's Stewardship – Ephesians 3:1-13

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Stuart chapter 6

Aim: To understand Paul's ministry and message.

Paul has been explaining to the readers of his epistle what happened to them because he had been praying that they might have understanding. He is now on the point of telling them more about what he prays for them. As he opens chapter 3 it is his intention to tell them about this right away. By comparing 3:1 and 3:14, we can see that he planned to write, "For this reason, I, Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles, bow my knees to the Father...." But he never did so. As he dictated to his amanuensis, or secretary, the word 'Gentiles' triggered a train of thought he just had to pursue. He would come back to what he originally planned to say, but not immediately.

Some commentators believe that Paul keeps interrupting himself because he is so excited and ideas come tumbling one after the other, and so here he inserts a 13-verse parenthesis. Actually, that's not so. Instead it is a literary device he uses. What follows is not just stuck in; it is absolutely integral to his argument. He's going to talk about being a prisoner and the relationship between prayer and being a prisoner. Before he offers the prayer concerning the revelation of the mystery, he wants to talk about being a prisoner and why he is a prisoner.

The central theme of the third chapter of Ephesians is the importance of the role of the Gentiles in the early Christian community and is directly related to the special commission that God gave Paul in his apostolic ministry. It is possible that the people who read the original letter to the Ephesians found chapter 3 to be the most provocative section of the whole epistle. What sparked the most interest among them was Paul's elaborate comments that are found here regarding the inclusion of the Gentiles into the body of Christ.

In addition to that theme, there is in chapter 3 some important information that is of abiding interest to us and to future generations of Christians concerning the personal character of the apostle himself. Here we get a glimpse of Paul's character and self-understanding in respect of who he was, what his task was, what his passion was, and what was his mission. We see into his heart and character, and learn a great deal more about his message.

A. The Mystery Revealed (Eph. 3:1-7)

- *Ephesians 3:2 speaks of the administration or stewardship of God's grace. Some translators have called it a dispensation of God's grace. This word choice has led others to believe that God has ordained various dispensations throughout the ages, the present one—from Christ's death to His second coming—being the period of grace. Why does Paul say that he was given the administration of God's grace (3:8; Acts 9)? Why is this important (3:5-6)?*

1. The Prisoner (3:1)

As we read the New Testament, we discover that there is something different about Paul that sets him apart from the other apostles. Paul was an unlikely candidate for apostleship, at least in the eyes of humanity. God, however, had prepared Paul to become the apostle to the Gentiles through education as a Pharisee and through experience as a persecutor. It wasn't just that he was not one of the original twelve apostles; for the legitimacy and authenticity of Paul's

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apostolic credentials were confirmed by the other apostles. But Paul had a special task, a special mission to perform, for he was designated the apostle to the Gentiles. So as he discusses this question of the role of the Gentiles in the body of Christ, Paul is speaking of something that is very close to his own heart.

Paul was not only a spiritual prisoner of Christ, in that he was held captive by God's grace; he was also physically restrained by the Romans. Why is he a prisoner (*desmios*)? Because of his message that Jew and Gentile (*ethnos*) are now one. In Acts 21:27ff., the Jews arrest Paul and accuse him of being against the Jews and that he had defiled the temple by bringing Gentiles into the holy place. So Paul can say to the Ephesians that because of them (Trophimus was an Ephesian), that he is in prison.

But it is more than that. It was Paul's faithfulness to Christ that caused him to preach to the Gentiles the good news of their ingrafting into God's household (2:19). And it is because of this message—that the middle wall of separation has been removed, so that all Gentiles are the same as Jews—that Paul is in prison. He is in prison for something that is at the heart of the gospel – it's integral. Paul is willing to pay the price for that.

The animosity of his opponents led him to appeal to Roman jurisdiction and eventually resulted in house arrest in Rome under Nero's regime. Although Paul had appealed to the Emperor of Rome and submitted to his jurisdiction, he never thought of himself as Nero's prisoner. Paul knew that God ruled in the affairs of men (*cp.* Rom. 8:28; Gen. 50:20). Rather than identifying himself as 'I Paul, a prisoner of Nero, the emperor of Rome,' he instead called himself a 'prisoner of Christ' (3:1) or the 'prisoner of the Lord' (4:1; *cp.* Philemon 1, 9; 2 Tim. 1:8). To outward appearance he was the prisoner of Rome, confined by the will of men. But just as his spiritual life 'in Christ' mattered far more to him than his outward circumstances and environment, so now he regarded himself as a prisoner by the will of his master. Paul understood that the lordship of Christ covered even his imprisonment.

For Paul, the doctrine of God's sovereignty was not an abstract concept, but a truth to be lived by. He was in prison because the Lord Jesus Christ wanted it that way. He was therefore His prisoner. He would remain there as long as his Lord wanted, but not a moment longer. Meanwhile he would live to please Him in the circumstances in which He had placed him. Humanly speaking it was very trying, and it certainly looked like a tragedy. But there are no accidents. Everything is part of a divine plan.

Paul's acceptance of his imprisonment and his infirmities should encourage all of us. We should recognize God's sovereignty and Christ's lordship in all our circumstances no matter how desperate they may seem. God is in control even though we may not think so. Our job is to submit to Christ's lordship and exercise our wills to follow Him even in the face of pain or death.

2. Dispensation of Grace (3:2)

This verse begins with a strong argument for the view that this letter was sent originally not to the Christians at Ephesus alone, but to a wider circle. The Greek particle 'if indeed' (*ei ge*) that begins this verse does not express doubt, but it calls on the readers to verify what is being said (*cp.* 4:21; 2 Cor. 5:3; Gal. 3:4; Col. 1:23). The argument concerning the destination applies because this is hardly what he would have said to a church that knew him as well as did the church of the Ephesians, but rather to those of whom some, at least, knew him only by reputation.

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The ‘dispensation of grace’ uses the same word as in 1:10 (*oikonomia*), often translated as ‘stewardship’ (see Col. 1:25). It means basically either the administration of a household, or the office of the one who administered it. Paul has in mind the manager of a large estate putting differing responsibilities into the hands of various servants. The particular task given to him is to preach the gospel to the Gentiles with the message of the unity of both Jew and Gentile. He is not self-appointed. He is a man with a strong sense of commission.

‘Grace’ (*charis*) is used in its fullest and widest sense of the undeserved favor of God that brings to men and women all that they need for living a Christian life. But Paul also uses it a number of times to express the privilege of being given a work to do for Christ, and to denote the particular task allotted in His service (*cp.* Rom. 12:3; Eph. 4:7). There is yet another application of the word that is found in Acts 11:23, and that rings through this whole section, that in the actual extension of the privileges of the gospel to the Gentiles the particular mercy of God has been shown. There is grace to the Gentiles that apostles of the gospel were sent to them, and grace to Paul that he should be their apostle.

3. The Mystery (3:3-4)

‘As I have briefly written (*proeegrapsa*) already’ – some commentators believe this refers to a previous letter that Paul wrote, but it more likely simply refers to chapter 2 of Ephesians. Through special revelation (the Damascus road, etc.) the mystery was made clearer to him than anybody else.

There was nothing manmade about the apostle’s message. God Himself had given it to him by ‘revelation’ (*apokalupsis*). Not only so, but God had given him an inspired understanding of it. Paul is not boasting here or displaying personal pride that he has this revealed knowledge. Paul is at pains to emphasize that all his understanding is by the gift of God, and only possible as He reveals His truth. The knowledge of ‘the mystery’ was not a personal discovery upon which he could flatter himself. It was the gift of God by His Spirit.

No one is receiving direct revelation today. But this does not mean that the message which Paul is speaking about is lost. It is contained in those writing of the apostles and their associates which the Holy Spirit has seen to preserve, such as the epistle to the Ephesians.

From 1:9 we have seen that ‘revealing’ and ‘making known’ go naturally with the word ‘mystery’ (*mysterion*) when it is used in connection with the gospel. The term ‘mystery’ does not mean an unexplained riddle or secret which remains an enigma to us. Rather it refers to something which was always in the plan of God but which had been obscured in the earlier chapters of redemptive history. Something previously concealed is now open to view. What was covered is now unveiled. The emphasis is not so much that something had been kept secret, but that it has now been made known. Paul uses this term seventeen times in his epistles, and it is used an additional five times in the other New Testament books.

A mystery is known—but only to those to whom it has been revealed. The word is used in this way of ancient mystery religions. All of the mystery cults try to bust into the sanctuary to get the hidden truth. In the Bible, it is hidden with God. In the New Testament, the sanctuary is opened up, and all the things hidden in the Old Testament are spilled out.

The mystery that Paul speaks about is that Christ’s atoning act on the cross was not only for Jews, but also for Gentiles. All people from all nations, who profess Jesus as Lord and Savior become incorporated into His mystical body, the church, and participate in the legacy of the

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Savior. Another way to describe the mystery is “Christ in you, and you in Christ;” and this is the same for both Jew and Gentile. If we are in Christ, we are all the same. This is Paul’s distinctive message, and it was revealed to him by revelation. It was also revealed to Peter (Acts 10-11). But with Paul it is made clearer than with anyone else – it becomes his peculiar message.

A person might ask how this is new, seeing that the Old Testament referred to God’s purpose to bless the Gentiles as far back as Abraham (Gen. 12:3). It is true, of course, that God announced His intention of saving Gentiles as well as Jews from the beginning. The Old Testament had revealed that the number of believing Jews would get less and less until there was only a remnant left. It had also revealed that great numbers of Gentiles were going to enter God’s salvation. All this was plain.

But before the coming of Christ it was understood that this was to happen only as the Gentiles became Jews through proselytizing. A Gentile could approach the God of Israel, but only as an Israelite. He had to become a member of the covenant people through the rite of circumcision. The new thing revealed to Paul is that this approach is no longer necessary. Christ has broken down that wall, making one new people out of two previously divided people. So now both Jew and Gentile approach God equally on that new basis. It was never revealed that the believing Jews and the believing Gentiles were going to become one body. It was never disclosed that the believing Gentiles would be on the same footing as their Jewish counterparts, and that they would become one spiritual nation.

4. Holy Apostles and Prophets (3:5)

In Romans 16:25-26 and Colossians 1:26, Paul talks about how the mystery was kept secret and hidden before, but now it has been disclosed. Paul says the same thing here about the revelation of the mystery concerning the bringing in of the Gentiles. This is not to deny that there were glimpses of God’s purpose in this matter in the Old Testament, but it is a truth that had not been at all fully understood that Jews and Gentiles should actually become one people, and it certainly had not been carried into practical effect.

Paul does not say that this mystery was completely hidden from previous generations; but that it was not known *as* it has now been revealed. It has been revealed now in a more clear way with greater clarity and emphasis. It is revealed not just to Paul but to ‘holy apostles and prophets.’ They all have access to this revelation, but it is Paul’s particular ministry and calling. The rest ministered to Jews; Paul ministered to the Gentiles.

Usually, when Paul speaks of prophets and apostles, he does it in that order. When in that order, the prophets obviously refer to the Old Testament men whom we know as the prophets of God. The office in the New Testament that corresponds to the office of prophet in the Old Testament is the office of apostle. In this instance, however, Paul reverses the order and speaks of God’s holy apostles (*apostolos*) and prophets (*prophētēs*), which makes some commentators think that Paul is referring to others in the apostolic entourage who are not at the level of apostles, but who have the gift of prophecy, men like Agabus (Acts 11:28; 21:10). Another possibility is that Paul is using a double phrase, saying that those who are apostles are also prophets.

In either case, Paul describes the apostles here as being ‘holy’ (*hagios*). Although he minimizes his personal merit and worth, nevertheless Paul magnifies his office as apostle. He understood that the office of the apostle was special. The word ‘holy’ here does not mean ‘pure’; rather, it means ‘set apart’ or ‘consecrated.’

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5. Equality of the Gentiles (3:6)

The chief thing Paul wants to say about the mystery of God's creating one new people in Christ is that Jew and Gentile, as well as all other types and conditions of men and women, hold their salvation blessings *jointly* in Christ's church. This is more striking in Greek than in most English versions, because to make his point Paul assembles (and in one case invents) three parallel, composite expressions. In Greek these words each begin with the prefix *syn*, which means 'together with.' It is added to the words: *klēronomoi* meaning 'heirs;' *sōma*, meaning 'body;' and *metocha*, meaning 'partner,' 'companion,' or 'one who shares in.' There is no way to capture the precise force of this in English. The NIV translates this phrase as 'heirs *together* with Israel, members *together* of one body, and sharers *together* in the promise in Christ Jesus.' Another translation reads '*equal* heirs with His chosen people, *equal* members, and *equal* partners in God's promise,' repeating the word 'equal' as an equivalent for *syn*.

The Gentiles were going to be 'fellow heirs' (*synklēronomoi*) (*cp.* Rom. 4:13; 8:17; Gal. 3:29; 4:1-7; Eph. 1:11-14; Titus 3:7) and not in any way restricted to second-rate blessings. Every heir receives the whole of God's blessing; it is possessed jointly by all believers in and with Christ. There is no inner circle or outer circle of the saved. The Jews are not first-rate Christians and the Gentiles second, or vice versa. All who are in Christ inherit God's entire blessing. And they inherit jointly!

They were going to be 'of the same body,' full members of Israel, and not in any sense outside it. *Synsōma* is not known in Greek literature before Paul, and perhaps was coined by him to express this truth that the Gentiles are incorporated with the Jews into one body of Christ. At the end of the preceding chapter Paul compared the church to a kingdom, a family, and a temple. But here he picks up on a theme introduced at the end of chapter one (1:22-23). Paul comes back to this theme again in chapter four (4:4ff). The image of the body speaks of a mystical union possessed by God's people in the church. But it also suggests that this is something into which the people of God must grow and toward which they must strive. How is this to happen? It is to happen only as we grow in the love and knowledge of the One who has brought us together.

They were going to be 'partakers (*synmetocha*) of His promise in Christ through the gospel.' They would share just as much in the covenant promises as any native-born Hebrew (*cp.* 2 Tim. 1:1), even though before the Gentiles were 'strangers to the covenants of promise' (2:12). The Bible has many promises for those who trust God and come to Him through faith in the work of Christ. But the word in this phrase is singular, 'promise,' and for that reason must refer to the promise of redemption, made to our first parents, repeated to Abraham, and which forms the burden of all the Old Testament predictions (Gal. 3:14; 19; 22; 29).

'The gospel' (*euangelion*), as it is preached and believed, is the effectual means, humanly speaking, by which men and women come to be 'in Christ.' That gospel, therefore, is the means and the only means of deep spiritual unity between people, however diverse their racial, cultural, or political backgrounds.

Every individual believer, whether his or her origin was Jewish or Gentile, was going to have exactly the same status. This was 'the mystery.' Today, removed from the apostolic era by many centuries as we are, we can hardly appreciate how radical this new disclosure was. Jews despised Gentiles; yet Gentiles also despised Jews and others. The Greek thought that all but Greeks were barbarians. The Romans, who conquered the Greeks, looked on them largely as

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slaves. Barriers were absolute in the pre-Christian world. So it really was a mystery that Jews and Gentiles would be joined together in Christ.

But the majority of believers today have still not really grasped what Paul has to say here. The idea is still widespread that the Jews have privileges into which the Gentiles cannot enter. There are still Christians who believe that the unfulfilled prophecies of the Old Testament refer to the Jews, whereas in fact they speak about the whole people of God. Many believers consider that the Old Testament is not really much to do with them, forgetting that every one of God's people is a beneficiary of its covenants and authorized to enjoy its promises. They have never grasped the mystery. God has only one people, not two. There are two sorts of people in the world, it is true, but they are the lost and the saved. The saved are not subdivided into two categories. They form just one body.

6. Servant of God (3:7)

Paul calls himself a 'minister' (*diakonos*) of the gospel. This Greek word is used sometimes in the New Testament of those in the particular office of deacon (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8-12); but it is often used more generally of one who lived and worked in the service (*diakonia*, as in 4:12) of Christ (*cp.* 6:21; 2 Cor. 3:6; 11:23; Col. 1:23; 1 Tim. 4:6). Paul gladly accepted the title of servant, knowing that even this servitude is a gift from God, given to him through the working of God's power, not his own.

Paul did not just wake up one day and think it was time to do something about the Gentiles. He did not make himself into a gospel minister. It was a function given to him by God's grace alone. Paul was unworthy to be a preacher of God's word, because he had been a persecutor; but the grace of God had made him all that he was, a new man in Christ (1 Cor. 15:10). It also made him Christ's servant in the proclamation of His 'gospel,' and in particular work that he had of ministering it to the Gentiles.

But mercy was not enough. He was also a minister 'by the working (*energeia*) of His power (*dynamis*).' The task to which he was called needed no mere human strength and patience and power of endurance. It needed the power of God, and He who sent him to the work equipped him for it. He tells that Ephesians that he is energized by the mighty power of God in this service for the Lord. As in 1:19, Paul shows that that power is given, and not just as an abstract thing, or as a force from afar, but as energizing strength operative in his life by the Spirit's indwelling (*cp.* Col 1:29).

B. The Mystery Proclaimed (Eph. 3:8-13)

- *What is the mystery that was hidden in God (3:9)? See Colossians 1:26-27. Why do you suppose God chose to reveal it through Paul (1 Cor. 1:26-31)?*

1. Less than the Least (3:8a)

If words mean anything, it is impossible for anyone or anything to be less than the least (3:8). But Paul uses this hyperbolic phrase to stress, in such a way that his readers can't miss it, that he has not merited this position or this authority; he has received it by the grace of God. If Paul had anything in his character that distinguished him, it was his genuine humility. He really was aware of his dependence on the grace of God. This was the man whom Christ had called to preach! The Lord took the lowest name on the list and made him His special messenger to the

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Gentiles! What a responsibility and what a privilege! The appointment was not done on the basis of merit. It was all of grace.

This was no feigned humility. It is the inevitable attitude of one who was prostrated with wonder at the grace of God in Christ. Here it is not so much that he is consciously comparing himself with others. Rather it is that the more he meditated on the blessings of God in Christ, and the infinite grace of His gifts, the more he realized that in himself there was nothing to make him deserve such mercy. He knew that he had no standing, no personal worthiness, no claim, no natural position or gifts, that he should receive the grace of reconciliation, and become a preacher of it.

2. Paul's Message (3:8b-9)

But the fact that he was less than the least does not cancel out the significance of his message. Paul's commission and desire were to proclaim everything that there was to say about Christ.

'Unfathomable' (*anexichniaston*) is used for an untranslatable word in Greek. The Greek says 'something that cannot be traced out by footprints,' or 'a path that cannot be walked.' It is used of the works of God in the Septuagint of Job 5:9 and 9:10. The idea is walking around a pond, but as you begin to walk around it, you realize that it is only an inlet on a vast ocean, and that you would have to walk around a continent. The idea is that the riches of Christ can never be exhausted; they are infinite and you can never fully grasp them. There will always be something new to learn about God. So Paul says that the riches of Christ can never be fully walked out. And that takes us back to chapter 2, when we formerly walked in the pattern of the world, according to Satan. But now we have been created in Christ to walk in good works, which are inexhaustible and will never end.

In the first place the task of the apostle was simply to make known the unsearchable riches (*ploutos*) of Christ to those who had not heard of him before. But as people came to faith in Him, the preacher's work was to go on to share the knowledge of the wonderful purpose of God. The verb *phōtīsai* means 'showing forth' or 'bringing to light' God's purpose. Paul shines light on the mystery so that all can know it.

Some translations translate *koinōnia* as 'fellowship,' but only a few manuscripts read this way. Most manuscripts have *oikonomia* as the original reading. This is the same term used in 3:2 and 1:10 and is often translated 'dispensation' or 'stewardship.' Some translations therefore translate this word as pertaining to God's 'plan' or 'purpose.' Paul is expressing again the fact that his work is to show and teach the great purpose of God in Christ.

Christ Himself was sending Paul to preach to the Gentiles. Everybody was to know about the mystery. Its hiding place had been in God Himself – God the creator of the whole world, and all worlds. Having now revealed the mystery, God's will was that the whole world should hear it.

3. The Manifold Wisdom of God (3:10)

The Greek word translated 'manifold' (*polypoikilos*) is a very difficult word to put into English. Some writers have used the word 'many-splendored' to convey its meaning to us. Classical Greek writers used this word to mean 'variegated' with reference to cloth or flowers, and so here it suggests the intricate beauty of an embroidered pattern or the endless variety of colors in flowers.

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In the ancient world, all the mystery religions were trying to bust into the sanctuary to get the hidden knowledge, but they couldn't do it. Paul is saying that God has freely opened up the doors of the sanctuary to everyone in Christ. This hidden wisdom is accessed through the church. The mystery is given to us (all of the wonderful things Paul lists in chapter 1), and we make them known to the 'rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.'

These 'rulers (*archōn*) and authorities (*exousia*)' can refer to three different groups of people. First, the rulers in 'heavenly places' (*epouranios*) refers to us – we are in the heavenly places in Christ (1:3). So, the proclamation of the mystery is given to the saints. Second, it can mean proclamation to angelic powers. Angelic beings run the world, but the mystery has been given to us, not to them. The angels long to look into these things. Angels have to learn from us – we are over them. Third, it can refer to human rulers and authorities symbolized by heavenly powers. The sun, moon, and stars symbolize earthly rulers. However, not to be restrictive, Paul is saying that we are to proclaim the gospel to everyone: rulers, angels, and saints.

It appears that God's grace, which reunited mankind, had value and purpose for those inhabitants of the heavenly realm as well. The spectators of this drama of salvation are the cosmic beings, 'the rulers and authorities of the heavenly places.' Since these cosmic intelligences are not omniscient, but long for the knowledge of the good news of salvation (1 Pe. 1:12), they have no way of knowing the master plan of God. God, evidently, did not desire to reveal His plan of grace through Christ directly to these 'powers and principalities.' Rather, He chose to unfold it 'through the church (*ekklēsia*).' It is the task of the church to make God's plan of salvation plain to the whole cosmos, even to the heavenly beings. It is the task of the church to make God's plan of salvation plain to the whole cosmos, even to the heavenly beings.

The great purpose of God for the church reaches out beyond the present time. It has to be declared now to all people, but the hosts of heaven also, who know the glory of God's creation are 'through the church' to be enlightened concerning His work of human salvation. In one way at least, human beings in the blood-bought church of God have a superior position to the angels. They know and are to declare to these spiritual powers the redeeming purpose and work of the Almighty, that otherwise they cannot know.

4. The Eternal Purpose (3:11)

The preaching of the gospel is said to be according to God's eternal purpose, because that purpose was not going to be brought about without such preaching. It is an integral part of the plan.

Behind all the events of this world's history, there is an 'eternal purpose' (*prothesis tōn aiōnōn*) being worked out. God's is no *ad hoc* plan, but one conceived from eternity and eternal in its scope. God's purpose, like His decrees, stands from all eternity. God's eternal Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, is at the center of the plan and it will come to pass through Him. In the covenant of redemption made by the Father and the Son the plan for the elect's salvation was ratified. God's plan is to bring home to the eternal fold all His sheep. He gave them to the Lord Jesus Christ before the world began, and it is that Good Shepherd who died for them. Throughout all subsequent history there has not been, nor could there be, a shadow of turning or an alteration, no matter how slight.

Paul's view of the historical significance of the church could not be more in conflict with prevailing secular opinions. John Stott expresses it like this: 'Secular history concentrates its

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attention on kings, queens, and presidents, on politicians and generals, in fact on VIP's. The Bible concentrates rather on a group it calls "the saints," often little people, insignificant people, unimportant people, who are however at the same time God's people—and for that reason are both "unknown to the world and yet well-known to God." Secular history concentrates on wars, battles, and peace-treaties, followed by yet more wars, battles, and peace-treaties. The Bible concentrates rather on the war between good and evil, on the decisive victory won by Jesus Christ over the powers of darkness, on the peace-treaty ratified by His blood, and on the sovereign proclamation of an amnesty for all rebels who will repent and believe. Again, secular history concentrates on the changing map of the world, as one nation defeats another and annexes its territory, and on the rise and fall of empires. The Bible concentrates rather on a multi-national community called "the church," which has no territorial frontiers, which claims nothing less than the whole world for Christ, and whose empire will never come to an end.'

5. Boldness and Access (3:12)

Now from the exalted, cosmic view, the apostle turns to the most practical significance that it has for the everyday life of the Christian. The word 'boldness' (*parrēsia*) is basically 'freedom of speech.' It is often used of boldness before other people (*cp.* 6:20; Acts 4:31; Phil. 1:20), the absence of fear or shame. It is used of a similar absence of fear or shame in approaching God (*cp.* Heb. 4:16; 10:19). The word 'access' (*prosagōgē*) was used previously in 2:18 and correctly means 'access' rather than 'introduction.' 'Confidence (*pepoithēsis*) of access' expresses a thought very similar to that of boldness, but it is more personal.' 'Faith (*pistis*) in Him' is the means of access.

As he speaks about Christ, Paul immediately thinks of Him as the one by whom we may come boldly to God's throne (3:12). The mere mention of His name sets Paul thinking about going to God as confidently as a child skips to his father. The terror of approaching Him is gone. We have access into the holiest. It is a privilege which becomes ours through faith. We can be bold to pray because this is God's eternal purpose. He is not going to change His mind. Don't worry about coming in to pray – it is what God wants.

6. Glory in Tribulation (3:13)

Some people think today, as possibly some of Paul's readers did, that if a person is really in God's will, he will not experience many trials and tribulations (*thlipsis*). Life will be peaceful and without conflict. Paul assured his readers that his difficulties and sufferings were for their benefit. The fact that he is suffering himself is not something he pauses to think about. But he is worried about the effect that his imprisonment might be having on others. To encourage his readers, Paul tells them that his time in prison is their 'glory' (*doxa*).

He was not there because he had something to be ashamed of. He was suffering because he had freely preached the gospel to the Gentiles. He was there for a worthwhile cause and they ought to be proud of the fact. They should be speaking positively about it. In his willingness to do this, and in the grace of Christ given to him in imprisonment, they could glory.

Only those whose confidence is in the sovereignty of God in the redemption of the elect could be admonished not to lose heart or grow discouraged at the thought of the Apostle Paul imprisoned for the faith. He therefore admonishes them not to faint at his tribulations. Discouragement with the outworkings of the plan of God is simply inconsistent with a bold confession of God as sovereign and Christ as reigning Lord.

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Why does Paul take this interruption? Because he wants to show that he prays from prison, and that it is a joyous part of the whole process of redemption. If God puts us into prison, it is proof that He wants to glorify us.

C. The Importance of the Church (Eph. 3:10)

- *Why do you suppose the church is important (3:10)? How does this stand against the view that a personal relationship to Christ is all a person needs?*

The first half of Ephesians 3 teaches the importance of the church. Some people would have us believe that the church is worthless, and that a personal relationship to Jesus Christ is all that matters. But God has chosen the church as central to the working out of His eternal purpose.

The church is important for a number of reasons. *First*, God has ordained the church as central to human history. The church as delineated in the Bible becomes a major emphasis in the salvation history God has preordained through Jesus Christ. History is not a random succession of events. It is the moving plan of God, the expansion of God's endless growing community of believers known as the church. *Second*, the church proclaims the gospel. The good news of salvation comes from the midst of a vibrant, growing, and sharing church. *Third*, through the church believers support one another and share burdens. There is no such thing as 'solo-Christianity.' In fact, the New Testament addresses groups of Christians to encourage them individually and corporately to walk together in Christ and not to walk alone. We are called together as God's elect, not only to share our faith and to worship the Lord, but to share in each others problems and to rejoice in each other's victories. *Fourth*, the church is the army of Christ and must fight spiritual battles (6:12). An individual believer who forsakes the security of the church makes himself vulnerable either to the subtleties of Satan or to outright frontal assaults by our archenemy.

D. Application Questions

- *Being in God's will doesn't necessarily mean you will not experience trials and tribulations. In fact, Jesus told us that in the world there is much tribulation, but take heart, for "I have overcome the world" (Jn. 16:33). What tribulations am I now experiencing? How can I grow through these trials?*
- *I believe that the church is important for all the reasons just studied. I am part of the church along with my brothers and sisters in Christ. There is one person in the local body with whom I have difficulty for one reason or the other. How can I improve my relationship with that person?*

For next time: Read Ephesians 3:14-21 and Stuart chapter 7.