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I Know A Secret

Scripture text: Ephesians 3

I KNOW A SECRET

Ephesians 3:1–13

I was once asked to be character witness at a child-custody trial. I was grateful that the case was being tried at a small rural county seat rather than in a big city, because it was my first experience on the witness stand. I have since learned that the location of the court makes little difference. All trials can be difficult and it is no fun to be a witness at any.

The prosecutor's first question caught me unawares, **“Reverend, do you think that a man who has been in prison is fit to raise a child?”**

I was supposed to answer “Yes” or “No,” so the reply I gave did not make the judge too happy. “Well,” I said slowly, stalling for time, “**I guess it depends on the man.** Some very famous people have been in jail and have made the world a better place because of their experiences—**John Bunyan**, for example, and the great **Apostle Paul.**”

I could have given other examples from the Bible, but I detected that my answer was not acceptable to the court.

Twice in this letter, Paul reminds his readers that he is a prisoner (Eph. 3:1; 4:1), and at the close he calls himself an **“ambassador in bonds”** (Eph. 6:20). No doubt the Ephesians were asking, **“Why is Paul a prisoner in Rome? Why would God permit such a thing?”** In this paragraph, Paul explains his situation and, in doing so, also explains one of the greatest truths in this letter, the **“mystery” of the church**. In the New Testament, a mystery is not something eerie or inscrutable, but rather **“a truth that was hidden by God in times past and is now revealed to those who are in His family.”**

A mystery is a “sacred secret” that is unknown to unbelievers, **but understood and treasured by the people of God.**

Paul explains the mystery—the **Gentile believers are now united to the Jewish believers in one body, the church** (Eph. 3:6). He had mentioned this new work of God, so his readers were familiar with the concept (Eph. 1:10; 2:11, 22). But now Paul explains the tremendous impact of this “**sacred secret**” that had so possessed his own life and ministry. Actually, this explanation is almost a parenthesis in the letter, for Paul begins this section **with the intention of praying for his readers.**

Compare Ephesians 3:1 and 14.

***Ephesians 3:1** For this reason I, Paul, a **prisoner** for Christ Jesus on behalf of you **Gentiles**—*

***Ephesians 3:14** For this reason I bow my knees before the Father,*

His use of the words “**prisoner**” and “**Gentiles**” leads him into this important explanation of the “**mystery of the church,**” and in this explanation, Paul shows us that the “mystery” is important to four different groups of persons.

1. It Was Important to Paul (Eph. 3:1–5)

The best way to grasp the importance of **“the mystery”** in Paul’s life is to focus on the two descriptions he gives of himself in this section. He begins by calling himself **“a prisoner”** (Eph. 3:1), and then he calls himself **“a minister”** (Eph. 3:7). Paul was a prisoner because **he believed in God’s new program of uniting believing Jews and Gentiles into one body, the church.** The orthodox Jews in Paul’s day considered the Gentiles **“dogs,”** but some of the Christian Jews did not have a much better attitude toward the Gentiles.

Paul was a leader in Jewish orthodoxy when Christ saved him (Gal. 1:11–24; Phil. 3:1–11); yet in the providence of God, he began his early ministry in a local church in Antioch that was composed of both Jews and Gentiles (Acts 11:19–26).

When the council was held at Jerusalem to determine the status of believing Gentiles, **Paul courageously defended the grace of God and the unity of the church** (Acts 15; Gal. 2:1–10).

Paul knew from the very beginning of his Christian life that God had called him to take the Gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15; 26:13–18), and **he was not disobedient to that call**. Wherever Paul ministered, he founded local churches composed of believing Jews and Gentiles, all “one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28).

Because Paul was the “apostle to the Gentiles” (Rom. 11:13; 15:15–16; Eph. 3:8; 1 Tim. 2:7), **he was accused of being prejudiced against the Jews, particularly the Jewish believers in Jerusalem and Judea.**

The special offering Paul collected for the needy believers in Judea **should have shown the goodwill that existed between these churches and the churches Paul founded** (Rom. 15:25–33).

Paul delivered the offering in person (Acts 21:17–19), and from all evidence, **it was graciously received by the Judean Christians.**

Even though Paul took drastic steps to pacify the Jewish believers, there was a riot in the temple and Paul was arrested (Acts 21:30–33).

The rest of the Book of Acts explains how Paul got from Jerusalem to Rome, “a prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles” (Eph. 3:1). Had Paul compromised his message and encouraged the selfish prejudices of the Jews he probably would have been released. Paul was not only a “prisoner” because of “the mystery,” but he was also a “minister.”

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.**