

Ephesians 3:2-13

Introduction

These verses are big picture stuff! They concern a mystery that has been made known. Something that hadn't been made known in the past. Something that has been revealed today through God's apostles and prophets. Something that even the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms pay attention to. This is big. And as we read it, we discover that it's all about the church. If there are any verses in the Bible that will blow your mind about the importance of the church, these must surely be among them.

Today, we're holding our annual meeting after the service. It's a good time to remind ourselves of the significance of the church and its place in God's eternal purpose. This letter to the Christians in Ephesus is all about God's eternal plan and what it means for our daily lives. And these verses that we've just had read for us are right at the heart of it. Paul begins by referring to the mystery of Christ. That's our first heading.

The mystery of Christ

Verse 4. **In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made know to people in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets.**

The mystery of Christ isn't something that's puzzling and difficult to fathom. Paul isn't using the word mystery in the way that we might use it... to speak of the mystery of the Loch Ness monster... or the mystery of UFOs. This mystery is something that had previously not been made known, but which has now been fully revealed. It's something that was previously hidden but has now been made known. And Paul tells us what this mystery is in verse 6.

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.

The mystery that has been revealed is that, in Christ, Jews and Gentiles have been joined together as the people of God.

Previously, it had been easy to divide the world into two types of people. There were the Jewish people, who were the people of God. And there were Gentiles, or non-Jews, who were not the people of God. But now, in Christ, God had done something new. He had created one new humanity out of the two. Through the cross, Christ had reconciled Jews and Gentiles to each other and to God. Paul writes in chapter 2, verse 18: **For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.** Today, we can still divide the world into two types of people. But now the dividing line isn't between Jew and Gentile. Now what matters is whether someone belongs to Christ or not. And that's where Paul comes in, who, remember, is a Jew.

Verse 7. **I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. Although I am the least of all the Lord's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was hidden in God, who created all things.**

When we hear about the prize money that golfers compete for, or the salaries that footballers are paid, or the bonuses that some company directors receive, it makes our heads spin. Millions and millions of pounds.

But God sent Paul out with a message about even greater riches. He was sent to preach the boundless riches of Christ. In him, we have every spiritual blessing that God can give – forgiveness, salvation, justification, adoption, a glorious inheritance in heaven, and so much more. God withholds nothing from those who belong to his Son. If golfers and footballers and company directors understood the riches that are ours in Christ, it would be *their* heads that were spinning.

And God sent Paul to make plain to everyone that these riches are available to all. They're available to people of every nation. It doesn't matter where you were born. It doesn't matter what language you speak. It doesn't what colour your skin. Paul's message is that Christ's riches are for you. And as he and the other apostles went out into the world and preached that message, something happened. The church was born. And it began to grow. As Christ was preached, the gospel message gave birth to a multi-racial, multi-cultural community of Jews and Gentiles that grew and spread throughout the world.

And in the next verse, Paul tells us God's intent. It was that through this multi-racial, multi-cultural community his manifold wisdom should be made known. That's our second heading.

The manifold wisdom of God

Verse 10. **His 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, according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. In him and through him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.**

Here's what is so mind-blowing; that this gathering here... you and me... together... we make known the manifold wisdom of God.

The word 'manifold' means 'many-coloured'. It's a word that was used to describe flowers. It was also used to describe woven cloth or tapestries. For those here who do cross-stitch or who crochet blankets, it's a word that could be used to describe the variety of colours that combine to produce the final product. That variety of colour is what Paul has in mind here. The church is like a beautiful, multi-coloured tapestry or embroidery, made up of men,

women and children from a variety of cultures and backgrounds. There is no other human community like it that displays such wonderful diversity and harmony. It's unique. Every local church, including our church here at Emmanuel, is one expression of it. And it puts on public display the manifold wisdom of God, who called it into being.

The audience for this beautiful, multi-coloured display of God's wisdom consist of the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. Paul's referring to the spiritual realms. The rulers and authorities are probably both angels and demons. And what's really fascinating is that, by implication, God had not communicated his eternal plan to them directly. Rather, God makes his eternal purpose known to them through *us*, the church.

We get a hint of that in 1 Peter. Having described God's great plan of salvation, that culminated in the resurrection of Jesus and the birth of the church, Peter says: **Even angels long to look into these things.** (1 Peter 1:12) Though we cannot see them, they can see us. They look on in wonder. And as they see the multitude of local churches that are springing up and growing all over the world, ours included, they are amazed!

And demons look on too. And as they do, those same churches communicate to the demons their failure. They send them the message that God's eternal purpose is being worked out despite their opposition. This church here at Emmanuel, along with others throughout our country and around the world, communicate to Satan and his forces that their plans have been foiled. Our existence is evidence of their failure and God's ultimate triumph... because... verse 12... **In [Christ Jesus our Lord] and though faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.** And Satan can't stop us.

Think about the significance this gives to our church gatherings each Sunday and our life together during the week. It's huge! This is big! And here's what it means for us.

What it means for us

Three things.

Firstly, it means we should value our church. God has placed the church at the centre of his plan of salvation. He gave his one and only Son to death on a cross, to bring the church into being, including our own church here at Emmanuel. We are so precious to him that he gave his Son to death on a cross to call us into being and make us his own. And he loves us as his own. There is no gathering of believers anywhere in the world more loved by God than this one. We couldn't be more loved and more precious to God than we are in Christ. And since God values his church so highly, surely, we should value it too.

Secondly, we should be committed to our church. God has placed the church at the centre of history. We tend to think that history is shaped by the various wars being fought around the world and the decisions being made by certain leaders. But it isn't. The Bible says otherwise. It's fully aware of wars and powerful leaders. But it says that the story of history

is shaped by God. It is his-story. And at the centre of his-story he has placed his church, the community of his Son, redeemed through the cross. In eternity past, he committed to bring the church into being. In eternity past, he committed to make known his wisdom through the church as it grows and spreads. And he is working in and through the church today to establish his people in his presence forever in a world made new. Since *God* has committed himself to the church so fully, then, surely, we should do likewise, for his glory and praise.

Thirdly, therefore, we should be actively involved in our church. Since God has placed the church at the centre of his plan of salvation. And since he has placed the church at the centre of history. Then it follows that he has also placed the church at the centre of our lives as Christians. We aren't saved to live the Christian life in isolation. We're saved to take our place in the church, the community of Christ's people. We dare not push it to the edges and treat it as insignificant. Rather, we should each play our part for its health and flourishing.

And one more thing, which Paul adds at the end of our passage. Look at verse 13. **I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are for your glory.**

Sometimes it may feel as though Satan's forces are winning. Persecution from outside the church and apostasy within can make it feel that way. But that isn't the case. The victory is the Lord's come what may.

So, Paul says, don't allow persecution and apostasy to discourage you. That's why he was suffering. He was suffering because he preached Christ and won converts. And he suffered gladly because he knew that his sufferings were evidence that his gospel message was bearing fruit.

Likewise, today, there's no need to be discouraged on account of the sufferings that Christians experience around the world. Of course, we are concerned for our brothers and sisters around the world and pray for them. We do what can to relieve their sufferings. But, nonetheless, we shouldn't be discouraged because their sufferings are evidence that the gospel is still bearing fruit today.

And our own sufferings on account of Christ are evidence of the same.

As we preach Christ, he is building his church. As we proclaim the gospel, he is adding to its number men, women and children from a colourful array of cultures and backgrounds. The fact that we too may suffer for our faith is merely evidence that the gospel is still bearing fruit today, even here in Hastings.

So don't be discouraged, Paul says, if you or your fellow believers should suffer for Christ's name.

Conclusion

As we bring one church year to a close and begin another, these are truths that we all need to be reminded of.

God is building his church throughout the world. He's making known his manifold wisdom to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms. And he's doing it through ordinary churches like ours.

We should value our church as God values it. We should be committed to our church as God is committed to it. We should be actively involved in the life and mission of our church, for its good and for God's glory. And we mustn't be discouraged if we should suffer for the name of Christ as a result.

Let's pray.

Loving Father, we thank you and praise you for all that you are doing among us. Thank you that the gospel is bearing fruit here at Emmanuel as Christ is proclaimed. Please help us to see the church as you see it, to value it as you value it. And please be glorified among us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.