

Supernatural Man Of Mystery

Ephesians 3:1-7 August 2, 2023

Ephesians 3:1-7 - For this reason, I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles—²you have heard, haven't you, about the administration of God's grace that he gave to me for you? ³The mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have briefly written above. ⁴By reading this you are able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ. ⁵This was not made known to people in other generations as it is now revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: ⁶The Gentiles are coheirs, members of the same body, and partners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. ⁷I was made a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace that was given to me by the working of his power.

One Monday in 1978, a limousine pulled up to a shopping center in downtown Kansas City. An unknown man stepped out, holding a paper bag filled with \$2 bills. He proceeded to hand them out to anyone he saw and promised he would be back the next day.

Sure enough, Tuesday he was back in the same place with another bag full of \$2 bills. The crowd was a little bigger this time and some local news reporters were on hand.

By Thursday, the national news had picked up the story. When asked why he was doing this, he said, "You people are responsible for me having it and I want you to have it back."¹

The man's name was John Leslie. He had just been hired by the KCKN radio station as a disk jockey for their new morning show. The money-giveaway was a promotional stunt to get listeners.²

One day in the city of Ephesus, a strange looking Jewish man came to town. He was something of a mystery - an academic, a world-traveler, a man who had been a leader within Judaism and now - seemingly - a leader within a new sect called Christianity. He was a Roman citizen by birth and had a stunning intellect, yet he wore an apron, making tents to support himself and his fellow travelers. He could work miracles but was humble. One look at him showed that he had been beaten many times, suffered from chronic illness, and probably didn't have much in his savings account.

He proclaimed that he knew the real truth about life and God, about heaven and hell. He spread this message house to house for three years and then was gone. Now, five or seven years after, a letter came from this man, Paul, with *more* truths explained and more mysteries disclosed.

In our text tonight, Paul says that he *is* the mystery man. The Lord gave him a ministry of mystery not just to the Ephesians, but to all Gentiles, which is not what we'd expect and definitely not what we would've designed if we were the ones strategizing how best to spread the Gospel.

¹ <https://www.nbcnews.com/flashback/video/mystery-man-hands-out-cash-579311683927>

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=As6wVm9VJ4c>

Ephesians 3:1 - For this reason, I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles

There was never any challenge to the idea that Paul authored Ephesians until the late 18th century.³ Now, naturally, there are scholars who turn their noses up at the idea that Paul wrote what we're reading. But the message of this letter hinges on whether he really is the man he says he is. In a moment we'll hear him say, "I have a unique message through direct revelation from Christ Himself." So, for a second time, he identifies himself and calls himself "the prisoner of Christ Jesus."

In other verses he describes himself as an apostle, a servant, a saint, an adopted son. He was the founder of their church in Ephesus and he was the dear friend of many people in the congregation.

We have a lot of roles to play as Christians. You may be a spouse, a parent, a child, a cousin, a friend, a co-worker, a classmate, a teammate. Or, maybe you're just a fellow passenger on the bus. In each of those areas, you are a representative of Jesus Christ and an outpost of His grace. Paul felt that way, even as a prisoner. He said, "I'm a prisoner of *Jesus*." Not of Rome, not of Nero.

Now let's remember what's come so far in this letter: Paul has been talking all about God's great power for His people. He's been talking about peace and fullness and inheritance and every spiritual blessing - about salvation and how our lives have been prepared for glory and how God works out everything in agreement with His unstoppable will.

"And *where* are you, Paul?" "Oh, I'm in chains. I might be getting beheaded pretty soon here." Paul then adds a kicker: Not only was he a prisoner, he was a prisoner *on behalf of you Gentiles*.

One commentator wrote, "Gentile liberty had cost Paul his freedom."⁴ It's true. As Klyne Snodgrass points out, "*The only reason why Paul was in prison was because he thought Gentiles had the same access to God that Jews did.*"⁵ Luckily for us, Paul thought our liberty was worth it.

So much of Ephesians is about Christians having a *different* perspective - a proper understanding of what it means to be in Christ. Paul's perspective on his imprisonment is counter-intuitive to our normal way of thinking. We think that Paul in prison is a *bad* thing, a limiting thing, a setback in the work of the Gospel. But Paul said, "I'm here because Christ wants me here and it's going to help *further* the faith of Gentiles." In verse 13 he'll go as far as saying, "My suffering is for your glory!"

The term he uses there where we read "on behalf of" can be translated as "for the furtherance of."⁶ Paul knew his suffering was not only within the will of God but was serving to spread the Gospel, not to hamper it.

Ephesians 3:2 - ²you have heard, haven't you, about the administration of God's grace that he gave to me for you?

³ Darrell Bock *Ephesians: An Introduction And Commentary*

⁴ J.A. Robinson *St. Paul's Epistle To The Ephesians*

⁵ Klyne Snodgrass *Ephesians*

⁶ <https://www.billmounce.com/greek-dictionary/hyper>

This verse is one of the reasons why some scholars say Paul didn't write Ephesians. They say, "Look, the recipients didn't know Paul, but Paul spent years in Ephesus!" The simple explanation is that, number 1, Paul is speaking rhetorically. Number 2, it had been a lot of years since he had been in Ephesus and a lot of *new* people had been saved who *didn't* know Paul personally.

Those newer believers would've asked the others, "Tell us about this Paul guy." And what stories they could tell! They might start by explaining how he was the most Jewish man you could imagine. He was a Pharisee of Pharisees. How he previously persecuted the Church on behalf of the Sanhedrin. How he knew the Hebrew Scriptures by memory and could reason through any theological issue. But, now he's out here in the Gentile world, telling pagans about Christ.

"Wow," the young Christian might respond, "Seems like he should be an apostle for the Jews." On paper, that's what we'd think. Paul is the Jewish expert. He had the heritage and skills that could open any Jewish door. To *not* use him to minister to all the Jews would seem like a mistake to us.

Sometimes you'll hear sports commentators talk about how a particular player is being "misused" on their team. "You've got to get that player into the right position so that they can score properly." They look at the stats and the matchups to make those determinations. That's the human mindset.

Then God comes along and says to Paul, "I have a plan for you. You're going to be the apostle to *the Gentiles!*" It's totally opposite what we would do based off the stat sheet.

Paul calls this gift an "administration of God's grace." Your translation may use the word "dispensation" or "stewardship." The term is an important one. It means a set of household rules.⁷ The idea is that, at different times, God has different ways of how He interacts with the world. This is why we are called *dispensationalists*. We recognize different periods of activity in God's unfolding work. That's why you didn't bring a lamb to church with you tonight to be slaughtered for your sin.⁸

Paul calls our time a dispensation of grace. This grace is freely offered to everyone. It doesn't matter your nationality or your status or any other separating factor. In this era of God's household rules, grace goes out to all corners and invites everyone to receive salvation through faith.

In this dispensation, *grace* is the characteristic element.⁹ Which means that our activity and attitudes should be all about grace. *That* is the main feature of God's work toward us in this era and we are called to reflect Him and do His work and His work right now is a work of grace.

Ephesians 3:3 - ³The mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have briefly written above.

⁷ Ben Witherington *The Letters To Philemon, The Colossians, And The Ephesians*

⁸ A good resource for further study is *Dispensationalism Today* by Charles Ryrie

⁹ Frank Thielman *Ephesians*

Paul here (and elsewhere) explains that he received direct revelation from God Himself.

There are people who want to take Paul out of Christianity. They call his teachings *Paulianity*. I recently heard a podcast where people were talking about how they had finally deconstructed their faith and how good that was because they realized that Paul was really just a racist and a sexist. You can go on Amazon and find books about Paul the “false apostle” or Paul vs. Jesus.

The problem is, if you reject Paul, you have to reject about 25% of the New Testament. Actually, you have to reject Peter’s books, too because he calls Paul’s writing “Scripture.” And you have to reject Luke’s writings, because he corroborates Paul’s teachings. So now you’re up past 50% of the New Testament. Really you have to reject the whole thing since the canon is not an á la carte thing.

The mystery Paul is referring to is that the Gentiles have a full share in the promises of God and the benefits of salvation and they don’t have to become part of the nation of Israel to do it.

Now, this word *mystery* would’ve jumped out. In the Roman Empire and in Ephesus specifically, there were all sorts of *mystery* religions. But Paul is taking this term and highlighting the difference between Christianity and these other cults. You see, in the mystery religions, everything was shrouded in secrecy. You couldn’t just join. There were weird initiations you had to go through and fees to pay. Those outside the group didn’t know what went on in these cults - there were very few written texts¹⁰ and it was treachery for a cult member to speak to outsiders about what they did and believed.¹¹ The first rule of mystery religion is that you don’t talk about mystery religion.

But here’s Paul, writing down on a scroll to be read publicly and then sent all around, “I have a mystery, and I want every Gentile to hear it, every Gentile to join. It’s free and open and public.”

Ephesians 3:4 - ⁴By reading this you are able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ.

We are invited to read and understand the revelation of God on the pages of His Word. His truth is collected and preserved and delivered to us so that we *can* grow in our knowledge and wisdom and so we can evaluate the things we hear from human teachers.

That’s why our focus is on the systematic teaching of the Bible in our gatherings. Because by reading God’s word we are able to understand and the more we understand about the Lord and what He has done for us, the more we are able to experience the outflow of His grace and the working of His power in our lives.

Now, notice this: It was more important for Paul to *write* them than for him to come work more miracles in their city. Jesus said, “You know what these Gentiles need? They need a letter.” Obviously we benefit from that decision. Had Jesus thought the most important thing was for Paul

¹⁰ https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/myst/hd_myst.htm

¹¹ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/mystery-religion>

to go and work a few more miracles in Ephesus, a few people would've been blessed, but all of us would've missed out on something that has been impacting the world for thousands of years.

Paul isn't boasting here about his insight. He's explaining that God was doing a unique, revealing work through his life. We know that often people would show up where Paul had planted churches and, after he left, would say, "That guy doesn't know what he's talking about." In Ephesus, Paul had warned that wolves were going to come in among the Christians and distort the truth and try to lure the believers away. So here he's building the case that the message he gave them was true, was from God, and was what they should be building their faith on.

Ephesians 3:5 - ⁵This was not made known to people in other generations as it is now revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit:

Paul was the key channel through which God revealed this mystery, but he wasn't the *only* one. It was confirmed by all the apostles, which is why they're called the foundation of the Church in chapter 2. There are gatekeepers when it comes to Biblical revelation. God revealed truth through certain people and they are the ones who "*laid out the perimeters within which [our] faith moves.*"¹² There is no *new* revelation. There is no *new* Paul for us to follow.

What wasn't known in other generations? Certainly the idea of grace can be seen in the Old Testament. As far back as Abraham we see God talking about ministering not just to the people of Israel but to all the nations of the world. So what does Paul mean?

The new layer is the revelation that there would be *no* distinction between Jew and Gentile in the Church.¹³ All people would have equal footing.¹⁴ Most of you know that, in the Temple, there were different areas. If you were a woman you could only go so far. If you were a Gentile you could only be in a certain part. If you were a male Jew, you could go further, but you were still separated from God's presence. Now, in the Church, all are unified with full access to the Father.

That doesn't mean God is done doing special work with Israel. He still has a particular plan for ethnic Jews which will be the focus of His efforts after the rapture of the Church. But *in* the Church, this is the mystery now revealed:

Ephesians 3:6 - ⁶The Gentiles are coheirs, members of the same body, and partners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

The word for "members" is one coined by Paul.¹⁵ I don't understand how that works in Greek, but it's pretty fun. The important thing is that now, in the Church age dispensation of grace, Gentiles like you and me are coheirs, members, and partners. That means that we share in all the riches, the rights, and the responsibilities of the faith. Hearing this news should cause a listener to then ask,

¹² Snodgrass

¹³ John Stott *The Message Of Ephesians*

¹⁴ Snodgrass

¹⁵ R. Kent Hughes *Ephesians: The Mystery Of The Body Of Christ*

“Ok, then what is my inheritance? What are these promises? How does this Body operate?” These are questions answered in the Bible and experienced as we work out our salvation.

Ephesians 3:7 - ⁷I was made a servant of this gospel by the gift of God’s grace that was given to me by the working of his power.

Paul’s perspective here is important. He talks *again* about being given a gift. He says, “God, by His grace, gave me a gift and it was to make me a *servant*.” It reminds us of that old song *Make Me A Servant*. I know in my own prayer life I’m so often praying things that are more like “Make me successful. Make me advantaged.” When I’m only focused on those things, it can crowd out other things the Lord might want to speak to me about my inheritance, His promises, my callings in His greater work.

Paul was chained to a Roman soldier for years. But looking at his life, he understood that God’s power had energizing him to be a table-waiter for the Gospel. That’s what the term *servant* means. Despite his genius, despite the miracles, despite his credentials and skillset, Paul recognized that he had been gifted this life so that He could be a part of building up the Body of Christ. Markus Barth writes, “*the grace given to Paul makes him and instrument of God for diffusing grace.*”¹⁶

That’s what the Lord wants to do in *each* of our lives. It wasn’t just for Paul. Peter wrote:

1 Peter 4:10 - ¹⁰Just as each one has received a gift, use it to serve others, as good stewards of the varied grace of God.

We’re all members of the same Body. We’re all partners in the work. Thousands of years of God’s plan has culminated to *this* dispensation and for *you* to be a special diffuser of His grace.

Think of your house during these hot, Valley summers. Each room needs an AC supply vent. You want each one to be open to the flow of that cold air that brings the grace of cool air. Maybe you have a room where that vent is closed off because you don’t want the air blowing there. That’s fine. But that room is hot and stuffy and unpleasant at 5pm in late July, isn’t it?

God brings us into His family, builds us alongside other living stones, so that we can diffuse His grace in our corners of the world. Paul understood his place in the plan - it was a unique work. But the fact of the matter is that the Lord has a unique work for *you*, too. What has grace prepared for you? Using Paul’s analogy, grace has made you a servant, and now you get to discover what tables you get to wait.

When John Leslie was handing out his \$2 bills, someone asked him, “*How much are you going to give away?*” His answer was, “*I don’t know, but I’m going to do this until it’s all gone.*” At first, people were reluctant to take what he was offering. But, he just kept at it. And the story unfolded. We don’t know how much we’ll get to diffuse, but let’s keep doing it until we’re all gone.

¹⁶ Markus Barth *Ephesians 1-3: Introduction, Translation, And Commentary*