

Ephesians 3:1-13

I'm a big fan of detective stories or "mysteries" like Sherlock Holmes. Years ago I read through *The Complete Sherlock Holmes* which is a pretty thick book. When that latest *Sherlock* movie came out I dragged my whole family off to see it. Then, when the ending seemed to leave room for a sequel I was thrilled – and I'm eagerly looking forward to the next one. In the meantime, we got a copy of G.K. Chesterton's *Compete Father Brown*, another thick book. I'm reading the whole series with my family – story by story – some 800 pages worth – dozens of short stories, all bizarre whodunits that only Father Brown is able to figure out.

The plots always go something like this: First you find out the big news, for example, someone is killed. Then you have to retrace the story to see how you got there. You get clues here and there as to how it might have happened, but unless you're a great detective with superhuman analytical powers, these are not often very helpful in solving the crime. In the ideal mystery, you never truly know the whole story until it is revealed at the end. Then you stand amazed at how the story actually worked itself out, thinking, "Who would have ever guessed?"

God did something similar with the church. In the Bible He tells us early on that He desires to bless all nations through Abraham and his descendants. Through the whole OT, especially the Psalms and the Prophets, we see that the nations would eventually worship the God of Israel. But though we get any number of hints about Jesus and God's desire to reach all nations that they might praise Him, we are never clearly told how this would ever come about.

In the NT we finally find this out. Jesus, after his death and resurrection, goes to back heaven, the Holy Spirit comes in His place, and God begins building His church. For his part in that building process, Paul finds himself in Roman custody.

Building the church is God's top priority. Paul devoted his life to it and we should do the same.

3:1 This verse implies that Paul really believed it was God's will for him to a missionary and then to become a prisoner as a result. He was OK with this state of affairs and saw it as God's will.

3:2 **dispensation** "stewardship" (ESV), Paul's responsibility was to preach the gospel to the nations.

*Ephesians 3:2 ESV assuming that you have heard of the **stewardship** of God's grace that was given to me for you,*

*Ephesians 3:2 NLT assuming, by the way, that you know God gave me the **special responsibility** of extending his grace to you Gentiles.*

3:3 **Revelation** *apokalypsis* It is by revelation that God made known the mystery. Otherwise, no one would have ever figured it out.

Mystery *musterion* Also in 3:4 & 3:9.

3:4-6 More about the mystery and how God has revealed it. Paul is talking about the church.

3:7 **Minister diakonos** Like “deacon”, one who executes the commands of another (Thayer), a servant with a specialized area of responsibility. Again, it was Paul’s duty to proclaim the gospel.

1 Cor 9:16-17 NKJV ¹⁶For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for necessity is laid upon me; yes, woe is me if I do not preach the gospel! ¹⁷For if I do this willingly, I have a reward; but if against my will, I have been entrusted with a stewardship.

Yet, at the same time, Paul regarded this duty as a gift of God's grace. He served with gratitude because he understood the grace he had received. More on that in the next verse.

Quotations about the Church:

“The church is only a secular institution in which the half-educated speak to the half-converted” (William Ralph Inge, professor of divinity at Cambridge, dean of St. Paul’s in London)

“People go to church for the same reasons they go to a tavern: to stupefy themselves, to forget their misery, to imagine themselves, for a few minutes anyway, free and happy” (Mikhail Bakunin, Russian philosopher)

A church is a place in which gentlemen who have never been to heaven brag about it to persons who will never get there. (H. L. Mencken, American satirist)

3:8 Paul considered his ministry, his part in the building of God’s church, to be a huge privilege. And he writes this chained to a Roman soldier. He never lost the wonder of God’s grace toward him.

First Timothy 1:15-16 NKJV ¹⁵This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. ¹⁶However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life.

Paul’s ministry: To proclaim **the unsearchable riches of Christ**. Jesus is more wonderful than we have ever dared to imagine. That’s why no sacrifice was too great for Paul.

3:9 **fellowship** More likely, “stewardship” as in v.2.
From the beginning of the ages has been hidden The **mystery** deepens.

3:10 **manifold** This word is only used here in the NT, it means something like “extremely multicolored”. A.T. Robertson puts it: “much-variegated, with many colours.” The point is that God’s wisdom is both incredibly beautiful and extremely complex at the same time.

3:10-12 Through the church, God is revealing His infinite wisdom to the **principalities and powers** in the heavenly places. Who are they? I believe they are demonic forces.

Eph 6:12 NKJV For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but **against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.**

3:13 Again, Paul sees his tribulations as being for the good of the church. No sacrifice was too great.

Applications:

Never lose the wonder of knowing that God has saved you. When Christians forget how amazing God's grace is, their Christian life often goes straight downhill. Paul knew his own past and he knew his own heart and I believe this was one of the things that kept Paul going. He was amazed by God's grace.

Never lose the wonder of knowing that God wants to use you. Paul counted his ministry a privilege. Sometimes Christians (no one here of course) begin to think, "Oh, the church just wants me to volunteer for something again." If you ever think that (though it's not likely, I realize), just stop for a second and thank God for wanting to use you to fulfill His plans.

Never lose the wonder of knowing Jesus. In v. 8 Paul spoke of **the unsearchable riches of Christ**. The more time we spend meditating on Jesus Christ, the richer our relationship with Him will be. We will never reach the end of Christ's riches. He is a wonderful Savior.

Try to always see the church from Christ's viewpoint. The church is the big thing God is doing in this present age. People of all nations are being joined to this **international, multi-generational** body of believers. Paul found himself in prison for the sake of the church. How important is she to us? Are we personally involved in reaching **the nations** or reaching **the next generation**? If so, with what attitude?

We should appreciate how God has built or grown His church over the centuries. Missionary biographies can be extremely enriching. David Brainerd, William Carey, Adoniram Judson, Hudson Taylor, David Livingstone can literally change your life. *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya* by Ruth Tucker is another one I recommend, as it gives short biographies of dozens of missionaries throughout the history of the church. God is still in the process of revealing this mystery and we can be a part of that process.

We should also consider what God wants us to do right now:

1. **God gives us opportunities to share the gospel.** God will give you opportunities to tell others about Christ. He may even want you to actively "make" opportunities to do so, like reaching and teaching the kids of this church or in this neighborhood (Awana? Sunday School? KIDS Inc.?) And when we act, we can count on Him to provide the ability, courage, and power.
2. **God gives us opportunities to be involved in missions – and not just by going on a trip.**
 - a. Consider Iran 30 and our goal of sending Bibles to Iran. Think of how God might use our little church to bless Christ's body in that part of the world – for all eternity.
 - b. Consider our own missionaries and some sort of closer ongoing involvement with them. Missionaries can never receive too much encouragement, prayer, financial resources. We're blessed to know a lot of missionaries. They are real, fallen and much-blessed people much like us. The relationship you forge with them can become a huge part of your own walk with the Lord and His plan for reaching the nations.
 - c. Consider (of course) going on a trip. If a picture is worth a thousand words, a visit is worth a thousand pictures. The smells, the sounds, the people and life itself make the living experience of serving cross-culturally potentially bigger than anyone of us would dare to guess. Will it cost you something? Yes, but probably less than it cost Paul.