

**PAUL'S GIFT OF GOD'S GRACE**

Ephesians 3:1-13

**Intro:** The Bible is a book that has been given to us by God. One of our memory verses for this year tells us how we got the Bible. Most of you know that I am speaking of one of the last statements made by the Apostle Paul which was to be a part of God's Word. This is what he wrote in 2 Timothy 3:16-17:

16 All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness:

17 That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.

(Explain.)

A companion passage with those words written by the Apostle Paul, has come to us in Scripture from the Apostle Peter. He wrote in these words which we find in 2 Peter 1:20-21:

20 Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation.

21 For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.

Notice that Peter also was speaking about "scripture." That word *scripture* used to include only the books of the OT. But now it includes the NT as well. Both the OT and the NT were give to us by God, the Holy Spirit.

Obviously it was not all given at one time through one man. Beginning with Moses, who lived some 1500 years before Christ, and going on down through history to the Apostle John, whose writing came at almost one hundred years after Christ, we can say that God gave the Bible to some forty different writers, and that is the book you hold in your hands today.

Now because it took all of that time for the Bible to be completed, we say that it was given progressively, a little bit at a time. And since it was revealed by God a little bit at a time (and notice I am using the word *revealed* which means that God in some wonderful way, told the writers of Scripture what to write) we say that the Bible was revealed progressively. He did not reveal it all at one time, but over a period of some sixteen hundred years.

Now when we go through the OT, and through the Gospels which tell us about the ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ, and through the book of Acts, we come to the writings of the Apostle Paul. Although they are not arranged in our Bibles in the order in which they were written, we have the writings of Paul all grouped together from Romans to Philemon. We don't really know who wrote Hebrews, but many students of the Word think that it also was written by Paul. At the end of Romans we find these words which Paul wrote in Romans 16:25-27:

25 Now to him that is of power to stablish you according to my gospel, and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery, which was kept secret since the world began,

26 But now is made manifest, and by the scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, made known to all nations for the obedience of faith:

27 To God only wise, be glory through Jesus Christ for ever.  
Amen.

Notice the words, "according to the revelation of the mystery, which was kept secret since the world began, But now is made manifest . . ."

Paul used the word "mystery," and he defined it as a revelation which God had kept secret since the world began, but now is made manifest . . ." This was not an after-thought with God. God does not have a Plan B, a term which people use today to describe a secondary plan if the first one does not work. Paul said that this was a part of God's plan from the very beginning, but He did not reveal it until after Christ had come, after His resurrection and ascension. But now it has been revealed. And it is especially revealed in the books of Ephesians and Colossians in the NT.

Now turn to our text for this morning, and follow in your Bible as I read essentially the same words here in Ephesians 3, verses 1 through 6. (Read.)

You see a mystery in the NT is a secret that God had kept all of those years, but now it has been revealed. It is not a change in plans, but an addition to what God had previously revealed to Moses, David, Isaiah, and all of the others whom God used to give us the earlier revelations. There would be no change in the Gospel, but there would be a change in what God was doing.

Now the Apostle Paul was the one selected by God to make this secret

known. And you will see this if you follow me as I continue with the reading in verses 7, 8, 9, and 10. (Read.)

Basically what was that mystery? It had to do with “the church.” The first time Paul used this word in this Ephesian epistle, was in verses 22 and 23 of chapter 1. Christ was appointed by God to be “the head over all things to the church, Which is His body [Christ’s body], the fulness of Him that filleth all in all.”

Up to this point in history God had been dealing specifically with the natural descendants of Abraham. They became the nation Israel. Through Israel God gave us His Word. And through Israel God gave us Christ. And the fact that God is now calling to Himself both Jews and Gentiles and uniting them together in that which is called, “the church, the body of Christ,” does not mean that He has turned away from His purpose for Israel. He is going to fulfill every promise He ever made to Israel, but that will come after the Lord has built and completed and removed His church. It is all according to God’s eternal plan. We are all saved by the same Savior, and the same Gospel, but His purposes for us are distinctly different. The Bible makes a clear distinction between the redeemed of Israel and the Church. Those who teach that God has departed from Israel, and now has started a new thing, forgetting the promises He made to Israel, worry me. God doesn’t do His promises that way. And if He would do that to Israel, what is going to keep Him from forgetting His promises to the Church. No, it is all one master, sovereign plan. The Bible doesn’t make specifically clear how all of this is to end up. A lot of different ideas are floating around among true Christians. We know that there is going to be a new heaven and a new earth, but what the relationship between the two will be, no one know for sure except God! We can leave that all to Him.

But for this present time the Gospel is to be preached to every creature throughout the whole world. God is building His Church. He is calling out from Jews and Gentiles those who will make up the Church, the body of Christ. And when the Church is completed, the Lord will come to call His Church out of the world, and then He will turn to fulfill His work with the nation Israel.

I think that what I have described to you is very clear as you get into a passage like we have here in Romans. I strongly disagree with those who say that the only part of the Bible we have to pay attention to are the

epistles of Paul. Not all of the Bible was written to us, but it is all written for us. We can learn a lot from the lives of Abraham, Joseph, Joshua, David, Isaiah, Daniel, and on and on, including godly women in the OT about how to walk with God. And that is the subject of Ephesians beginning with chapter 4 as we learned in our SS lesson this morning.

But now, having discussed this all-important NT mystery, this secret which has now been revealed, I was to take the remainder of the time this morning to talk about Paul. Verses 1 through 13 are all about Christ, all about God, all about the Church, but specifically they tell us much about Paul in his own words.

I hope you know a little about the Apostle Paul's past and his relationship to the new organism, this work of God which was already underway before Paul was saved. He was born a Jew, in the city of Tarsus, which was located in Cilicia just to the north of Israel. He had been educated by the rabbi who was probably the outstanding teacher among the Jews of his day. But like many of the Jews he had a hatred for Gentiles, and particularly Gentiles who were Christians. And he was greatly feared by many Christians because of the great suffering he had caused for them. I have said before that I don't know of any reference in Scripture to any church or to any Christian who was praying for his salvation. The first two verses of Acts 9 describe for us the kind of a man he was before he was saved. Listen to what those two words tell us about the mission he was on when the Lord in heaven stopped him and saved him. This is what we read in Acts 9:1-2:

- 1 And Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest,
- 2 And desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem.

But as he and those who were with him, made their way to Damascus, the Lord stopped Saul, blinded him temporarily, and he was led into Damascus. There, the Lord appeared to a Christian named Ananias, told him where he could find Saul, and he was to place his hand on Saul so that Saul could see again. Ananias objected because he had heard that Saul was coming to Damascus, and why he was coming. He knew what Saul intended to do. But then the Lord said this to Ananias, as it is reported in Acts 9:15-16:

- 15 But the Lord said unto him, Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings,

and the children of Israel:

16 For I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake.

So Ananias went and found Saul, told him that the Lord had sent him, put his hands upon Saul, and Saul could see again. And shortly after Saul was in the synagogue in Damascus, preaching that Jesus was the Son of God. His hatred for Jesus, and his hatred for Christians, were gone, and he became a mighty instrument in the hand of God for preaching the Gospel and seeing Jews and Gentiles throughout the Roman Empire turn to Christ.

Paul became an apostle of Christ, established local churches throughout the Roman Empire. But he never forgot the terrible things that he had done to Christians before he, himself, was saved. We see this in his first letter to the church at Corinth when he wrote to them concerning the resurrection of Christ. In telling about those who had seen the Lord after His resurrection, he concluded by saying:

8 And last of all he was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time.

9 For I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.

10 But by the grace of God I am what I am . . . (1 Cor. 15:8-10).

Note especially his words in verse 9. Though we often speak of *the great Apostle Paul*, he would not like to be called that. If you want to know a word that always touched his heart, it was the word *grace, the grace of God*.

In the something like five years between the writing of his first letter to the church at Corinth, and his letter to the church at Ephesus, he still felt the same way. Did you pay particular attention to what he said about himself? Listen to what he said:

8 Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ;

9 And to make all men see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God, who created all things by Jesus Christ:

10 To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God (Eph. 3:8-10)

In verse 7 he had written, after he had spoken of this “mystery,” Whereof

I was made a minister, according to the gift of the grace of God given unto me by the effectual working of his power.” How would you measure how a man thought of himself, a Christian man, who would say, “I am less than the least of all saints”? Paul was marveling, not that he was such a great prize for the church, but that God would save him, and then make him the instrument for telling this divine secret that God had not revealed from the beginning of time, that unworthy, defiled Jews and Gentiles, would be saved and joined to Christ as His body, the Church.

Far from believing that he was some kind of a celebrity because he formerly had been a very promising rabbi who had come to Christ, the apostle Paul said in one of his last epistles,

15 This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief (1 Tim. 1:15).

Putting these two passages together, it was like he was saying, “List the saints, and I come at the bottom, but list the sinners, and my name comes at the top.”

**Concl:** To Paul, he was amazed that the Lord would have saved him who had been one of Christ’s worst enemies, and then give him the amazing privilege of being the one to announce to his fellow-saints that they had been joined to Christ as members of His body, called out of the world as the church. Unfortunately this subject has been one of great controversy in the church, and still is in many places. We will know that we are beginning to understand what it all means when it humbles us as it did Paul. Even angels and demons are being educated into the wisdom of God when they see how certainly Christ is building His Church.

(Close by reading Eph. 3:11-13.)

After the closing hymn: Col. 1:18-19.