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# Partakers in the Promise in Christ

## Ephesians 3:1-13

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**Introduction** How do promises cause serving? <An illustration>

Paul has a great ministry. It flows out of God's glorious promises and unifying purposes in Christ. Listen to how this flows as translated by the NLT:

<sup>17</sup> He brought this Good News of peace to you Gentiles who were far away from him, and peace to the Jews who were near. <sup>18</sup> Now all of us can come to the Father through the same Holy Spirit because of what Christ has done for us.

<sup>19</sup> So now you Gentiles are no longer strangers and foreigners. You are citizens along with all of God's holy people. You are members of God's family. <sup>20</sup> Together, we are his house, built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. And the cornerstone is Christ Jesus himself.

<sup>21</sup> We are carefully joined together in him, becoming a holy temple for the Lord. <sup>22</sup> Through him you Gentiles are also being made part of this dwelling where God lives by his Spirit.

For this reason...

So God has ordained that Jew and Gentile be brought together into one new man in Christ. He has revealed what this will be like in the types, shadows and metaphors of the Old Covenant. He has brought into being that great reality through fulfillment in Christ's life, death, resurrection, ascension and reign. Now, the revelation of that fulfillment in all its redemptive historical intricacies and in its manifold ministry expressions has been given to the Apostle Paul. So, don't miss this. Paul's unique ministry is a result of a unique assignment by God to spotlight the unique place and pre-eminence of Christ.

For all practical purposes, chapter three is one of Paul's famous parentheses. Look at how 3:1 and 4:1 both begin: "Therefore [For this reason], I Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus [of the Lord]." Here is what triggered the glorious discursion of chapter 3: "for the sake of you Gentiles." What he really wants them to grasp is verse 13. "Don't lose heart on my account: *my suffering is for your glory.*"

Now this is a hard word. *I suffer-you glory.* How are we going to not only accept this to be true, but to embrace it as a very important principle of Biblical ministry? How does this fit into our theology of ministry? In fact, do you even have room for it at all?

But we don't get there directly. We get there by the way of the argument Paul makes. The promises we participate in and the ministry we serve in are connected. They are connected by three great principles and illuminated by a glorious prayer.

## The Greatness of the Mystery

(v.1-6)

*Ministry in Christ is a stewardship from God.*

For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles—<sup>2</sup> assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you,<sup>3</sup> how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly.<sup>4</sup> When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ,<sup>5</sup> which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.<sup>6</sup> This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

### It Defining Reception

(v.1-2)

This ministry Paul had was not one of personal glory or ambition. He writes as a prisoner. He is both bound to God in service and bound because of service to God. But God has so ordered his own life and ministry that it is given in behalf of and in the service of the Gentiles.

The ministry Paul had was unique. To no other apostle and no other believer was given this unique administration of the grace of God to the Gentiles. The ordering of the household of grace in the New Covenant age was given to Paul. This ordering he did was to administer the grace of God in such a way as to bring all of the elect, both Jew and Gentile, into Christ.

### It Divine Revelation

(v.3-6)

God made the disclosure. It is important for us to realize that what Paul has taught in chapter 2 on personal redemption and corporate reconciliation in one Body is not something he discovered by study nor is it merely his perspective on things. It is God's special self-disclosure of truths that were not revealed in the Old Covenant as they were then being revealed to the prophets and apostles. There is a huge implication here for our hermeneutics: the Old Testament is to be understood in the light of the New.

Paul summarizes its content (v.6). The Jews and Gentiles, in Christ:

**Familial Unity** – We are all joint-heirs of all that God has given His Son, Jesus Christ. Therefore we will receive the blessings that God has purposed and planned for Christ as His brothers and sisters.

**Corporate Unity** – We are all one in the Body of Christ. This new reality is largely if not wholly unknown in the Old Testament. God has purposed and planned to bring us together in all the essential ways a body is knit together.

**Covenantal Unity** – We are all partakers of the promise (See Acts 26:6; Romans 9:8; 15:8-9; Galatians 3:18; Ephesians 1:13; 2:12.). This is one of the grounds for our assertion that God has fulfilled His promises in Christ and that we are partakers in the fulfillment, we who are in Christ.

All of this is "through the gospel." Understand this: part of the good news is not only redemption, but reconciliation. The gospel brings Jew and Gentile into one. Jesus' work on the cross has done it all.

## The Grace for the Ministry (v.7-10)

*Ministry in Christ is enabled by the grace of God to unfold the glory of God.*

<sup>7</sup> Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power. <sup>8</sup> To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, <sup>9</sup> and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, <sup>10</sup> so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

So we have this great mystery in the gospel that is to be served by grace.

### Its Inward Power (v.7)

Paul is made a servant of the gospel by grace's gifting. Some of our translations are interpreting when they use the word "minister" here. Paul is not using this in the specialized way in which we might refer to a preacher as a minister, meaning someone who is a full-time preacher. The word simply means, servant. Paul is a servant of the gospel. He is serving in the gospel family. He is serving gospel food. He is serving for the good of gospel people.

But he has been enabled by grace in his giftedness to serve the gospel. This gift was given him. It is a part of his ministry equipping. And it provided an inward power to carry on the outward work.

### Its Outward Preaching (v.8-9)

God is enabling by grace men to serve the gospel by:

Preaching unsearchable riches - God has ordained the corporate proclamation of the greatness and supremacy of God for the good the church and the glory of Christ.

Making plain New Covenant truth - God had called Paul to a special ministry of this which we inherit as we preach the Word.

Note the unmistakable characteristics of a grace-enabled service of the gospel:

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|-----------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Authority | Grace enabled people preach, teach, counsel, exhort so that what is being declared has God's authority.              |
| Clarity   | Grace enabled people have as their objective to make all know what cannot be fully traced out (unsearchable riches). |
| Humility  | Grace enabled people have a proper understanding of our own low place before the greatness of the glory of God.      |
| Ability   | Grace enabled people exhibit the power of the Spirit in the preaching of the Word.                                   |

### Its Upward Purpose (v.10)

This is huge for me in preaching: I preach unsearchable riches to make plain to all God's New Covenant promises so that the multi-faceted wisdom of God might NOW be made known in the church on earth and among the beings in the heavens.

**The Glory in the Manifestation****(v.11-13)***Ministry in Christ is shaped and strengthened by eternal purposes.*

<sup>11</sup> This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, <sup>12</sup> in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him. <sup>13</sup> So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory.

Note the connection to verse 10: there is a present revelation in the light of an eternal purpose.

**Its Eternal Purpose****(v.11)**

The purpose of God is Christ centered. Those unsearchable riches we are to proclaim and make clear to all God carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord.

These purposes are realized in Christ. The word “realized” here is a very important and so very precise in translation. Many translations use the word “carry out” which conveys the concept of means or agency. This is not exactly what is meant here. If I have a dream for a company or a church, I can write that out in words so that the vision or the dream, the purposes and plans are accessible, understandable and to some degree even, visual to those who read. But it is not until what those purposes and plans envisioned comes into being that they are “realized”. All of God’s eternal, everlasting, unchanging, irrevocable purposes are “realized”; they come into existence and become real in Christ Jesus.

**Its Present Privilege****(v.12)**

The Christ centered purpose of God gives us, in Christ, courage and confidence in coming to God by faith. This sentence you should commit to memory. Through faith we have confidence to pass through where the former walls of separation between us and God stood and enter into the very presence of God. As we look around at the holy temple in which we find ourselves, we will see living stones like white crystals all uniquely reflecting the glory of the Jesus. But what we will have is “access with confidence!”

"God's eternal purpose was carried out in Jesus. Faith in Him imparts courage and confidence in our coming to God." Now, what are the connections between those two sentences?

**Its Encouraging Principle****(v.13)**

In the light of God's Christ-centered purpose and our bold and confident access to God, don't lose heart over the suffering of God's servants because affliction in us yields glory in you. Paul's being a prisoner should not dishearten. It should encourage prayer and enable deeper insight into the glories of Christ.

You know, a lot of people want to be the servants of God. But how many are willing to embrace the suffering that goes with it?

## The Goal for the Measure

(v.14-20)

*Ministry in Christ is dependent upon the power of the Spirit through prayer.*

<sup>14</sup> For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, <sup>15</sup> from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, <sup>16</sup> that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, <sup>17</sup> so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, <sup>18</sup> may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, <sup>19</sup> and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

<sup>20</sup> Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, <sup>21</sup> to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

So here it is: “for this reason”. Because of the reason that these principles frame, Paul calls us to respond in prayer and praise. The prayer at the end of chapter one and this prayer are bookends for the text. The first is a prayer for wisdom and insight into knowing Christ Himself and experiencing His resurrection power. This prayer is that we may know the love of Christ and experience the Spirit’s power.

### Bowing to God, the Father

(v.14-15)

The inward (and sometimes outward) posture for praying is to bow to the Father and address our praying to Him. Paul is following the pattern of Christ and setting an example for us. While we are praying to our Father, we still must be bowing. We are not insolent teenagers presumptuously demanding from an indulgent parent what we believe to be our due. We are bending proud hearts in humble supplication even for what we are absolutely sure God will do for us.

One other theological note: the existence of fathers and families on earth is derived from the fact that God is a father with a family. We are not dealing with something that is discovered or defined by culture. God is not looking for ways to explain Himself to us and thus uses familiar analogies. All that we are is a reflection of who He is. This is God’s design and intent. Every family on earth derives its identity, definition and existence from the fatherhood of God. He is the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, His eternally begotten and beloved Son.

### Strengthened by God, the Spirit

(v. 16)

He prays that the Spirit will strengthen our inner beings. The primary locus of the Spirit’s strength, work and enablement is in our souls. This is an important corrective to the errors that locate the Spirit’s primary work in the flesh in healings, miracles, etc. Yes, He does those things. But what we crave for so much that we pray intensely for it is that the Spirit will empower our inner persons.

To what end is the Spirit strengthening our inner man? It is a Christ-centered aim.

### Indwelt by God, the Son

(v.17)

He prays that Christ might be more and more at home in their hearts. The purpose of the Spirit’s indwelling and enabling is to be the presence of Christ in our inner beings. Yes, there is a corporate indwelling of the Spirit, but that is not

what is being spoken of here. This is an individual indwelling in our inner man. It is through the enabling power of the Spirit that the indwelling presence of Christ is experienced. But the sense of this is that this indwelling will be one in which Christ is more and more at home, settled in, controlling and shaping our inner man.

But even that is not even the ultimate aim of our praying.

### **Comprehending the love of God (v.18-19)**

He prays that they might be able to grasp the full dimensions of God's love. The indwelling of the Spirit in power that causes us to become comfortable residences for the settling in of Christ at home is so that we will be able to actually comprehend the incomprehensible, that is, the unlimited dimensions of the God's love.

Notice a missing prepositional phrase and pronoun? We are not merely comprehending the love of God *for us*: that would be too limiting. We are to grasp not just the ocean of Christ's love that breaks in waves on our beach, but its vastness in all the width and depth and height of the being of God Himself. Thus, as we comprehend the wideness of God's love in Christ, we are filled with all the fullness of God.

### **Praising the Glory of God (v.20-21)**

We enter into the experience and the expression of worship, of giving to God the glory, honor and adoration He deserves and desires.

<sup>20</sup> Now all glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think. <sup>21</sup> Glory to him in the church and in Christ Jesus through all generations forever and ever! Amen. [NLT]

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## Reflect and Respond

Here are the principles that connect the promises we participate in and the ministry we serve in:

- Ministry in Christ is a stewardship from God.
- Ministry in Christ is enabled by the grace of God to unfold the glory of God.
- Ministry in Christ is shaped and strengthened by eternal purposes.
- Ministry in Christ is dependent upon the power of the Spirit through prayer.

Since Christ has come, we live in the age of the New Covenant where God has revealed what was hidden in the Old Covenant. This means that we must understand the Old Testament in the light of the meaning, application and fulfillment the New Testament gives it. We do read, understand and teach the whole Bible as Christian literature.

All service for Christ is a gift from God given by the Holy Spirit's enablement. And no one is exempt. In the New Covenant the Spirit indwells all who believe. All whom He indwells, He empowers in the inner person for ministry.

I want to elevate preaching to its New Testament standing: no more of this demeaning it. Let us acknowledge that God has given special place and power to the corporate proclamation of the Word of God-- what we call preaching.

What is unfolding in our lives, down to the very suffering we endure, is to bring Christ and His people, glory. This should hearten all of us: those who are suffering and those who are benefiting.

May you so be filled with the Spirit that Christ is at home in your hearts. May you so know the unlimited dimensions of the love of God that you are filled with all His fullness. May you be willing to suffer in service to God because of the good and glory it brings to others. May we all praise and worship and adore our God, our King, our Father in this age and in the eons to unfold in eternity. Amen.

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## Notes