

GOD'S MYSTERIOUS PLAN

Ephesians 3:1-13

This first half of Ephesians 3 is a digression. In 3:1 Paul starts on a line of thought which is picked up again in 14. Something makes Paul suddenly change direction. Perhaps it is the use of the expression, “the prisoner of Christ Jesus. Maybe Paul realised that such a description of himself did not sit well with his previous words. He had just been writing about the wonders of the Gospel he had been called to preach: how the same power that raised Jesus from among the dead was at work in them, how we are all saved by grace, how God was at work in the world bringing reconciliation. To suddenly use a negative term like ‘prisoner’ would have seemed out of place. How could Paul say that we are ‘seated with Christ in the heavenly realms’ (2:6) and then say he was a prisoner? And so Paul responds to this possible question.

These verses (2-13) are a very personal touch. They talk about Paul’s personal and unique experience, and, apart from an occasional bit of proof-texting, are often passed over briefly in our hurry to get to Paul’s prayer in 14-21. It is true that these verses are a personal testimony about Paul’s calling and ministry, but they also tell us something of the life and work of all followers of Jesus.

The two key words, at least for Paul, in this passage are ‘mystery’ and ‘revelation’. When Paul speaks of ‘the mystery’ he is not speaking of something mysterious or secret knowledge or ritual. A mystery is simply something unknown. Tomorrow’s weather is a mystery, but it will be known in twenty-four hours. Similarly, the mystery Paul refers to is a mystery no longer because God has made it known. God revealed his hidden plan to all, revealed by the Spirit to his apostles and prophets (5). The content of this once-mysterious-but-now-revealed truth 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 (6). In 6f Paul twice equates this mystery with the gospel.

Paul also speaks of ‘revelation’ and uses the word in a number of ways. First, he speaks of a personal experience, when God made his plan

known to Paul 'by revelation' (3). Here he is describing some unique experience, part of his special calling as apostle to the Gentiles. Second, he speaks of a process that is common to all as, through the teaching of those empowered by the Spirit, everyone shares in the good news (5). Then thirdly, Paul tells the Ephesians that all who receive this revelation are to pass it on, for it is through the church that the wisdom of God is to be made known (10).

Paul's special calling is, then, to get the ball rolling. He was a trail-blazer, the first to receive a specific call to take the Good News beyond the boundaries of Judaism, and into the Gentile world. We can easily forget how radical, and unpopular, this move was. Paul was plagued by those who objected to his mission, and not just unconverted Jews who saw Paul as a traitor to his faith, but also Christians who could not accept such a major shift in their understanding. Of course, such difficulties did not stop with the end of the apostolic age. The church has always had its full quota of those who feel that they have reached the fullness of God's plan. In Paul's day it was enough for some that the Messiah had come. To accept Jesus as the fulfilment of God's ancient promises was already a step of great faith. To go further and say that those promises applied to all nations was a step too far. Today, some, who are deeply committed to the faith of our fathers, find accepting that God still has more light and truth to break forth from his word hard to cope with and wonder if we are not going too far. But Paul still speaks, as he digresses from his main theme to convince and assure these Gentile Christians that they really are part of God's new people, and not second class citizens of heaven who have yet to make the grade.

Paul stakes his life on this new openness. He claims he is a prisoner "for the sake of you Gentiles" (1) and that his sufferings are "for you", indeed, "they are your glory" (13). Are we willing to follow his example? In these verses Paul hands on the torch: "Although 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... 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." (8,10) What Paul started we are to continue, for Christ's riches are indeed boundless, and know no limits or end, and so there will never be an end or limit to God reaching out through his church with the Good News.

Amen

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