

“God’s Eternal Purpose in the Church”

Ephesians 3:1-13

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Introduction:

1. In a few days it will be census day. You’ve already received your form in the mail and have probably looked over its questions. Let’s conduct a brief census of our own this morning. How many of you want to live a joyful, peaceful life free from trouble or discouragement? Go ahead; raise your hands. How many of you want to suffer, experience trials, tears and turmoil and want to battle discouragement and depression? Let’s see how many raise their hands now? One more question, how many think that God owes you the first alternative rather than the second?

2. One of the difficulties of the life of true faith is waiting for the Lord. We act like children on a trip. “Are we there yet?” Complicating the issue is the false teaching, warmly received by many, that God doesn’t want us to suffer and he wants to experience great physical blessing in this present age. What amazes me is that anyone who has seriously read the New Testament Scriptures could ever hold such expectations. What should probably amaze me more is that I know what God the Holy Spirit tells me in the word and I still drift into false expectations.

3. Paul, the writer of this letter, certainly was not led astray by such delusions. As he wrote this letter, he was suffering as a prisoner—a captive of the Roman Empire. Yet as we listen to Paul, we do not hear him complaining about his condition or mumbling under his breath that God had let him down. Instead, we are listening to a man who was content, confident in his Lord, and very willing to suffer whatever the Lord Jesus brought his way.

4. Why did Paul have this attitude? We can probably suggest a number of reasons, such as his high view of Christ’s supremacy and all-sufficiency. Along with this was his correct view of God’s eternal purpose. Paul understood that God was working in human history to glorify his name in the Lord Jesus Christ, and he was glad to be part of that plan, regardless of the personal problems that brought his way. Let’s look at this plan and how an understanding of it can help us.

Exposition:

I. Paul evaluated all things according to their relationship to God's eternal purpose in Christ.

A. He understood that his sufferings were subservient to that purpose.

1. He viewed himself, not as a prisoner of Rome, but of Christ Jesus. See 4:1; 2 Tm 1:8; Phm 1:1,9. He knew who was really in control of human events. A Biblical view of God's sovereignty gives hope even in the most difficult situations.

2. He viewed his sufferings as contributing to the good of others—Gentiles! Do we realize the radical change of mind this required (cf. Ph 3:4-7)? Think of it—a Jew suffering for the good of Gentiles. But Paul gladly suffered because he knew the change that Christ had made. This must have been very moving for the Ephesian Gentiles to hear that Paul had been suffering for their good.

Action Step: Let us always remember that the ground is level at the foot of the cross. In Christ there is no reason for racial, ethnic, educational, economic or gender preference. In fact, a person from one classification should be willing to suffer for those from others.

B. His message focused on Jesus Christ—"the mystery of Christ".

1. "Mystery" means something that would have remained unknown unless God had revealed it. He calls it the "mystery of Christ" (3:4), because Christ is both the source and substance of the mystery.

2. Paul knew that God's promises were wrapped up in Christ—"the promise in Christ Jesus" (3:6). You can never separate God's promises from Christ.

Apply: Are you relying on Christ?

II. Paul accepted God's right to administer his eternal purpose.

A. God chose Paul to be an instrument of his purpose. One day the Lord stepped into Paul's life and said to him, "From now on you will follow my orders—end of discussion."

1. This choice involved a place of honor for Paul. He knew that he was one of the "holy apostles". Wow!

Apply: Remember that you are highly honored. God has made you a saint, a holy one.

2. This choice made Paul a servant. The grace that he had received, he was to pass on to others—"that was given to me for you" (3:2).

Point: Paul's job was not to sit around and read his own press releases. He knew the grace that God had given him, but he wasn't wrapped up in it. His burning desire was to do good for others with the grace he had received. We are not here to please ourselves! Look at each other and think, "for you... for you... for you... for you... for you... for you..."

Apply: One of the difficult tasks of the Christian life is to hold on to a high esteem of being greatly blessed at the same time of sensing the obligation to serve others. Let Christ's mind be in you (Ph 2:5).

B. God chose the time to make known his revelation.

1. He chose to pass by previous generations. Nobody in former times had the knowledge made known in the New Testament writings (cf. 1 Pt 1:1-12). The Old Testament Scriptures do speak of the salvation of the Gentiles in many places, as we have seen in our Sunday night study of the doctrine of eschatology.

2. He chose this age to make his purpose clear to his holy apostles and prophets.

a. This revelation came by the Holy Spirit, who was poured out by the ascended Christ on Pentecost (Ac 2:14-33). In this way, the promise of Christ to his apostles was fulfilled (Jn 15:26; 16:12-15).

b. This verse clearly shows the finality of the New Testament Scriptures. This means that to interpret the Old Testament Scriptures properly, we must read them in the fuller and final light of the New Testament Scriptures.

Apply: This approach is essential to a correct understanding of the doctrines of the church, the Christian life, and the last things.

III. Paul proclaimed God's eternal purpose in the church.

A. He declared that the Gentiles belong to the body of Christ.

1. Notice carefully and clearly that now Jews and Gentiles form one or the same body. God does not have two people. There is one people of God, and this one people was formed through the gospel.

2. This was beyond the understanding of Old Testament saints. Abraham, David and Isaiah knew that Gentiles would be saved, but they did not know that they would be in union together in the church, the body of Christ.

Point: Since this is God's purpose in Christ, we should not look for a separate hope for Israel outside of the church. Any such purpose would degrade from Christ's honor in the church.

B. He declared that the Gentiles share in the promise.

1. There was an old chorus that said, "Every promise in the book is mine—every chapter, every verse, every line." I'm sure that people who held to Dispensational theology did not like song, and people who held to Covenant theology loved it. However, this verse does not address that controversy.

2. What this verse does say is that in Christ those in the church share in God's promise. This includes justification by grace through faith in Christ, the reception of the Holy Spirit, and the still to be fulfilled promise of a new heaven and new earth.

Point: True Christianity always has a forward look. Many things **now are** ours in Christ, but there are others that we have **not yet** received.

C. He declared that the Gentiles are fellow heirs.

1. We are heirs because God has adopted us as adult sons. While we may rightly use the phrase "sons and daughters of God" (2 Cor 6:18), in regard to the inheritance, all are adult sons (Gal 4:7).

2. All those in Christ, both Jews and Gentiles, are fellow heirs of the same inheritance. We share a common hope and a common destiny (Heb 11:39-40).

Apply: Since we are heirs, we must wait patiently for the time set by the Father for us to receive our inheritance. On the one hand, do not act like you have received all things already. That attitude will only lead to disillusionment and doubt. On the other hand, fix your thoughts on what you will receive. Hope is essential to Christian living in this present evil age.

Apply: You can only be an heir of all things if you are in Christ by faith? Have you turned from your sins and trusted in Jesus Christ alone to be right with God and to have a true and lasting hope?