

Ephesians 3

January 24, 2011

In the outline I gave you at the beginning of this study of Ephesians, the first part of chapter 3 comes under this heading:

V. The calling of the Apostle Paul (Eph. 3:1-12).

3:1 Some expositors see in what Paul wrote in chapter 2, nothing more than the expansion of the Gospel to the Gentile world. It is certainly that, but Paul's main purpose as he stated it in the beginning of this chapter was to show that in expanding the Gospel ministry to the Gentile world, the church had had its beginning, and the Apostle Paul had been specifically chosen of God to carry this message to the infant church. It had been probably some thirty years since the ascension of Christ and the pouring out of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost when the Church was began by the baptism of the Holy Spirit. "For this cause" takes us back to chapter 2 (especially to the last four verses) to get the connection with what Paul was about to right in chapter 3.

Although Paul was actually a prisoner of Rome when he took his pen to write to the church at Ephesus, he called himself "the prisoner of Jesus Christ" because he had realized that the reason for His imprisonment was his ministry to the Gentiles. Anybody who was a friend of the Gentiles was not a friend of the Jews (that is what the Jews thought), and so it was really the opposition which Paul faced from his own countrymen that led to his imprisonment, and his trip to Rome. So in writing to the Gentiles in the church at Ephesus (which was mainly Gentile), Paul told them that his ministry to the Gentiles had resulted in his confinement. The ministry that God had called Paul to do had brought about his arrest, but he could see the sovereign hand of God in where he was. When Paul wrote to the church at Philippi, which was at about the same time, he actually told the Gentiles in Philippi that what had happened to him had "fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the Gospel" (Phil. 1:12).

3:2 He knew that they would understand if they had heard that "the dispensation of the grace of God" had been given to him for them. Now a dispensation is really an assignment, an appointment, a calling from God to proclaim this further manifestation of the grace of God. Paul had been appoint an apostle to the Gentiles to tell them about the Church, this building, of which Christ was the foundation stone and all believers were as stones in the building.

When Paul written to the church at Corinth a few years before, he had told them what we read in 1 Corinthians 12:13:

13 For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit.

So, while Paul had been called especially to the Gentiles, his ministry included the Jews as well. And we are thinking of believers in both groups.

3:3 Where did Paul get his message, and how did he get it? He got it from God, and it was given to him by direct revelation. And it had to do with "the mystery" which Paul had first mentioned in this letter back in 1:9. And I hope you remember that a "mystery" is a secret, something that God had planned to do back in eternity before creation. But now the time had come for believers to know this secret. Dr. Chafer mentioned in his commentary on Ephesians that the cults in ancient Babylon and Rome had their "secrets" to, but to make them known to outsiders could have been punished by physical death. Lodges today have their secrets, their mysteries, also that outsiders are not supposed to know. But the difference with God's mysteries or secrets was, and is, that all believers today are to know what they are. That is why we are studying Ephesians.

The way Paul learned about this mystery, the Church, is the same way that the writers of Scripture received the truth of God. “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God . . .” (2 Tim. 3:16). “Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him. But God hath revealed them to us by His Spirit; for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God” (1 Cor. 2:9-10). The writers of Scripture wrote what God revealed to them, and what they wrote has to be revealed to us by the Spirit. Paul was well acquainted with this work of the Spirit because he wrote thirteen epistles in the NT, and possibly fourteen.

Paul had just mentioned it before, but now he wanted to give the mystery more in detail.

3:4 This verse ought to be an encouragement to us in reading our Bibles. Notice the words, “when ye read,” “ye may understand.” And to assure that we understand what we read, the Holy Spirit has been given to us.

3:5 In this verse we have *a definition of a NT mystery*.

Notice that it is not just anybody who can come up with a mystery. They were men especially chose by God for this purpose: “Apostles and prophets.” There were no apostles in the OT. And here the prophets must be NT prophets. Some wrote, primarily the apostles; others only spoke. Often, as in this passage, those who wrote also explained what they wrote. The Lord has always been very concerned that people, especially the Lord’s people, understand what is written.

3:6 In verse 5 we have a mystery defined; in this verse we have the mystery revealed. Up to the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2, the emphasis had been on getting the Gospel “to the Jew first.” Gentiles has been saved before, but not on the large scale that they were sought and brought to Christ after Pentecost. The Lord had promised Abraham that “in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed” (Gen. 12:3). This was an OT hint of the coming NT mystery. But it was not until the Lord came that any mention was made of a Church. But Paul said it here in Ephesians 3:6. (Read the verse.)

3:7 The word that Paul used for “a servant,” is the word from which we get our word, deacon. Paul was not saying that he held the office of a deacon in the any church. The word has as its primarily meaning one who serves others on behalf of the one who has sent him. He can be one who carries out orders or delivers a message.

So Paul felt a God-given responsibility to see that his message was written down, and also that it got to those for whom it was intended. Paul said that he “was made a minister.” God had made him a servant not only to see that they got the message, but that they understood it. Both in this verse and in the next verse Paul indicated how humbled he was to have this calling, and how unworthy of such a privilege. There is probably no higher honor that is bestowed upon us as the people of God than to be one of those who is called to give the Word of God to others. And I see no reason why this could not be a lady as well as a man. It was not a call to preach, as such, but to carry the good news that in the Church Jews and Gentiles enjoyed the same blessings, and stood on the same ground with each other.

When we think of the Apostle Paul, we think of one who was a powerful servant of the Lord. But you see here how he gave all of the glory to God. The “grace given” is *enabling grace*. Paul indicated that it was a great honor to serve the Lord, and that he could only be effective by “His power,” God’s power. When we get to chapter 6, we are going to see that the Apostle Paul exhorted all of the people to “be strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might” (Eph. 6:10). If we go in our own strength, we will fail. But there is no limit to the

possibility for blessing if we go empowered by the Lord.

3:8 Here Paul continued to talk about his ministry. What humility and grace characterized this dear man of God. To be “less than the least of all saints” is to be at the bottom of the pile. Remember that Paul was writing under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, so this had to be his true feeling about himself. Probably the reason that we don’t see more blessing ourselves is because we think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think. It was because he considered himself to be “less than the least of all saints” that he enjoyed a fuller measure of the grace of God and that he was given the special ministry that he had. Preaching the Gospel and the doctrine of the Church he called “the unsearchable riches of Christ.” This word “unsearchable” is only used in one other place in the NT in Romans 11:33 where Paul wrote about God, “how unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out.” We just can’t fully understand them because they are just too wonderful. It is about which we might say, “Where did they come from, and how did they get to me?” They leave us speechless! This means that many have tried to understand the Gospel, and what God is doing in the Church, as well as the judgments and ways of the Lord, and have gotten into more than they could comprehend.

But then Paul went on in the same vein in verse 9.

3:9 Though it is impossible to make men fully see, fully perceive, the glory of the Gospel and the Church, yet Paul felt that it was His ministry to get people to see, to understand, as much as they could, until they felt as he felt that they also were “less than the least of all saints.”

Nevertheless the object in Paul’s ministry was “to make all men see.” The word that Paul used here for “see” is a word which means *to turn the lights on, to shed light upon, to illuminate*. The churches in Revelation 2 and 3 are lampstands, aren’t they? True preaching sheds light upon the text, doesn’t it? Actually we are the light of the world as the Lord was when He was here on earth. When we pray for anyone who does not know the Lord, we pray that the Lord will open their eyes so that they will see the truth of God’s Word. And Paul felt that this was his objective with everyone – men, women, young people, children.

What do we want them to see? Some texts read, “the fellowship of the mystery.” Others read, the stewardship, or the economy of the mystery. We want the light to shine upon the truth so that those who hear will have some understanding of the glory of the Gospel, as well as the glory of Christ’s Church, uniting all believers together in one body.

Again in the middle of this verse we have a definition of a mystery – truth which from before creation has been hidden in God “who created all thing by Jesus Christ.” Both the Gospel and the truth of the Church have to do with a greater understanding of our Lord Jesus Christ.

3:10 But then in verse 10 we come to one of the many revelations that we would never know if God had not revealed it here in His Word. What is it? Notice the word “now.” It was “now” when Paul wrote this, and it is “now,” for today – still going on. Who are the “principalities and powers in heavenly places”? They are angels. And what are they learning? They are watching the Church on earth, and learning from what God is doing in all of our lives, “the manifold wisdom of God.”

This is what we all need to learn. The wisdom of God is one of His greatest attributes. It is manifold which means that it is diverse. It has many different aspects. We see it in Christ. We see it in the Word. We see it in salvation. We see it in His love, and in His sovereignty. We see it in the Gospel. We see it in His judgments. We see it in His promises. We see it in the display of His power. We see it in creation. Learning to know God in the display of His wisdom, is an excellent place to start, continue and end. Verse 11 helps us to, to know the

wisdom of God.

3:11 God’s wisdom is eternal. It never grows. It never changes. It never fails, nor does it cease to be. If we lack wisdom, and we always do, we are to “ask of God” (Jas. 1:5). And God gives wisdom and is no respecter of persons.

3:12 “Christ [is] the power of God, and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:24). In Christ we have boldness and we have access with confidence through faith in Him, Christ. Thus the wisdom of God gives us strength and confidence that we are in the right way.

3:13 Paul, knowing that he, too, was under the constant watchfulness and care, of an all-wise God, encouraged the believers in the church at Ephesus, not to faint, to be discouraged because of the trials he was experiencing in getting the Gospel and the truth of the Church to them, because it was all for their eternal and spiritual good.

And then we learn how Paul was praying for them.

January 31, 2011

VI. Paul’s Second Prayer (Eph. 3:13-21).

There are many interesting things that we learn in the epistles of Paul about the place that prayer had in his life. Prayer was a major part of his daily life. One of the first things that is recorded about Paul after the Lord changed his life as he was on his way to Damascus to arrest Christians and to bring them back in chains to Jerusalem, was when Ananias, one of believers in Damascus, to where to go to find Saul (as his name was then), and how he could be identified. And it was with these three words, “Behold, he prayeth.” Paul had been blinded by the light when the Lord struck him down as he was nearing Damascus on his evil mission, and I suppose that would have made pray-ers out of any of us if that had happened to us. Anyway, from that time on Saul of Tarsus who became the Apostle Paul, was known for his prayers. He was very outspoken about them, not only that he prayed, but about the specific requests that he was presenting to the Lord. We have two such examples here in his epistle to the Ephesians. One at the end of chapter 1, and this prayer here at the end of chapter 2.

Paul prayed regularly throughout his life as a Christian for many believers in many places. Many were people he had led to the Lord; many were people he had heard about from others. Paul firmly believed that the preaching and teaching of the Word must always be preceded and followed by prayer. He believed very strongly in the power of the Word of God, but he believed that in answer to prayer, God made His Word even more fruitful.

God uses many things to move us to pray. We ought to pray because we are conscious of how much we need the Lord’s blessing every day and in every way. But we also pray because it is God’s will that we pray, not only for ourselves and our loved ones, but for believers whom God somehow brings into our lives. We also pray for people who don’t know the Lord, that they will be saved.

In these two prayers in Ephesians we see that Paul was burdened to pray for two different reasons. In the prayer in chapter 1 we see that Paul prayed that the Ephesians would come to a greater and clearer understanding of the truth, particularly as it related to the Gospel. But here in chapter 3 he told them that he was praying for them because they were worried about him! Look at 3:13. And so why was he so moved to pray for them?

Paul knew that they were in danger of *fainting!* Did he mean that they might literally faint and become unconscious? No, the word he used meant *to become discouraged, to lose heart, to despair, to become fearful, or worn out with Paul's repeated and extended troubles.* Trials can do this to us – either our own troubles, or the troubles of those we love. Some may have been confused because they thought that His position, or surely his faithfulness, would have spared him from such difficult times. Paul certainly would not have had to endure such experiences if he was in Judaism. But the Lord told His disciples plainly, “In the world ye shall have tribulation,” but he also went on to say, “but I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

It is true that trials, especially the extended one, can affect us adversely. But we don't often think about how others can be affected by the trials that we go through. But Paul was wise enough, and at this point, experienced enough to know that what apparently was going on in the hearts of Ephesian believers who were concerned about him, was a tact that the Devil uses to slow down, and in some cases, to cause other believers to “faint.” Obviously this moved the heart of the Apostle Paul to pray for them.

The other night our granddaughter, Katie, whom most of you know sent us a drawing which she have made of their new puppy, which they named Payton. It was just like him. But for some reason she just added below his picture the last few verses of Isaiah 40. I have an email copy of Payton's picture, and the words which Isaiah wrote 40 and which mentions fainting at least three times. I was thinking about fainting Christians, and these verses greatly encouraged me because I at times am inclined to faint. Listen as I read it to you. **(Read Isa. 40: 28-31.)**

Now let's learn what we can from verse 13.

“For this cause” are words which tie the verses before to the prayer – it was because of the way his sufferings for their sanctification had caused distress to their souls.

So what did he do about it? He went to the God in prayer. If you have a habit of praying, it will be the first response you have when you learn about any trouble. But notice he was not standing, or sitting in a chair (although those are both positions in which you can pray, including walking, or running, or riding in a car). He was on his knees, which is one way we can express that we are humbling ourselves before the Lord.

And notice who it was that he addressed: “Unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” It is most normal for us to address God when we pray. The Lord Jesus said when His disciples asked Him to teach them to pray, “When ye pray, say, our Father.” See Eph. 2:18. Stephen prayed to the Lord Jesus when he was being stoned to death, and so that is permissible, but usually we pray to the Father. So prayer is the best safeguard against fainting.

Now verse 15. What Paul was saying here is the prayer is a privilege that belongs to the family of God, and that we are brought into the family of God through Christ, *i.e.*, through faith in Christ when we are saved. I prefer the reading of the KJV.

In verse 16 we have Paul's main request in this prayer. The tendency to faint must lead to a recognition that what we need is strength, inner strength, spiritual strength. And that is not a strength that we work up in ourselves, but it is a gift, a special gift from God. And this would not be a second blessing, but since we have all spiritual blessings when we are saved, it is a strengthening of what we already have in Christ.

The phrase, according to his riches in glory, is a reference to the inexhaustible resources that we have in “the riches of His glory.” Most of us have resources in God that we have never drawn upon – His grace, His mercy,

His wisdom and His power, but especially as verse 17 goes on to tell us, the inexhaustible love of God.

The tendency to faint is an indication of weakness, which, in turn, reveals the need for strengthening, becoming stronger. I am always impressed when I read the latter part of Ephesians 6 and come to those words stated emphatically by the Apostle Paul as he speaks of our spiritual warfare, that we are under orders to “be strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might.” It is not our strength made stronger, but it is the Lord’s strength that we need to exercise. This calls for a deepening of our fellowship with the Lord. It sends us to the Word, and that is where we find our strength. It calls for more prayerful reading of the Word, more meditation on the Word, and more obedience to the Word. We will begin to learn what it means to pray without ceasing instead of feeling when I have had my quiet time with the Lord in the morning that I have done my praying for the day. It will mean putting the Lord ahead of all other responsibilities. Our resources for being faithful are to be found in the Lord, not in ourselves. We need to do everything that enables us to see verse 17 fulfilled in our lives. Millions are being spent today by people who want to keep their bodies in top physical condition. And that is important as long as it does not become an obsession with us, or a religion. But most people don’t know anything about “the inner man.” In fact, their inner man is dead because they have never come to Christ for life, eternal life. But how are we as the Lord’s people nurturing “the inner man.” That is where we need to be getting stronger and stronger.

But what, according to verse 17 is the primary objective of all of our Bible reading, meditation, and obedience? What is the object of strengthening our praying and the time that we give to prayer? Why is it important for us to avoid sin? What is really the main reason that we need the kind of fellowship that we are enjoying today just by being with each other and looking together into the Word? It is “that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith,” is the first thing. But I hear someone saying, doesn’t Christ already live in us? And the answer is, Yes, He does. But the Apostle Paul was speaking of recognizing His presence, making our hearts a home for the Lord where, first we delight in Him, and revel in the fellowship that we have with Him, and while we look to Him for His guidance and blessing in all that we are and do.

But just where did the Apostle Paul put the emphasis in our fellowship with the Lord? It is that we might be “rooted and grounded in love.” These words are rich in their meaning for us, and the joy and peace that they bring to us. The Lord’s relationship with us is “rooted” in His love for us, and it is “grounded” in that it is a permanent and unchanging love. And the Apostle John expressed it in such a way that they convey the idea that we will experience progress in our understanding of that most amazing of all loves. In fact, we read in verse 18 that we may be able to comprehend His love, but in verse 19 the Apostle said the love of Christ “passeth knowledge,” meaning that we will never be able to understand all about God’s love for us that there is to know.

And yet in verse 18 he indicated that we would be able to comprehend in a growing way the four dimensions of God’s love:

- 1) Its breadth.
- 2) Its length.
- 3) Its depth.
- 4) Its height.

Now this is not a privilege that is limited to just a few. The people of the world are entirely ignorant of the love of God, but it is given to “the saints,” and to all of them, although not all of the Lord’s people take advantage of this privilege. The Spirit of God chooses His words carefully, Westcott seems to have gotten the reason for calling the Lord’s people “saints” in this instance. He said it is because “saintship – consecration – is the condition of spiritual knowledge” (p. 52). Our ability to understand the truth is definitely linked with the godliness of our lives.

But what about those dimensions? How broad is the love of God, the love of God that brings salvation? It is broad enough to include all kinds of people – the Gentile as well as the Jew, the rich and the poor and those who are in between, both men and women, adults and children. The saints will include people from every tongue and tribe and people and nation.

How long is the love of God? It is without a beginning, and without an ending, and it is eternal, never changing. How deep is His love? It is deep enough to reach the chief of sinners. And its height? It will fashion all believers into the very likeness of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We cannot fully understand the love to God, and yet we are to be increasing in the understand of that which God is pleased to make known to us. We, according to the Apostle Peter, are to be growing in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. See 2 Peter 3:18. And to be growing in our knowledge of the love of God is what leads to being filled with all of the fulness of God. These words are so glorious that it must have been amazing to Paul that he could describe them, and it should be amazing to us that we can find any words to explain them. What does it mean to “be filled with all of the fulness of God”? Truly we find ourselves “lost in wonder, love and praise.” We should not be surprised that Paul concluded his prayer with a doxology which is, by definition, “a hymn of praise to God.” And we need to add which is all for the praise of God and all for the glory of God. We find our hearts moved to make the words of the Apostle, our words.

Let us look at verses 20 and 21.

A God of such love has to be an omnipotent God. And His power is as indescribable and incomprehensible as His love. And the exercise of His power calls into action His omniscience. And since we, like Jacob, are “not worthy of the least of His mercies” (Gen. 32:10), this calls into action the fact that God’s love is always an expression of God’s grace and mercy.

I am sure that as we read these words of Paul’s doxology, a sense of our unworthiness must fill our hearts. God has already in saving us gone far, far beyond what we deserve in delivering us from our sins and promising that they will never be remembered against us again. Jacob was forced to flee from his home because of his own sin with only his staff in his hand. God had blessed him richly in making him “two bands.” And in Genesis 32 we find him asking for more. The last he had heard about Esau was that Esau wanted to kill him. All of that led to Peniel. And yet we see the weakness of Jacob’s faith when he arranged his family in anticipation of meeting Esau with the hope that he would be able to save at least half of his family. But when they met, did Esau meet Jacob with a sword. No, absolutely not! Esau ran to him with a loving embrace and together they shed tears of joy.

I am sure that Jacob’s experience is recorded for us in the OT as the Apostle Paul said it, and countless other things were, “that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope” (Rom. 15:4). Let me read that entire verse for you:

4 For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope (Rom. 15:4).

When we have presented our greatest requests to the Lord, we still have not reached the limit of what God is able to do – ***because there is no limit!*** As Westcott so wisely said according to what we read here in Ephesians 3:20, “His power in us is the measure of that which He [God] does” (p. 53).

And so we are not surprised that the Apostle said again in verse 21 as he has said in verse 20, “Unto him . . .” “Unto Him” what? (Read verse 21.) Who is the “him”? It is first of all to God, and then to the Lord Jesus Christ, and then to the Holy Spirit, as we learn from Paul’s prayer which led up to this.

And so Paul's prayer, followed by his glorious doxology, prepares our hearts for all that Paul is going to tell us about how we are to live in the light of the glorious faithfulness of God.

What the Apostle Paul has prayed, and the consequent blessing of the Lord that follows, is not just for Paul, nor just for the Ephesian church two thousand years ago. But is for all of the body of Christ, the Church, "throughout all ages, world without end. Amen" – so be it! In the margin of my Bible I have this reading of the Greek: "Unto all generations of the age of the ages." So there is no time limit, nor need limit, on the love and faithfulness of God. So let us show our love for Him, by doing His will and living in obedience to His holy Word. All of this leads us to the practical instructions of Ephesians 4, 5, and 6.