**PAUL’S UNIQUE** **PRIVILEGE**

***I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God’s grace given me through the working of his power. 8 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, 9 and*** ***to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. 10******His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known******to the*** ***rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, 11 according to his eternal purpose that he*** ***accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. 12 In him and through faith in him we may*** ***approach God with freedom and confidence.13******I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.***

Ephesians 3:7-13 (NIV)

At the end of 3:6 Paul has closely connected the ‘mystery’ with the gospel (‘*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’*). Through the gospel Jewish and Gentile believers are united to Christ, and this can only happen because the gospel announces the mystery so that people can hear it, to believe it, to experience it. The ‘mystery’ was truth revealed *to* Paul while the gospel was truth proclaimed *by* Paul. He made the connection because he was convinced the good news was only revealed to him so it could be shared, ‘*I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God’s grace given me’* (3:7). Paul received it by God’s grace and ministered it ‘*through the working of his power’*(3:7).

Paul saw his commission as an enormous privilege. What he calls ‘*this grace’* (3:8), and we might call ‘this privileged ministry-gift’ from God, was given to him despite the fact he saw himself as ‘*less than the least of all the Lord’s people*’ (3:8). He takes a superlative (‘least’ or ‘smallest’) and turns it into a comparative (‘less than the least’). It is possible he was playing on the meaning of his name. The Roman surname ‘Paulus’ is Latin for ‘little’ or ‘small’ and tradition says he was a small man. He may be saying: ‘little by name, little in stature and spiritually littler than the littlest of all Christians.’ Paul was deeply conscious both of his own unworthiness because he ‘*was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man’* (1 Timothy 1:13) and because of Christ’s overflowing mercy towards him. Paul’s awareness of his past never left him but nor did it stop him fulfilling his calling.

The privilege ministry of spreading the gospel, entrusted to Paul by the grace of God, is now elaborated in three stages.

Firstly, in making known Christ’s riches to the Gentiles, ‘*this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ’* (3:8), the riches he possesses in Himself and which He bestows on those who come to Him. They include resurrection from the death of sin, victorious enthronement with Christ in the heavenlies, reconciliation with God, incorporation with Jewish believers in His new society, the end of hostility and the beginning of peace, access to the Father through Christ and by the Spirit, membership of His kingdom and household, being an integral part of His dwelling among humanity, and all of this as only a foretaste of the riches to come, the riches of the glory of the inheritance which God will give to all His people on the last day. Paul calls these riches ‘*boundless*’ which literally means ‘not to be tracked out.’ Dynamically equivalent terms might be ‘unsearchable,’ ‘inexhaustible,’ or ‘incalculable.’

Paul has just touched on two of the strongest incentives for evangelism. He began by emphasising that the revelation and the commission given to him belonged together. All revealed truth is held in stewardship. It is given to be shared. Paul then went on to emphasise the invaluable content of the message itself. He was convinced that Christ never impoverishes those who put their trust in Him. In fact, He immeasurably enriches them. Here was God’s double obligation: to share God’s truth and to share Christ’s riches.

The second stage of Paul’s privileged ministry was to make known the mystery to all humanity: ‘*to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things’* (3:9). At first this seems to be saying the same thing as the preceding verse but there are three distinct differences.

First, the preaching of the gospel is not here defined as ‘announcing good news’ (Greek: *euangelizo*) but as ‘enlightening’ (‘*make plain’* in NIV; Greek: *photizo*), a word he has already used in 1:18. The emphasis is not now on the content of the message but is on the condition of those hearing it (darkness and ignorance). Jesus had told Paul at His conversion that His commission was ‘*to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God’* (Acts 26:17,18). The prince of darkness holds men and women in darkness and only a supernatural ‘enlightenment’ can open their eyes to see. Our responsibility is to be faithful in spreading the gospel because this is the means God has ordained to bring His light to those in darkness.

A second difference between verses 8 and 9 is Paul’s description of his message. In 3:8 he called it ‘*the unsearchable riches of Christ’* but in 3:9 ‘*the administration of this mystery.*’Christ’s ‘*unsearchable riches’* is the broader term. It embraces Christ’s remedy for the Gentile alienation from both God and from Israel. The ‘*administration of this mystery’* is Paul’s particular commission within the church.

The third difference between verses 8 and 9 is that Paul directs his ministry to ‘*the Gentiles’* in 3:8 but to ‘*everyone’* in 3:9. This was necessary because the mystery concerned both Jews and Gentiles. It was a message of mutual reconciliation and joint membership in God’s new society, the new humanity He was creating. This is probably why Paul concludes 3:9 by describing God as the One ‘*who created all things.’* He who created the universe has now begun a new creation.

So the first stage of Paul’s privileged ministry was making known Christ’s riches to the Gentiles. The second stage was making known the mystery to all humanity. The third stage is making known God’s wisdom to the cosmic powers: ’*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’* (3:10). Though the gospel is primarily addressed to humans, it brings a message to *‘to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms’* (3:10). What does this mean?

The first result from the preaching of Christ’s ‘*unsearchable riches’* and the ‘*mystery’* was the birth and growth of the church. Gentiles and Jews embraced the gospel, were converted, and found themselves joint members of the family of God and the body of Christ. This new multi-racial humanity displayed the wisdom of God. In fact the coming into existence of the church as a community of saved and reconciled people was at one and the same time a public demonstration of God’s power, grace and wisdom: first of God’s mighty resurrection power (1:19-2:6), next of His immeasurable grace and kindness (2:7) and now here of His ‘*manifold wisdom’* (3:10). The word for ‘*manifold’* means ‘many coloured’ and was used to describe embroidered cloths or woven carpets. The church as a multi-racial, multi-cultural community is a tapestry, a human community with unique diversity and harmony. The church, God’s many coloured society, is a reflection of the many coloured wisdom of God.

As the gospel spreads throughout the world, this new and variegated Christian community develops. Among those watching this happen are ‘*rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms’* (3:10). Paul doesn’t clarify if he has in mind godly powers, hostile powers, or both. Those he does have in mind will see and understand His master plan as it is played out through the church. God reveals His glory to humans through the old creation, the universe, but He reveals His wisdom to angels through the new creation, the church. These ‘*rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms’* learn from the church not only ‘*the manifold wisdom of God*’ but also ‘*his eternal purpose’* (3:11). He has *‘accomplished’* this purpose ‘*in Christ Jesus our Lord’* (3:11) in history through His death and resurrection, the gift of the Spirit, the preaching of the gospel and the creation of the church. For ‘*in him*,*’* in Christ, ‘*and through faith in him*,*’* all of us, whether Jews or Gentiles ‘*approach God with freedom and confidence’* (3:12). This priesthood of all believers is a foundational privilege of all who are in Christ.

Looking back over Paul’s outline of the privilege given him by God’s grace to be the apostle to the Gentiles, three phases were noted. First, God made known the mystery of His plan to Paul himself (and other apostles and prophets [3:5]) by revelation. Secondly, He commissioned Paul (and others) to preach the gospel to everyone around the world. Thirdly, His manifold wisdom and eternal purpose were made known to the principalities and powers through the emergence of the church as they watched it grow.

Because of the freedom of approach to the eternal God, and because of the greatness of His purpose within the scope and glory to which every Christian has been brought, Paul urges ‘*I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory’* (3:13). Paul was well aware that his readers might lose heart because he, as the apostle and champion of the Gentiles was in prison. But he saw his imprisonment was for their ‘*glory*.’ Their apostle was continuing to live out the sufferings of Christ (Colossians 1:24) and this was all in the loving wisdom and purpose of God. Christ was being magnified by Paul’s weakness and confinement. With God nothing is wasted.

Without direct referencing these studies have drawn, sometimes heavily, on:

‘*The Epistles to the Colossians and the Ephesians’* (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries) by F. F. Bruce (William B Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1984)

*‘Ephesians’* (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries) by F. Foulkes (Inter-Varsity Press, Nottingham, England, 1989)

*‘The Message of Ephesians’* (The Bible Speaks Today Series) by John R. W. Stott (Inter-Varsity Press, Nottingham, England, 1999)

‘*The Prison Letters* (Paul for Everyone)’ by Tom Wright (SPCK, London, 2004)

‘*Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words’* by W. E. Vine (Thomas Nelson, Nashville, TN, 1996)