



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

Ephesians 3: 1-13

Ephesians

"The Mystery and the Ministry"

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] Well, turn in your Bibles to Ephesians chapter 3. Ephesians 3, and we want to look this morning at verses 1 through 13. "For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles -" And you'll notice after the word "Gentiles," there's a hyphen. That indicates that there is a break in Paul's thought at this point. Now, if you go down to verse 14, you see that he begins the same way as he begins verse 1. Verse 1 says, "For this reason I," Paul, and then in verse 14, "For this reason I bow my knees before the Father." What that probably indicates is the thought that he breaks off in verse 1 is resumed in verse 14, which would suggest that Paul's intention in verse 1 is to pray for the Ephesians. He's given them great truth. He's told them about their reconciliation in Christ, their reconciliation with the Jews, Jews and Gentiles together, and reconciliation to God. And so, He's going to then pray for them. And so, we could read this in this way, beginning with verse 1: "For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles - bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory," and then he goes on to pray for their strengthening. What we have then, if that is the case, is something of a parenthesis from verses 2 through verse 13 in which Paul goes back to the subject of the Gentiles and the blessings that they have in Christ, and he elaborates on that. He develops what we will see as, he calls the mystery in Christ, the mystery of Christ, the mystery that's been hidden from the ages, truth that has not been previously revealed. That will be the subject of the verses that we will look at this morning. So, let's begin again with verse 1. He writes:

"For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles - if indeed you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace which was given to me for you; that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief."

Now, that's important to notice that he has this mystery by way of revelation, and we'll develop that some more in our lesson, but you see that this is hidden truth. He's received this revelation by way, or rather, this mystery, by way of revelation.

Verse 4:

"By referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit; to be specific, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel, of which I was made a minister, according to the gift of God's grace which was given to me according to the working of His power. To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things; in order that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and confident access through faith in Him. Therefore I ask you not to lose heart at my tribulations on your behalf, for they are your glory.

May the Lord bless this reading of His word and bless our time of study together. Let's bow in a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Gracious God and heavenly Father, we do thank You for the great privilege that we have again this Sunday morning to come together as the body of Christ, people who have been chosen before the foundation of the world and redeemed by the blood of Your Son, brought together as Your people, clothed in the righteousness of Christ with, as Paul says, access, confident, bold access to You. We make use of that at this moment, Father, to thank You for the grace that You have extended to us, grace of which we study this morning. And as we do so, we pray that

You would bless us, give us a deep understanding of the mystery of the blessings that You have poured out upon the Gentile and the Jew alike. This creation of the church, in which we have been brought together in one body, as one new man, as Your family, as Your temple. Father, we pray that You'd bless these things to our understanding and help us to rejoice in them, and to understand them better, that we might live the kind of lives that should flow from an understanding of grace. That word that Paul loved so much and that we should love as well, the gift that You have given us, the unmerited favor that You have shown us. It constantly amazed the apostle. May it do the same for us, and may our hearts be deeply moved by the thoughts of what You have done on our behalf, in Your Son, how You have called us out of darkness into light and given us an inheritance that is imperishable and cannot fade away. Thank You for that. Thank You for all the blessings that are ours and pray that You would teach us this morning. And among those blessings, as we've already mentioned, is this great privilege of prayer, access to the throne of grace. We can talk to You, the creator and the ruler of the universe, and make our needs known to You.

We do that, Father. We pray for those who have needs of a material and an emotional kind, a physical kind. We pray for blessing upon them. Provide for those needs. We pray for the sick. We think of Margaret Dietrich. We pray that You continue to show mercy and grace to her and others in similar conditions. Provide for us in those areas where we need provision and give patience where we need patience, and may our faith be strengthened in the midst of trials. We thank You that that is the end result of the difficulties of life, that because of who You are and the relationship that we now have to You, all of the events of life, those that we would consider favorable and those that seem to be unfavorable all work together for our good. And we praise You for that. So we pray that You'd bless us Father in the material needs as we need them, and bless us spiritually. Bless us at this time. We pray, Father, that You'd bless us this evening as we return, and remember the Lord's death as we gather around the table to remember that great event. And in so doing, are reminded that the end has not yet come, that He will return, and He will bring with Him His reward, and bring with Him His kingdom. May we be moved to live in light of that, live for eternity. We commit the time this evening to You and we commit our time now to

You. Bless us. Bless us as we sing our final hymn. May it be good preparation for our hearts, and we pray these things in Christ's name. Amen.

[Message] Most everyone likes a good mystery, trying to solve a crime or a riddle by searching for clues and following the evidence to the guilty person or uncovering a secret. That's normally what we think of when we hear the word mystery. Enigmas, puzzles that we try to solve. And so when we come to chapter 3 of Ephesians where Paul uses the word mystery three times, in fact, his subject is the mystery, we naturally think of sleuths or plots out of Sherlock Holmes. But Paul's meaning is very different from that. The word that he uses here, the Greek word, *mysterion*, doesn't refer to something that is hard to find out. It doesn't refer to a puzzle that we can solve with effort.

In fact, just the opposite. It refers to something impossible to find out and possible to solve by searching for facts and clues. There are no facts and clues. This mystery is a secret, a secret that can only be known by revelation. But Paul says that this secret, what he calls in verse 9 "the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God," that this mystery has been made known to him, has been revealed to him and to the holy apostles and prophets, and what has been revealed to him is amazing truth. At least, it certainly seemed to be that in Paul's day. He's already given us some hints of it in chapter 2 where he said that Christ has demolished the barrier between the Jew and the Gentile. He has made the two groups into one new man, into one family that God loves, into the temple in which God now dwells.

That was an unthinkable idea at the time. That is very clear from the animosity that Paul speaks of, which existed between the Jew and the Gentile, how they were alienated from one another, how they were enemies from one another. So what he describes in chapter 2 is quite amazing in and of itself. But in chapter 3, Paul goes further. And in verse 6, he explains the mystery. He summarizes it, that the mystery which was revealed to him is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs of the promises in Christ. They are co-heirs with the Jews.

Now, Paul doesn't begin the chapter that way. Having described their situation, he intended to inform them of his situation and then pray for them. Before his thought is interrupted, that is how he begins. He informs them that he was a prisoner, literally a prisoner in a Roman jail. That is where he wrote this letter, as

well as other letters, known as the Prison Epistles. He was there because he had preached the gospel to the Gentiles. He calls himself a prisoner for the sake of you Gentiles. Paul was, as you know, the apostle to the Gentiles and his mission to them led to his arrest.

Luke records the circumstances of this arrest in Acts chapters 21 and 22, how Paul was in the temple in Jerusalem when a mob of Jews, suspecting that he had brought a Gentile with him, passed that wall or that barrier that went around the temple on which was posted those signs warning foreigners or Gentiles from going past that and entering into the temple area. Well, suspecting that Paul had brought with him a Gentile, they seized him and they tried to kill him. He was rescued by the Romans, and was then allowed to speak to this large Jewish crowd, and he told them of his conversion. And as he spoke and told them the details of it, they listened. They seemed to have listened very carefully to what he said.

But when he told them of his ministry, told them that Christ sent him to the Gentiles, when they heard that word "Gentiles," the mob exploded. That Paul would suggest that Gentiles were being shown favor by God infuriated them. They wouldn't hear any more of what he had to say, and they called for his death. And so began a long period of imprisonment for Paul. After some time in Jerusalem, he was transferred to Caesarea on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, and then two years later, taken to Rome because he had taken the gospel to the Gentiles with the great truth of their reconciliation to the Jew and their reconciliation to God as he explained in chapter 2.

He was about to go on to pray for them, that God would strengthen them in these truths, that God would cause them to grow in grace, when his thoughts were interrupted. It may have been the word, Gentiles, that caused him to pause, but he delays his prayer until verse 14, and with verse 2 resumes his explanation of these blessings that have been given to them, and also gives a description of his ministry.

God had given him a stewardship, he says. He had made Paul a steward, given him an office, the office of messenger, the messenger of Christ. He was entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, preaching the word of grace to them. It is, he says, a stewardship for you. And when he was given this great task of preaching to the Gentiles, he was also given an understanding of the mystery, which was made known to him, he says, by way of revelation.

And in verses 3 through 6, he explains this mystery, the mystery of Christ, as he calls it in verse 4. The gospel, as he will explain, applies as equally to the Gentile as it does to the Jew. The Gentiles share fully in the salvation of Christ. He summarizes it in verse 6 where he says: "To be specific, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel."

That is something that had never been imagined by the Jew. The Jew had been given great blessings by God, great blessings of revelation. The Jews had been entrusted with the oracles of God. They'd been given the prophecies of God. They'd been given the law of God. But, they had not been given this truth, that Gentiles would be equal partners with the Jew in the blessings of salvation.

Paul says in verse 5 that it had not been made known in other generations, so it was a secret, it is a mystery. Not that Gentiles would be saved. That was no secret. That had been clearly revealed from the beginning. God told Abraham back in Genesis chapter 12 and verse 3 that in him, all the families of the earth would be blessed. Isaiah speaks of both Israel and the Messiah as a light to the nations and of salvation, reaching to the end of the earth.

There was a Gentile salvation prophesied from the very beginning, but this idea that Gentiles would be included equally in salvation, that they would be co-heirs with the Jews, fellow heirs, that was the mystery.

They could've imagined that Gentiles would be heirs of salvation. To be an heir doesn't necessarily mean to be an equal heir. Two sons might be heirs of the same fortune without being equal heirs, while one can receive a large portion of that wealth, while another receives a small portion of it. But that's not the case in the church. Gentiles, who for generations had been considered dogs, had been considered pariahs, outcasts, had been brought near. They had been brought into the fellowship of God, the family of God. And now, Paul says, they are fellow heirs and fellow members, and fellow partakers of the promise.

They came into the salvation as Gentiles. In the Old Testament, that was not so. There were occasions when Gentiles were saved, and we can think of a few examples of that that are recorded in the Old Testament. Rahab, for example, Ruth is another example. But they became Israelites. They were saved in a way different from the way that we are saved now. They were saved through faith and the promised

redeemer to come. We are saved by faith and the redeemer who has come. Salvation has always been by grace through faith, but it had different consequences then. Under the Old Covenant, Gentiles came under the law, identified with a nation and the covenants. They became Jews, in other words, and the Lord reminds the Samaritan woman of that. You remember in John chapter 4 and verse 22 when he says, "Salvation is from the Jews." It doesn't mean you are saved by keeping the law and adopting Judaism, but it is through the way of Judaism, through the religion of Israel that one came to salvation.

That's no longer so. Gentile salvation is now independent of Israel, independent of the law. As is Jewish salvation. The law has been abolished and the two made into one new man, as Paul has already taught. Fellow members in the church. Salvation in Christ means equality in Christ. Gentile believers are on the same level as Jewish believers. They are no longer strangers, no longer aliens to one another.

That had a very practical outworking in Paul's own ministry because before his arrest and his time in prison, before the time that he writes this letter, Paul had delivered an offering to the church in Jerusalem designed to help the poor Jewish believers there, and it is an offering that was collected from the Gentiles. In fact, Paul speaks of this in 2 Corinthians chapters 8 and 9. And there, he talks about the Macedonian churches who were poor churches. They had very little money but they were very eager, very anxious to contribute to this fund which would help the poor Christians in Jerusalem, and that gave Paul great joy, because it was a clear demonstration of the miracle of the mystery, of the grace and the power of God that had broken down the barrier between the two groups, had made these old enemies into one family of God, which can care greatly for one another.

So, the mystery is the equality of the Jew and the Gentile in Christ. We are one family together with family concern for one another. That is the revelation that was given to Paul, and he was given the ministry of this mystery. That was his stewardship which he now describes in verses 7 through 9. He says, of which I was made a minister. Literally, made a deacon, a *diakonos*. He doesn't mean by that that he was made a deacon in the church in the sense of occupying the office of deacon. The word *diakonos* originally referred to a person who waited on tables. It referred to a servant, and that's what Paul is saying of himself. He's saying that he is a servant.

Paul didn't consider himself to be an important person. Not in and of himself. He held an important office. He was an apostle. He had a great calling. He was the apostle to the Gentiles. But he recognized that all of that was of grace, and that's what he says. He was made a minister. He was made a servant according to the gift of God's grace. He hadn't earned it. He hadn't deserved it. That's the point of grace. Grace is a gift, and a gift to the undeserving, and he had it as a result of God's grace. And his very ability to carry out his stewardship, to carry out his ministry was of God. It was, he says, according to the working of His power.

Commentators sometimes point out that the two words that are used here, working, and power, are words from which we get our words energy and dynamite, which illustrate the greatness of the power. That same power is at work in all of us. It is a power that changes our lives, and it is a great power. It is a power that is far greater than any physical power that we can know. Dynamite can destroy things, but this power gives life, and it does destroy things as well. It destroys false ideas. It destroys the power of sin within us. But it also gives life. It gives life out of death. It is resurrection power, the greatest power that there is. That is the power that is at work in every believer in Jesus Christ, because we are in Him, we have His life, and it is that very power that accounts for Paul's ministry and his success in the ministry.

Paul was a great worker for the Lord, a great worker for the Lord's church. It's no exaggeration to call him the greatest evangelist and the greatest missionary of the church. He planted churches across Asia and Europe. He wrote 13 epistles of the New Testament. His labors literally changed the course of history and we're deeply in his debt. But Paul takes no credit for his ministry. He attributes it all, his ministry and his success in the ministry, to God and to His grace.

Paul goes on to show the greatness of grace from the fact that it effectively works in the lowliest of people, in the most unlikely of candidates. That is what Paul considered himself to be. He calls himself the very least of all saints. That's a very unusual description that Paul gives of himself. Grammatically, the word least is a comparative adjective, and so it literally means something like the leaster of the saints. Well, there's no such word in English, and so the authorized version translates it less than the least of all the saints.

Either way, the very least, or less than the least, or the leaster, it makes the point, and the point is that Paul felt himself to be completely unworthy of such a high

calling. Paul was in prison. Paul was suffering for the gospel, and yet Paul did not consider his ministry to be labor. It wasn't a grind for the apostle Paul. He suffered a great deal in it and he labored very diligently. You get a clear picture of that from reading through the Book of Acts and what he experienced. You see that in 2 Corinthians 11 as he describes his labors for the Lord. Paul never complained about what he suffered. He never complained about the difficulties. He never complained about the long hours of ministry that he underwent. He considered it all to be the greatest privilege.

Who was he to have received this great blessing? A man who had been a self-righteous Pharisee, a blasphemer of Christ, a persecutor of His church, a man who prior to his conversion had the blood of the saints on his hands. He had a terrible history. He later wrote to Timothy in 1 Timothy 1:15 that he was the chief of sinners.

That's not a case of poor self-esteem or a bad self-image as some might want to read into those statements that he makes. It's a matter of theology, not psychology. Paul understood his sin, and he understood how sinful he was, and he understood how great his guilt was. I think the closer we get to Christ, the more we will see that. But the understanding that he had, the clear understanding of his unworthiness of his sin and his guilt was something that reflected and magnified all the more in his mind the greatness of grace, that it would save him, remove all his sin, cleanse him of his guilt, and then bless him. Of all people with this great ministry of preaching to the Gentiles, the unfathomable riches of Christ, well, that's nothing but the grace of God.

Now, notice the ministry that God had entrusted to him. God didn't entrust Paul with a ministry of preaching sociology or social change or psychology or politics or any such thing. He entrusted him with the ministry to preach Christ. That's the measure of a true ministry. Churches can be filled with Bibles and hymnbooks and all the trappings of a Christian church, and a man can stand with all of the robes and all of the appearance of a Christian minister. But if his ministry isn't a ministry of preaching Christ, it's not God's ministry. It's not a ministry that's been entrusted to Him. We can know what a true ministry is by this fact: that the minister preaches Christ. And by preaching Christ, he preaches Christ, the crucified Savior. The eternal Son of God become man who has died in the place of sinners, who has been raised from the dead physically and is now seated at the right hand of the Father, and He will return to this earth again someday in the future with His kingdom and His reward.

That's the ministry of Christ; that's preaching Christ. And the measure of a true listener of that ministry is whether he or she wants to hear about Christ and about all of the blessings that are in Christ. What Paul calls the riches of Christ.

They are, he says, unfathomable. That word, unfathomable, is an interesting word. It's really a compound word made up in part of the word footstep, or the word track. And it literally means untraceable. So, these are riches that cannot be tracked out.

One of the older commentators, Walter Locke, sees the meaning as the tracks of His footsteps go in so many directions that no man can follow them all up. They are like thousands and thousands of footprints on a snow-covered field. So many footprints going in so many directions that no man can follow all of them up. We can't follow them. There are so many. We can see them, and so it is with the wisdom and the grace of God and the blessings of God. They are like thousands and thousands of footsteps that we can't track out.

Now, if that is the picture that Paul has in mind, and it seems to be from the word that he uses, a very descriptive word, then he is saying that the riches of Christ are so great that we can never track them all down, we can never search them out. They are the unsearchable riches of Christ. A person who thinks that he is giving up a lot or she is giving up a lot in coming to Christ really doesn't understand the unsearchable riches of Christ. We really give up nothing. We give up things, it's true, but what they are compared to what we receive, they cannot be compared. I think young people go through this quite a bit. I guess I think back on my own history and how I looked at the world when I was young, and felt whether I really articulated these things in my mind or not, but felt that really, the world is what has everything to offer.

I didn't find a great deal that I want in the church or in Christ. Of course, I wasn't searching very hard for anything in Christ at that time. But what I saw before me in the world was so attractive, it seemed to have everything. Well, to believe that and to follow the call of friends, of peers, to enjoy the pleasures of this world or the popularity of this world, or seek those kinds of things, to come out of that influence, and it's a very strong influence for young and old alike. To come under that is to be fooled by the world, and certainly not to understand what Paul says here, because he says Christ has the real riches. We can labor day and night for the riches of this

world. And if, by chance, we obtain some of them, the best we can do is hold onto them in this life. There's no guarantee that we'll hold onto them in this life. But certainly, we can't hold onto them beyond this life. They are transient. They slip through our fingers. But these riches are eternal.

They are beyond all human need. They are inexhaustible riches, and Christ gives them to everyone who comes to Him. If you've come to Jesus Christ, if you've believed in Him, if you've trusted in Him as your Savior, then you have those riches, inexhaustible riches.

What are they? Paul doesn't list them here, but from what he's already written in this book and what is recorded throughout the New Testament, they include the blessing of justification, that we are forgiven of all of our sins the moment that we believe, that upon faith, we are fully and completely accepted by God. We never have to prove ourselves to God once we have believed in our Lord Jesus Christ. We gain His immediate and His full acceptance, fully accepted by Him through faith alone.

That's one of the blessings, the blessing of justification. The blessing of sanctification is another of these riches, that God is presently at work in us to change us, to make us more and more like Christ. He is presently, at this very moment, transforming us from glory to glory, Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3:18. A present work that is right now going on in your life. He's presently changing you. The riches of a new relationship with God must be included in this subject of the riches that he is speaking of. We are no longer children of wrath as we once were, but we are children of God. We are His sons with all of the privileges of that relationship. We are citizens of heaven with all of the rights and the privileges that come with that citizenship. Though we live in this world, we belong to heaven, and all of heaven is on our side.

And of course, we have the riches of God's love, which is behind all of this, that the Triune God so loved us that the Father chose us, and that the Son purchased us, bought us for the Father, and that the Spirit now indwells us. God loves us. There's an amazing treasure, or riches, that we have in Him.

There's a story of an incident that occurred during the French Revolution when so many people were being arrested and executed. It's the story of a young man who was arrested and thrown into prison and condemned to the guillotine. He was a

young man who was greatly loved by many, but there was one man in particular who loved him more than all, and he was his own father. He proved his love for his son in the ultimate way. He had the same name as his son, and so when the list was called, the father answered to the name and went to the execution in his son's place.

That's what Christ did for the sinner. He went to the execution in our place. That's how much God loved us, that He sent His only begotten Son to die for us, to die in our place. And so, in light of that great truth, Paul says in Romans 8 verse 32, "He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?" If He has given us the greatest gift, the gift of His Son, He'll certainly give us the lesser gifts. If He didn't spare His Son for us, what won't He spare?

All of the riches are for us in Jesus Christ. So, God promises to give us all things. In fact, in that same great chapter of Romans 8, earlier, Paul points out that all things work together for good to those who love God and are called according to His purpose. In other words, we have the protection of providence. We have the unsearchable riches of God's love. And He guarantees to bring us safely home someday where our inheritance is waiting for us, an inheritance that Peter describes as imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away. That is some of the riches in Christ. They're unsearchable. We cannot trace them all out. We cannot explain them all, not in the time we have left, not in a lifetime. They're that great.

The object of Paul's ministry was to preach Christ with all of those riches and preach Him to the Gentiles. But he adds a further duty in verse 9 and that was to illuminate the church, to inform the universe about the universe, to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things.

The church was very important to Paul. He devoted his life to gaining converts from among the Gentiles and from the Jews alike, and building up the church, and the importance of the church is explained in verse 10. Through it, he says, the wisdom of God is made known. Paul calls it the manifold wisdom of God, which means the multicolored wisdom of God. It's another very picturesque term that he uses, and it's a term that gives us the impression of a tapestry full of various colors and patterns that are richly woven together or maybe an oriental carpet with its variety of designs and colors and details that all fit together.

The word that Paul uses here is actually a strengthened form of the word many-colored, and it means, most varied, or the very varied wisdom of God. It's an unusual word, but it brings out the fact that there are many aspects to God's wisdom. That wisdom is seen in the church, which is His great masterpiece. You'll remember the description that Paul gives of the church to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 1, and as you think about that, I think you get some impression or some idea of how the wisdom of God is demonstrated in the church. You'll remember he describes us with a rather unflattering description. He says that we are made up of people, or the church is made up of people who are not many wise, not many mighty, not many noble. God has chosen the weak and the foolish things of the world to show His power and His wisdom in changing them and using them greatly. His wisdom is seen in joining natural enemies together, the Jew and the Gentile, and to one new man, united in the church so that despite the differences, despite their former hatred of one another, the alienation that they had between one another, they now live in peace and they live in love, one for another, as was demonstrated with the Macedonian churches, the churches of Greece, contributing to the church in Jerusalem. Many other examples that can be given of that. Only God can create that.

And so, in the church, we see demonstrated God's power, His grace, His wisdom. The church isn't the idea of man. Man would never think of the church. We're enemies. Those here are alienated from one another. We'd be brought together in harmony and in love for one another. Man's idea is to crush the enemy, prevail over the enemy. It's the wisdom of God that designed the church. It's God's plan of salvation, the mystery, as Paul says, hidden in Him through all the ages, but now revealed to Paul, and Paul was bringing it to light. His purpose in bringing this out, of illuminating the church, is to instruct a very unusual audience, one that is beyond the world of men. It is to inform the angels. As he says, the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places.

Now, what that means is the angels are watching us. They're learning from us. What they hear from the pulpit or what they hear in the Sunday school classroom, that instructs them. What they see in our lives and in the way that we relate to one another, how the barriers have been brought down and we've been united together, that illustrates for them God's grace and this great masterpiece of salvation that He has created in the church. That's an amazing thought. At least, it is to me. And

evidently, what that suggests is that this auditorium at this present time is full of angels. They are listening to what I'm saying and they are observing you as to whether you're listening to what I'm saying, and how we respond to these things and how we respond to one another.

This was a mystery to them as well. It hadn't been revealed to the angels, and so they are learning about this great mystery, this masterpiece of God's grace from us.

This isn't the only passage where this idea is taught. Peter at least suggests it when he speaks of the gospel and spiritual things in 1 Peter 1 as things into which angels long to look. Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:10 writes that women should wear a covering on their heads as a symbol of authority because of the angels. So, the angels are watching. Our lives are a kind of theater in the round, and the audience is angelic, and I guess we're playing to a packed house because when you read about the angels, we read of thousands upon thousands, and myriads upon myriads, and they are looking to us for instruction. That's sobering.

The church, as a display of God's grace and wisdom, was very important to Paul. It is important to the angels. It is important to God. And so, the implication of that is it should be very important to each of us. Church is God's masterpiece of grace. Not something that God sort of threw together when Israel rejected their Messiah. This is a work that God had planned from all eternity. In fact, if you read Romans 11, you find that Israel's rejection of the Messiah was God's way of bringing the Gentiles into blessing. All of this, this great work of salvation is the plan of all eternity, verse 11. That's what Paul says. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose. God's plan and purpose for the church is eternal, just like His election of us, which was before the foundation of the earth.

In the council of eternity past, God drew up His plan of salvation. In time, Christ executed that plan. He accomplished it on the cross. As Paul says, God carried out His purpose in Christ Jesus our Lord. Through Christ, He saved His people from their sins and He created the church.

Now, as a result of that salvation, Paul says, we have access through faith in Him. We have access to the Father. We have access to the throne of grace, and our access is with boldness, he says, because Christ has made atonement, because He has fully satisfied the justice of God through His death, paid for all of our sins, carried them away. Because of that, every believer is fully forgiven, fully forgiven and

clothed in the righteousness of Christ. That's how we approach the throne of grace. And so, we should never approach God in prayer hesitantly, fearing that we might not receive, be received by Him or receive the answers. We do that, I think. We become burdened with guilt and we feel like I'm not worthy to approach the throne of grace.

But you see, that is the very time when we need to approach the throne of grace. All of those sins have been forgiven, but we must go to Him, confess our sins to Him. We must go to Him at our worst time, certainly, and see His grace, and He gives it. So, Paul says, we can approach without hesitation. We can approach with confidence. We can approach boldly, the author of Hebrews says the same thing. That's what Christ has done. He has brought together those who are far away and those who are near. He has recognized Jews and Gentiles together and reconciled both to God so that we are at peace with Him. Both have equal access to Him, bold and confident access to Him. We are on equal footing with one another in Christ before the throne of grace.

That leads naturally to Paul's final statement in verse 13 where he writes: "Therefore I ask you not to lose heart at my tribulations on your behalf, for they are your glory." Paul concludes the way he began, with the reference to his sufferings. He knew that the Ephesians must've been discouraged by his imprisonment. The great apostle was now the prisoner of Nero and it might have seemed like the young church was about to be crushed by the mighty Roman Empire. But Paul states in verse 1 that he was a prisoner of Christ Jesus, meaning that years ago, he had been taken captive by Christ. He had been taken captive by God's grace, and he was under His Lordship. He was under our Lord Jesus Christ's control. He wasn't under the control of Nero. He was a prisoner in Rome because that was God's will for him. That is where God wanted him at that time.

God is sovereign. God is always at work. He has an eternal plan. That plan is building the church. It's an eternal plan, and He's going to carry that out. He's going to finish creating His masterpiece. And as our Lord Himself assured His apostles and assures us, the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

That is our position. We have access to God. We don't lose heart. Avail yourselves of the access that you have and realize that this God who sits upon the throne and rules the universe is sovereign, and He has a plan for His church.

So, they were not to lose heart. Paul's sufferings fit into God's plan. It was no sign of defeat. His tribulations were, in fact, he says, they were glory. He doesn't say how they were their glory or how his tribulations benefitted them. But his meaning is clear, and that is that suffering is not meaningless. It is an opportunity to represent Christ in His grace to men and to angels.

In fact, every moment of our lives is an opportunity to do that. It's an opportunity to share, to serve Christ, an opportunity to display the riches of God's wisdom and grace in the church, to bring to light the mystery which God has revealed in the church. The church on earth is not perfect. It never has been, and it never will be, not till our Lord returns and then presents us before the Father, faultless, without spot or wrinkle. But until that day, we're not going to be perfect.

But, the church was at the center of Paul's interest. It is the focus of God's activity and care. And so, we are to be committed to it. I think the great implication of what Paul is teaching here is that you and I as Christians must be devoted to the church of Jesus Christ, the church for whom He shed His blood, the church that He purchased to be His bride, and we are to be committed to it, to its welfare and supporting its fellowship. We are to be part of it. We're to be seeking to bring those outside of the church into it, to a knowledge of salvation and a knowledge of the Lord. And one of the greatest services that each one of us can render to the church is to pray for it, to pray that this assembly would be blessed of God, that if there are lukewarm hearts in this church, that they would be changed, that if we love the world more than we love our Lord, that God would change us, that if there are jealousies and disputes among us as there are in every church, that God would change us, that we might bring to light this great mystery in a way that brings honor and glory to Him.

What a privilege it is to be part of this mystery. To think that you are a part of God's eternal plan, that He set His love on you before the foundation of the world and Christ decided in eternity past to enter into this world and save you. That is reason for great rejoicing, and we can be assured that that makes the angels rejoice, rejoice at the wisdom of God and what He has created in this church, the power of God in saving us and the love of God. It's reason for great rejoicing and celebration.

But if you're here this morning and have not believed in Jesus Christ, then you don't know if you are part of that eternal plan and purpose of God, and that should concern you greatly. There's nothing to rejoice in in that uncertainty. If you fear that

you are far off, if you fear that you are separated from Him, then the way to Him, the way to reconciliation is very simple. It's through faith and faith alone, faith in Jesus Christ, faith in Christ as our Savior and as our substitute, the substitute for sinners who died in our place so that all who believe in Him might have the forgiveness of their sins and everlasting life. Faith in Christ is the way to knowing that you are part of God's eternal plan of salvation and part of this mystery. If you want to know if you fit into that, then believe in Jesus Christ and you will know that, and you will be a part of that blessing. If you desire to be forgiven, if you have a sense of your sin and you know that you're unworthy, and you are unworthy, all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. If you know that, you desire to be forgiven, to be reconciled to God, to be cleansed of all your sin and guilt, there is no reason why you shouldn't have that. He saves the blasphemer. He saves the murderer. He saves the thief and the adulterer. He saves the chief of sinners. He saves all who come to Him, and all who come to Him enter into not only to the forgiveness of sins, not only into life everlasting, but into these unfathomable riches of Christ.

If you've never believed in Christ, if you don't know Him as your Savior, I urge you: look to Christ, trust in Him, and enter into life eternal.

May God help you to do that and help each of us who have done that to rejoice in what we have and what God has done for us. May He help us to do that now. Let's stand for the benediction.

[Prayer] Gracious God and heavenly Father, we are thankful for Your many blessings to us. None of us are worthy of the blessings that we have received. We look at the words of Paul, and the more we know, the more we realize that we can adopt the same words that he uses of himself. We can all think of ourselves as the least of the saints. And yet, in Your grace, You saved us. That's what You came to do. It's a trustworthy statement that Christ came into this world to save sinners. He didn't come to save the righteous. He came to save sinners. So we pray, Father, that if there be any in attendance this morning who have come to the conviction of their sin, realize that yes, they are sinners, and they need the Savior. So move upon their heart that they will understand that and trust in Him, trust in Jesus Christ alone for their salvation. We thank You for the life we have in Him. May we live it in a way that is pleasing to You.

“ The Mystery and the Ministry” by Dan Duncan

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