

3 For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—

²Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, ³that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. ⁴In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, ⁵which was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. ⁶This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.

⁷I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. ⁸Although I am less than the least of all the Lord's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ, ⁹and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. ¹⁰His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, ¹¹according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. ¹²In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. ¹³I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.

Grace, a mystery revealed.

One of my strengths and my weaknesses is that my brain is constantly pondering. What I mean by that, is I am often thinking through things that I see or hear. People might call this being absent minded and perhaps they're right. One of the times that it can be a negative is if someone says an interesting fact, or strange piece of information just before or at the start of their sermon or prayer. For example, A number of times when Marty has started his sermon with historical context, it gets me thinking further about that period of time and I sometimes find myself not entirely focused on the sermon being delivered. Or occasionally if people make a comment before prayer, it gets me thinking about that rather than always focusing on the prayer. Well, I think Paul is aware of people like me in the first half of this third chapter of Ephesians.

At the start of Ephesians 3 Paul is still excited about what he has been saying. He has been explaining how the Jews and Gentiles are reconciled with each other and also reconciled with God because of Christ. So to start chapter 3 he wants to pray for the Ephesians that they would understand this amazing reality. He starts in verse 1, For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—. But then he breaks off and starts on something else. I think sometimes that we forget that the bible is not a carefully crafted text book, as we read it, no offense intended for our readers today, we often just keep going and don't read it like a living document. "For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—2 Surely you have heard about the administration... But that's missing something. See the dash at the end of verse 1. Now its not there in the greek, but its the NIV trying to draw attention to something. You see Paul breaks off from what he was trying to say and the rest of the passage is him going on a tangent or explaining further before continuing on in verse 14. Look down at verse 14. You see again. For this reason... Paul in 14 is continuing on with the prayer he was going to say in verse 1. So what has got Paul distracted and off on a tangent, or what does he thinks needs further explaining before praying. It is how he describes himself "a prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles." You can sort of understand that this might cause some distress. I mean if Ben and Penny wrote to us and said that they were in prison for us, we might be distressed and want to do something about it too. You can see how it might be distracting as Paul prays what he is about to pray. People like me would be hung up on Paul saying that he is a prisoner and for our sake. You can imagine people thinking, is it our fault? Is Paul distressed? What can we do? So Paul stops his prayer and explains further before continuing on with his prayer.

Now initially it seems to be a bit disjointed from how he starts. He starts talking about a mystery. From verse 2-5 Paul says that this mystery or secret has been hidden or a long time but he has had it revealed to him. You see its not a mystery like a puzzle to solve, its a mystery like a secret. Someone has to reveal or tell you what the secret it. Paul says that the secret was revealed to him by the spirit. And after 3 verses he finally says what the mystery is.

This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus. Ok you and his readers might be thinking we just covered that in the previous chapter. You've already explained the mystery Paul. But Paul is still excited as he is just so amazed that this has happened. Like when a child keeps repeating something that they are excited by. You can even see that he sort of repeats himself 3 times, he's that excited. Heirs together, members together, sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus. And what is that promise? The promise in Christ Jesus. I think we see that in

verse 12. In him (that is Jesus) and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.

Grace changes how we interact with God

You may be wondering why Paul is so excited by the idea of being able to approach God with Freedom and confidence. I mean we can pray to God whenever we want. Well you have to remember the background the Jews and Gentiles came from. The key way to approach God in the First Century and for a lot of the Israelites history was at the temple. It was at the temple that Gods presence was.

And a layout of the temple is a great way for us to understand why this new promise is so amazing. The temple floor map if you look at it from the top works in layers. And depending who you were was how many layers you were able to go in. The outer most layer was the court of the Gentiles, this was as far as the Gentiles were allowed in. In fact one of the reasons Paul may have been a prisoner at the moment was that he was accused of bringing a Gentile man further in than this area. Then the next area was for the Jewish women, then the Jewish men, then just the priests and then finally the part of the temple where God was supposed to dwell, the holy of holies. The different layers certainly made it clear that there wasn't freedom in approaching God. Confidence was an issue too. Even the Holy of Holies was only able to be visited once a year by the high priest and the Israelites lacked confidence even with their high priest as he had to wear clothing with bells on it and a rope tied around him so that if he was struck dead because he shouldn't have approached God they could hear that he wasn't moving and drag him out. All in all, the structure seemed to have the opposite implication to approaching God with freedom and confidence.

Imagine living that way for hundreds of years. Knowing that God was someone who you couldn't necessarily approach freely. Jesus death and resurrection changed all that, and that's the great promise. We now have free access to God. It was even symbolised using the temple when Jesus died. The curtain in the holy of holies that separated it from the rest of the temple was torn when Jesus died. No wonder Paul is excited. The ease at which we now can pray and call God Father is all because of what Jesus has done. We can approach God freely, whenever we want, wherever we want. And because we are heirs with Christ we can be confident that our prayers are heard and we along with Jesus can call God, Father.

Grace changes us

And that brings us to the end of these verses and the explanation Paul wants to give to the introduction to his prayer. He said at the beginning that he was a prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles. Having reminded the Ephesians once again of the mystery of the gospel and the amazing promise that they have received he eventually gets to reassuring the Ephesians that its ok that he is a prisoner as he concludes in verse 13, I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory. You see because we can now be confident in approaching God that should change us in how we live in this world. It gives us confidence because we know if God is for us who can be against us. It gives us confidence because we know that nothing can separate us from God.

Its like my nephew and his Dad. Sometimes my nephew is a little timid. He is a very cautious little boy. He doesn't necessarily like new things, he doesn't like going on things that move or going near things that move. But that all changes when his Dad is with him. Suddenly he has confidence. He is now willing to try that new ride, or pat that animal. Being confident in his Dad means that he has confidence in what he does in life. And it can be the same for us and God. We can have confidence

that God loves us, in fact it's something that Paul will emphasise in the prayer that he is about to pray which we will look at next week. It means that we can live our lives in a way where we don't need to be discouraged by what happens to us. You see, When we go through difficult and hard times, sometimes we can feel that we're alone in the situation, that God has left us, we can feel discouraged, we can feel depressed. And it's ok to feel these emotions. But the beauty of knowing God and what Paul is so excited to remind us of in this passage is that because of God's grace to us we can be confident and know that God is always with us, we can know that no matter how bad our situation is, we are confident that God is there to support us and that he is the one that we can find our refuge in.

Grace leads to work

To some extent we could finish the talk here. We have addressed the big ideas of mystery revealed, promises in Christ Jesus and Freedom and Confidence to approach God. We have looked at the one direct command in the passage, which is to not be discouraged. And these have all been worthwhile to look at. But I feel if we left it there we would miss some important points. Points that although mainly refer to Paul, I think are applicable to us today.

There are three things I want to look at and We will start with God, then the church and finally us.

God

For us to have confidence in life and not be discouraged we need to have confidence in God our Father. And we see the almighty power of God in the passage today. Boundless riches – to some extent this continues on the theme of mystery in the sense of we don't know the limits, but this time it's referring to riches, It reflects again how valuable Paul sees the gospel. The idea that we can approach God and are now heirs is worth more than all the wealth in the world – it is boundless riches. If we think like this, two things come to mind, first of all, we have more than enough to share if it's boundless, and second, we are to be encouraged to share the gospel because it is amazing.

The second point to talk about with regards to God is the idea that the Gospel has all happened according to his eternal purposes. Again, this is using language that has no limit, just as the riches are boundless, time has no limit here as these are God's eternal plans. Before creation God had a plan on how he would bring us to him. Before we were even born, God knew that we would be his children, if God has that much power and knowledge, we can surely be comforted and know that he will look after us.

The final point with regards to God that I want to look at is, the manifold wisdom of God. Now, manifold is an unusual adjective which we don't tend to use very often, does anyone know what it means? It means varied, or multicoloured, it's actually the word used to describe Joseph's multicoloured coat in Genesis. What does it mean for God's wisdom to be manifold? I think first of all it means simply that it's complex, that we can't necessarily understand God's wisdom - His ways are higher than our ways, but I also God's manifold wisdom reflects in the nature of his church. That his wisdom leads to a multinational church. People of all colours and races come together to make up the church. And that leads me to the next area that I want to look at the church.

Church

For most of us, we may have a narrow view of what church is. It is a place that you come to on Sundays and you spend an hour and a bit together with God's word and other people. But, when you look at this passage, Paul paints for us a grander picture of what the church is.

Verse 10 says that it is through **the church** that the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms. I think sometimes Christians and even the world get fascinated by the things that are spiritual. We see many movies or tv series that talk about ghosts, demons, or angels, but interestingly here, we see that the heavenly realms are focused upon us. You see as much as we might think spiritual beings know exactly what's happening around us, they don't. 1 Peter 1:12 in talking about salvation, says "It was revealed to angels that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things." It is through the church that they can know the manifold wisdom of God. Does knowing this give you a different perspective on the importance of church? We come together not only to praise God and have fellowship, but also to reflect God's wisdom to the heavenly realms. The fact that we are a multinational church coming together as heirs of Christ is part of God's eternal purpose. As we meet together as a family of Christ, all of what we say, all of our actions are to reflect God's manifold wisdom. And so this brings me to the final point I'd like to focus upon, and that is us as individuals.

Individual

- Servant of the gospel, Grace was given to preach, Great Commission, less than the least, pray, proclaim, put into practice

In verses 7-10 we get an example of Paul of how God's Grace lead him to action. One of the things that really struck me as I looked at this passage was how Paul viewed what his ministry was and how he served God. The gift of God's grace in Paul's life made him a servant of the gospel, where he went out to preach to the gentiles the good news of Jesus Christ. I think we can pick up two things here that we can apply to our own lives.

The first thing is about how we think of ministry. Sometimes we can think that ministry is for someone else to do. We may say, It's not my job. However, here we see that God's grace empowers Paul to do ministry to go out and preach the good news of Jesus. If we understand the mystery of Christ, then we too have God's grace which empowers us to tell others about Jesus and to serve God. We often think that our ministry, our serving at church, our doing the morning tea, our leading the service, our being a leader of a group, is our gift back to God. However, here, Paul flips this idea around and shows us that his ministry is God's gift to him. And the grace Paul has been given empowers him to be a servant of the gospel, he goes out and proclaims the good news of Jesus to the gentiles. I think this view radically changes our perspective about serving God. Ministry is tough, hard work, and we are all called to be involved in ministry in some way. If we rely on our own power, on our own gifts, then we may become bitter and weary of doing ministry. However, if we are reminded that God has given us his grace so that we can serve him, that God himself works through us by his power – then serving him is no longer a burden but a joy.

It's like the athlete at the end of the marathon race running into the stadium full of people applauding and cheering them on to finish, and they are powered to finish the race. It makes a difference to us when we know we're not on our own doing the hard work. Paul reminds us in this passage that God is the one who gives us grace and empowers us so that we can serve him.

The second thing I wanted to pick up on is found in verse 8 it's really interesting how Paul sees himself. He says that he is less than the least of all the Lord's people. Now you might be thinking, hang on a minute – Paul – he is an awesome man of God, how is he the less of the least? As amazing

as he ended up being, he started out as a murderer of God's people, he was someone who was as far from a Christian role model as you would expect, but through God's grace and power he made him be a servant of the gospel who proclaimed the good news of Jesus.

If he can do that for Paul, how much more could he do it for us?

I want us to be encouraged this morning to be involved in serving God, whether that is sharing the good news of Jesus with people at our workplace, in our families, with our friends, in the community groups that we run here at church like ESL, Ministry of Game, SRE in schools, G4K, WAY, C4K, Playtime. For some of us this is something that we're excited to be involved in, but if it becomes daunting to us, if it becomes too hard for us, if we suffer for the gospel, we need to think back to what we've looked at this morning and remember that we can approach God with confidence and freedom and shouldn't be discouraged like Paul says, because we are given God's grace and we have the boundless riches of Christ.

The Key is to remember that we are one with Christ, that we are heirs together, we are members together of one body and we are sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus. And we will see next week the importance of knowing the amazing depth of God's love for us.

Too often the church thought it was focusing on the gospel by preaching evangelistic messages, but in the process never proclaimed or knew the depth and extent of the gospel. The gospel is not merely about getting to heaven; it is about life now as well as in eternity. It is as much about discipleship as about initial conversion, as much about unity as about individual faith, and as much about new life as about forgiveness. Focusing on the gospel will require the recovery of a full-orbed gospel

If grace enlists and empowers, why is passivity so common in the church? Christianity is not a religion of works, but it is still very much a religion of action. A significant application of this text surely has to do with our understanding of the gospel and evangelism. For too long people have heard a message that said, "No action is necessary," and they have been content to be passive. But you cannot be Christian and passive

Implicitly we think of ministry as our gift to God, but Paul thought of ministry as God's gift to him. When we take that seriously, it changes our perspective. Ministry is not drudgery to be endured or something for which God owes us, and it is certainly not a job to be acquired or kept. Rather, ministry originates in and is the expression of God's grace. Ministry is the free flow of grace from God through us to other people

