

The Summation of All Things in Christ

Studies in Ephesians with a Local Church Emphasis

LESSON XLII : DIGRESSION #2 - PAUL AS MINISTER OF THE MYSTERY TO THE GENTILES (3:1-13)

For this cause I Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles, if ye have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given me to you-ward: how that by revelation he made known unto me the mystery; (as I wrote afore in few words, whereby, when ye read, ye may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ) which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit; that the Gentiles should be fellowheirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel: whereof I was made a minister, according to the gift of the grace of God given unto me by the effectual working of his power. Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ; and to make all men see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God, who created all things by Jesus Christ: to the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God, according to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord: in whom we have boldness and access with confidence by the faith of him. Wherefore I desire that ye faint not at my tribulations for you, which is your glory. (Eph 3:1-13 KJV)

For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles — Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. 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. 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 less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. 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 which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory. (Eph 3:1-13 NIV)

For this cause, I Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you the nations, if, indeed, ye did hear of the dispensation of the grace of God that was given to me in regard to you, that by revelation He made known to me the secret, according as I wrote before in few [words] — in regard to which ye are able, reading [it], to understand my knowledge in the secret of the Christ, which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it was now revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit — that the nations be fellow-heirs, and of the same body, and partakers of His promise in the Christ, through the good news, of which I became a ministrant, according to the gift of the grace of God that was given to me, according to the working of His power; to me — the less than the least of all the saints — was given this grace, among the nations to proclaim good news — the untraceable riches of the Christ, and to cause all to see what [is] the fellowship of the secret that hath been hid from the ages in God, who the all things did create by Jesus Christ, that there might be made known now to the principalities and the authorities in the heavenly [places], through the assembly, the manifold wisdom of God, according to a purpose of the ages, which He made in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have the freedom and the access in confidence through the faith of him, wherefore, I ask [you] not to faint in my tribulations for you, which is your glory. (Eph 3:1-13 Young's Literal Translation)

Paul as Minister of the Mystery to the Gentiles (3:1-13)

Paul begins introduction to intercessory prayer ...

¹ *For this cause, I Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you, the Gentiles,*

... but his mention of his ministry to the Gentiles leads him to expound upon his position, forming a digression about the mystery entrusted to him.

² *if, indeed, ye did hear of the stewardship [administration] of the grace of God which was given to me towards you,*

Paul further describes this grace he was given as being a 'mystery' (a thing hidden until revealed by God)

³ *namely, that He made known the mystery*

This mystery Paul is about to describe is something he has just mentioned and by reading it, the Gentiles should be able to perceive Paul's insight and understanding into the mystery

by revelation to me (as I wrote before briefly [lit., 'in a little, in a few'], ⁴ by which ye are able, when you read it, to understand my insight in the mystery of the Christ,

Paul explains this mystery has only now been revealed in the providence of God

⁵ which was not made known in other generations to the sons of men, as it was now revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit),

Paul now explains the contents of the mystery

⁶ that the Gentiles should be

joint – heirs

and joint – body

and joint – partakers of His promise in Jesus the Messiah through the gospel,

Paul explains he was a servant to declare the mystery

⁷ of which I became a servant

according to the gift of the grace of God given to me,

according to the working of His power;

Paul explains he was given two tasks in this grace of the mystery

⁸ this grace was given to me,

the less than the least of all the saints,

Paul uses two infinitives to describe the 'grace' God has given him:

to preach the unsearchable riches of the Christ among the Gentiles

⁹ and to enlighten all as to what is the plan of the mystery

which was hidden from the beginning of the ages in God,

who created all things through Jesus Christ,

an infinitive is a verbal noun and therefore has features of both; it almost always begins with the word 'to'
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Why did the Lord give this grace of administering the mystery to Paul? The answer follows in what is called a 'hina' clause (ὅτι) which shows the purpose or result of something.

¹⁰ in order that [hina] the untraceable wisdom of God might now be made known

To whom?

to the principalities

and to the authorities

Where are these principalities and authorities located?

in the heavenlies

What did the Lord use to make His wisdom known?

through the ecclesia [assembly, church]

This was all done according to God's eternal plan:

¹¹ according to the eternal purpose

which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord

¹² in whom we have the freedom and the access in confidence through the faith of him,

Paul now gives the reason for his digression. Although he was a prisoner because of his actions on behalf of the Gentiles, Paul showed it was in the outworking of the larger, eternal plan of our Sovereign God to manifest His glory, and it was Paul's honor and privilege to be a part of this ministry of grace. His Gentile readers should therefore not be discouraged with his (and their) trials.

¹³ therefore I ask you not to lose heart in my tribulations on behalf of you which is your glory.

The essence of what Paul is saying is as follows:

For this cause, I Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you, the Gentiles —

*if, indeed, ye did hear of **the responsibility of managing the GRACE of God which was given to me, namely, that He made known the mystery that the Gentiles should be***

joint – heirs

and joint – body

and joint – partakers

of His promise in Jesus the Messiah through the gospel;

this GRACE was given to me

- *to preach the unsearchable riches of the Christ among the Gentiles*
- *and to enlighten all as to what is the plan of the mystery*

in order that [hina] the untraceable wisdom of God might now be made known to the principalities and to the authorities in the heavenlies through the ecclesia.

Therefore I ask you not to lose heart in my tribulations on behalf of you which is your glory.

V 2 — of the dispensation — τὴν οἰκονομίαν [tēn oikonomian] In our last lesson we discovered the word used here originally described either the office or the work of a steward, a house-manager. The word was also used figuratively (or as a metaphor) to describe the responsibility given to believers to do the work of God. In today’s lesson we will see that the work in this passage given to Paul was a specific task. Although the Lord had given Paul many responsibilities, he is now focusing in on one aspect of those responsibilities for this context. *“Every believer is a steward of the calling, spiritual gifts, opportunities, skills, knowledge, and every other blessing he has from the Lord. Everything we have belongs to the Lord, and we are therefore entrusted as stewards to manage our lives and everything we possess in behalf of the One to whom they belong. We are faithful stewards when we use what we have to minister to those within the family of God and witness to those who are without. ‘As each one has received a special gift,’ Peter admonishes us, ‘employ it in serving one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God’ (1 Pet. 4:10).”* [MacArthur, 89] As we apply what we learned last week to verse 2, the sense could be either one of these:

If Paul was speaking of the OFFICE of the steward – *“If you have heard, as I assume you have, of the responsibility of managing the grace of God which was given to me for you”*

If Paul was speaking of the WORK of the steward – *“If you have heard, as I assume you have, of the work of managing the grace of God which was given to me for you”*

OF WHAT WAS PAUL A STEWARD? — *“[T]he primary meaning of οἰκονομία [oikonomia] in Paul’s time was ‘management of a household’, and the connection was probably lost on neither Paul nor his readers. God has given him the responsibility of administering the part of his plan for the universe that involves the inclusion of the Gentiles within his household.”* [Thielman, 192f] *“This ‘special’ grace is the revelation of the mystery regarding the church, which is composed of believing Jews and Gentiles united in one body. Hence, rather than call it a dispensation of grace, a better designation would be the dispensation or administration of the church. **This clearly shows that God is operating in a different way in the present day. Before the cross Gentiles would have had to become Jews, whereas now Gentiles do not become Jews nor do Jews become Gentiles but both become one ‘new person,’ the church.**”* [Hoehner, 424] *“God gave him a ‘dispensation’ (stewardship) that he might go to the Gentiles, not only with the good news of salvation through Christ, but also with the message that Jews and Gentiles are now one in Christ. ... God made Paul a steward of ‘they mystery’ with the responsibility of sharing it with the Gentiles. It was not enough simply to win them to Christ and form them into local assemblies. He was also to teach them their wonderful position in Christ as members of the body, sharing God’s grace equally with the Jews.”* [Wiersbe, 27]

WHAT WAS GIVEN WAS ‘GRACE’ NOT THE ‘STEWARDSHIP’ — of the grace of God which was given to me — τῆς χάριτος τοῦ θεοῦ τῆς δοθείσης μοι [tēs charitos tou theou tēs dotheisēs moi] — As we noticed when we evaluated the sentence structure of Paul’s digression, the phrase *‘which was given to me’* is not a reference to the *‘stewardship’* but is directly connected with *‘the grace of God.’* *“Compare verse 8, in which he says, ‘To me was this grace given.’ Not infrequently the office itself is called χάρις [charis], a grace or favor. Romans 12:3, 15:15; 1 Corinthians 3:10; Galatians 2:9. Paul esteemed the office of a messenger of Christ as a manifestation of the undeserved kindness of God towards him, and he always speaks of it with gratitude and humility. It was not its honours, nor its authority, much less any emolument connected with it, which gave it value in his eyes; but the privilege which it involved of preaching the unsearchable riches of Christ.”* [Hodge, 109] Here are the verses to which Charles Hodge was referring:

“For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith.” (Rom 12:3)

emolument – noun: profit, salary, or fees from office or employment; compensation for services

“Nevertheless, brethren, I have written more boldly to you on some points, as reminding you, because of the grace given to me by God, that I might be a minister of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles, ministering the gospel of God, that the offering of the Gentiles might be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.” (Rom 15:15,16)

“According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it.” (1 Cor 3:10)

“And when James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that had been given to me, they gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.” (Gal 2:9)

Once again we notice the importance of context. We regularly and correctly connect grace with our salvation but it would be an extreme error to suppose every instance of the word ‘grace’ is a reference to our salvation!

THE ‘GRACE’ GIVEN TO PAUL WAS THE REVELATION OF THE MYSTERY (v. 3) AND THE COMMISSION TO PREACH AND TEACH THAT MYSTERY (v. 8) — *“God did not simply give him the gospel message of grace to take to the Gentiles, but the assignment to do this is itself, in a special sense, God’s grace given to Paul.” [Thielman, 193] “In the present context, Paul talks about the unmerited favor involved in the revelation of the mystery. Therefore, he describes what the Ephesians had heard about his administration regarding God’s unmerited favor. In addition, Paul’s responsibility was to explain it to his readers. In verse 7 it will be seen that grace is necessary not only for the revelation of the mystery, but also for enablement to make known the mystery.” [Hoehner, 424f] “It is by God’s grace that people become Christians. But it is not the conversion of Paul which is related to grace here; instead the idea is that God gave Paul grace in relation to the Gentiles; they are the ultimate beneficiaries of the grace as [‘to you’] indicates.... It is because Paul is the recipient of God’s gift for the Gentiles that he dares evangelise them and speak with authority not only to the churches he has founded but also to those he has never known or visited.” [Best, 298] “The section begins and ends with a reference to Paul’s sufferings ‘for’ his Gentile readers. In 3:1 he is ‘the prisoner of Christ’ for them, and in 3:13 he asks them not to be discouraged about his sufferings for them since these sufferings are their ‘glory.’ In the digression that appears between these two statements, Paul reflects on his ‘responsibility of administering’ the ‘grace’ God has given to him. ‘Grace’ here means the calling he received at the times of his conversion to preach the untraceable riches of Christ to the Gentiles.” [Thielman, 187]*

for you, to you-ward, in regard to you — εἰς ὑμᾶς [eis humas] *“The grace was given to Paul, but it was for the ultimate benefit of these Gentile Christians — ‘for you.’ This assertion underlines that the subject of the digression is not simply Paul himself, but his ministry for the Gentile readers.” [Lincoln, 174] “The εἰς ὑμᾶς [eis humas, ‘for you’], admirably rendered by the AV ‘to you-ward,’ denotes the ‘ethical direction’ of the gift of grace — **the fact that it was bestowed upon Paul not for his own sake, but with a view to their position.**” [Salmond, Expositor’s GK Testament, 303] “Paul’s mission was to the Gentiles. It was in special reference to them that he had received his commission and the gifts therewith connected. When Christ appeared to him on his journey to Damascus, he said to him, ‘I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and witness both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in the which I will appear unto thee; delivering thee from the people and from the Gentiles, unto whom now I send thee, to open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me.’ (Acts 26:16-18) Here we have an authentic account of Paul’s mission. He was appointed a witness of what had been and of what should be made known to him by revelation. He was sent to the Gentiles, to turn them from Satan to God in order that they might be saved.” [Hodge, 110]*

PAUL’S SELF-SACRIFICIAL ATTITUDE FOR THE GENTILES — *“[H]is preaching to Gentiles aroused the jealousy of the Jews, and led to his imprisonment. But he rather thinks of it as a result of his great office and himself as a sacrifice for those whom it was his intent to benefit.” [Alford, 103]*

v 3 — “Now that Paul’s ministry of the administration of God’s grace has been made clear, he now discusses the revelation of the content of the administration, namely, the mystery. This is divided into three parts:

- how the mystery was revealed (v. 3);
- the ability to understand the mystery (v. 4); and
- the initial revelation of the mystery in the NT era to the apostles and prophets (v. 5).” [Hoehner, 425]

THE ‘MYSTERY’ DID NOT COME TO PAUL BY STUDY — **how that by revelation** — ὅτι κατὰ ἀποκάλυψιν [hoti kata apokalupsin] this serves to identify the means through which Paul came to his knowledge, or the basis for that knowledge. *“He had not been driven to the conclusion that Jews and Gentiles were in the same position before God either as a result of interpreting the OT or as a deduction from a democratic philosophy, or indeed of any philosophy. It was not something he had been taught by other Christians, nor was it the product of his research for his Ph.D. at the University of Antioch! He had come to this knowledge through a direct and personal communication from God. . . . [Some hold Paul was merely inspired to understand a new interpretation of the OT] However, v. 5 does not say that in other generations the sons of men did not look deeply enough into the OT to discern the revelation but that it had been withheld from them, though they had the OT. The knowledge given to Paul was then something new.” [Best, 300] “In Dan. 2:17-19 Daniel received information about both the content and the interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream apart from any cleverness of his own, and strictly because God in his mercy revealed it to him (thus saving his life). Similarly, Paul received his insight into the part of the mystery that was of*

particular relevance to the Gentiles only 'by revelation' from God and as an act of God's mercy (1 Tim. 1:13). No amount of exegetical study of the Scriptures would have yielded this insight; God had to make it known to Paul personally." [Thielman, 194f] "Paul is first careful to explain that he received the mystery by revelation. He wanted to prevent the misconception that it was developed by his own or someone else's ingenuity." [Hoehner, 425]

'REVELATION' DEFINED — *"Revelation is a divine activity; not, therefore, a human achievement. Revelation is not the same thing as discovery or the dawning of insight, or the emerging of a bright idea. Revelation does not mean man finding God, but God finding man, God sharing his secrets with us, God showing us himself."* [J. I. Packer, *God Speaks to Man*] "The word ἀποκάλυψις [apokalupsis, 'revelation'] was discussed at 1:17 and has the meaning of *unveiling or disclosing something that had been previously hidden. In the NT it has the theological significance of the unveiling of that which was previously hidden in God and unknown to humans. It is not the acquisition of knowledge by diligent searching but the unveiling of facts intrinsically hidden.*" [Hoehner, 426] As I read these definitions, it strikes me how similar 'revelation' and 'mystery' are in meaning.

'BY REVELATION' IS EMPHATIC — *"The 'revelation' receives emphasis in this verse due to its location at the beginning of the clause."* [Alford, 103] "The sentence explains and develops the preceding statement, giving what they heard of the peculiar dispensation made by God with Paul; and the prominent thing here, as indicated by the emphatic position of κατὰ ἀποκάλυψιν [kata apokalupsin, 'by revelation'], is the way in which the 'mystery' was made known to him, viz., the way of revelation." [Salmond, *Expositor's GK Testament*, 303]

he made known unto me — ἐγνώρισεν μοι [egnōrisen moi] KJV, NKJV, NIV, YLT; also translated 'was made known to me' (RSV, NASV, ESV). Interestingly, the verb is 'aorist' ('there is no emphasis on the progress of the action but only shows a simple occurrence, the action viewed as a whole; how long of time is involved is dependent upon the context') and 'passive' in some manuscripts (meaning Paul was the passive recipient of the knowledge, God was the Actor in this situation). *"The aorist views the action as completed. The passive voice reinforces the fact that the mystery was made known by revelation rather than discovered by human ingenuity. This is further heightened by the dative pronoun μοί [moi, 'to me'], which shows that Paul was the recipient rather than the originator of the knowledge of the mystery."* [Hoehner, 426]

unto me — There are some commentators saying something similar to the following: *"Paul's position in this revelation was unique for it was given to him alone, as indicated by Paul noting it was given 'to me.'"* **This is probably an over-statement since v. 5 states there were other New Testament prophets which received the same message.** We will look at this further when we get to verse 5.

WHEN DID PAUL RECEIVE THIS REVELATION? — As to when Paul received this revelation, from comparing the comments made by various Bible teachers, it seems to me the answer depends upon how one defines what revelation Paul received. If this revelation is about the general acceptance of the Gentiles within the call of the gospel then without question Paul received this at the time he was converted: *"Our translation here assumes a particular moment of insight when Paul realized that the Gentiles were to be included within the scope of the gospel, presumably his Damascus road encounter with the risen Christ."* [Muddiman, 150] The accounts in Acts link Paul's commission to take the Gospel to the Gentiles with his conversion (Acts 9:15; 22:15 the commission is mediated through Ananias; Acts 26:12ff it states Paul received it directly at his conversion; Acts 22:21 Paul received it when he was praying in the temple; Gal 1:12ff implies the revelation was associated with Paul's conversion). **But note as well that the commission was not always to go to the Gentiles only (Acts 9:15f) and Paul would historically begin his missionary activity with the Jews in the cities he visited.**

But as we will see in later studies, if we confine the revelation to the Gentiles being equal to the Jews in the one-body then this probably began at Paul's conversion but was further clarified and revealed over a period of time. Note Paul mentions he received divine revelations throughout his life:

"And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me" (2 Cor 12:7)

"It is not clear when this mystery was made known to Paul by revelation. It may well have been at the time of his Damascus experience where he is told to go to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15-16; 26:17-18; Gal 1:16), or perhaps when he first returned to Jerusalem (Acts 22:21). However, it is possible that he received the revelation of the mystery at different stages. Certainly this occurred earlier; for when Peter baptized the Gentile, Cornelius, he was criticized by some in Jerusalem (Acts 11:1-3). Even in A.D. 49, sixteen years after the crucifixion ... the Jerusalem Council debated about the inclusion of the Gentiles (Acts 15). It took years to understand this new concept completely. In the present passage, Paul explains fully what this mystery is that he received by revelation. There is no doubt that this book presents a further development than the earlier epistles of the concept of Jews and Gentiles in one body." [Hoehner, 427] Speaking about the verb being an aorist, Ernest Best makes these comments: *"Yet this does not imply that Paul became aware of his special missionary task precisely at the moment of conversion. It may have taken time for the implications of his Damascus Road experience to come home to him; perhaps he only realised its full meaning while he was meditating on the experience during his time in Arabia (Gal 1.17)."* [Best, 301]

RECEIVING DIRECT REVELATIONS WAS ONE OF QUALIFICATIONS OF AN APOSTLE — *"He was not indebted for his knowledge of the Gospel to the instructions of others as he proves in his epistle to the Galatians by a long induction of acts in his history. This was one of the indispensable qualifications for the apostleship. As the apostles were witnesses, their knowledge must be direct and not founded on hearsay."* [Hodge, 110f]

‘DEMONSTRATION AGAINST THE IDEA OF A HUMAN POPE’ — “[T]his dispensation was given to him by revelation of Jesus Christ. He did not get it second hand from Peter. He is clear to say that this gospel did not come from man. It was a direct revelation from Jesus Christ to him. That is demonstration against even the idea of a human pope, for here is a man whose gospel is entirely independent of the gospel committed to the twelve. And he insists that he is not a whit behind any of them; he is not indebted to any of them for the authority with which he preaches, and they were forced to concede that the same God who wrought mightily through Peter to the circumcision, wrought just as mightily through Paul to the Gentiles.”

[B H Carroll, *Colossians, Ephesians, and Hebrews*; 125f] This concurs with Galatians when Paul confronts ‘the first pope’:

“Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed; for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision. And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter before them all, ‘If you, being a Jew, live in the manner of Gentiles and not as the Jews, why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews?’” (Gal 2:11-14)

PAUL’S POSITION UNIQUE AMONG THE APOSTLES BECAUSE OF THE REVELATION FROM GOD — “Paul was an apostle and his personal position has already been referred to: he was part of the foundation (2.20). This however only made him one among a number of apostles and prophets. *Yet he was not just one among a number but had a unique position in relation to the Gentiles: he is the apostle to the Gentiles. What are the grounds for describing him in this way? It was neither insight into the OT nor a brainwave on his part which led him to see that the Gospel must include Gentiles. God had given him a revelation to that effect.*” [Best, 292]