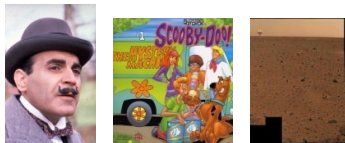


Martin White. 24<sup>th</sup> February 2008. Ephesians 3:7-8

### A servant of the Gospel

Last week Colin talked about the start of Ephesians 3 where Paul was explaining how God had called him to explain the "mystery of God" - namely that God's Gospel is so big and His Grace so far reaching that it is not just for God's People - the Israelites, but actually it is for everyone who believes and responds to God's grace - from every tribe and tongue and language and people.

I don't know about anyone else, but sometimes reading through books like Ephesians can be difficult to get my head round, and when Paul starts talking about mysteries within that, I can feel like you need to be like an amazing detective (**Poirot/Scooby Doo**) or it's something we'll never know (**life on Mars/Belly button fluff!**) and so I feel like I'm never going to understand.



I thought that Colin explained it well, but just to recap, when the Bible talks about a mystery, it doesn't mean you need to be clever to understand it, it means that you can't understand it unless God shows you.

**Mystery - Rico Tice → what's my mother's maiden name?** - It's not hard to grasp, just need to be told and then we'll know.

The mystery that God has revealed in Ephesians is that God's Grace is for Gentiles (non-Jews) as well as Jews and that as we are reconciled to God; we are also reconciled to each other - making us, diverse, divided people into "one new man" in Christ.

Paul starts Ephesians 3 by saying:

**"For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles..."** Ephesians 3:1

The reason he is a prisoner at the time of writing Ephesians (as you can read in Acts 21) is:

"They (Jews from the Province of Asia) had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian in the city with Paul and assumed that Paul had brought him into the temple area." Acts 21:28

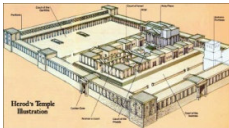
Paul was accused of taking Trophimus - a Gentile, "into God's Presence" without going by the correct route - almost as if acting out this mystery.

There seems to be a bit of discussion about whether Paul actually did take him into the Temple, but the fact that people assumed he had show that this is the kind of thing they expected him to do - presumably because he was known for teaching that Gentiles didn't have to become Jews in order to have access to God.

And when, in Ephesians 2:14, Paul said:

"For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility," Ephesians 2:14

He would have had in mind a real wall in the Jerusalem Temple which was exactly that.



On this wall was a notice in Greek and Latin, warning Gentiles to keep out on pain of death. In A.D. 1871 archaeologists who were excavating the site of the temple found a pillar with this inscription,

"No man of another nation is to enter within the fence and enclosure around the temple and whoever is caught will have himself to blame that his death ensues."

Before this mystery was revealed by God to Paul, the only way any of us would have had to come to God was to become converts to Judaism - circumcision, sacrifice and obedience to all the Law.

Now he is in prison for taking a gentile in past this wall so that Paul - a Jew and Trophimus - a gentile, could pray together to God.

Spiritually speaking, God has utterly destroyed this wall - torn it down to say "You are all welcome!"

So the mystery Paul is declaring is that the Gospel is for everyone - and the Church in Ephesus, and The Crown Church in Birmingham are both a result of this.

And this is the reason that Paul is in prison:

"Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles" v.1

And the point of him writing is to encourage this young church.

- Encouraging them to have confidence in Jesus & the Gospel - right in the shadow of the Temple of Artemis - largest building in the world - temple to false god. Reassuring them that actually Jesus Christ is the Supreme God over all.
- Encouraging them to keep going after they have faced a time of persecution
- Encouraging them to look at the bigger picture and understand why Paul is in chains (prison)

Later in the chapter, he writes:

"I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory." Ephesians 3:13

You can imagine being a young Christian in Ephesus, you have lived through a riot, you can see the biggest temple in the world - to a false god, every time you go out your front door and the person who has started your church is in prison and suffering for this new faith you now have.

→ Normally if you get a letter telling you not to be discouraged, it's because you are discouraged!

What does Paul draw on to bring encouragement into this potentially dire situation?

He tells them about the revelation God has given to him and lets them in on the mystery God has revealed - as Colin talked about last week.

**(Send someone out the room)**

**Talk about interviews when you are sent out the room and you aren't included in the discussion**

It's powerful to be let in on the secret!

**So what's the secret? What is the message? - That we can all be included in the working out of God's plan.**

This fact absolutely changed the course of Paul's life - from the time of his conversion:

**"But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name." Acts 9:15-16**

...And on through the whole of his life.

"Even I, Paul, who used to persecute the Church and blaspheme against Jesus, who saw to the stoning of Stephen...the chief of sinners! Even I can be included in this wonderful Gospel of salvation!"

**"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." Ephesians 3:7-8**

Paul was very clear about his position as a Christian - "less than the least of all God's people"

**Bishop Alf Stanway (Pittsburg) - speaking to people about to be ordained.**

**If other people knew you the way God knows you - your failings; your thoughts; your sins - what secretly goes on in your mind that no-one else knows about; would they trust you with the kind of work that God trusts you with? God has supreme confidence in His Grace. He'll take the likes of you and me and Paul and give you the privilege of being His saints and fellow workers.**

This doesn't mean that Paul was being falsely modest; it was, I believe, him stating the facts as he saw them.

And it didn't mean that he skulked off into a corner like some lowly worm. He was able to both see himself as a leader and apostle to the whole of the *Gentile* world - to carry huge authority and be completely bold and confident in Christ; but also remember that it was all due to God's grace, rather than what he deserved.

John Stott makes the comment that:

**Paul minimized himself to magnify his message (John Stott)**

So here is Paul, once an enemy and persecutor of Christ, now entrusted by God's grace with the mystery that this Gospel is for anyone - even *Gentiles*; even Jewish persecutors; even chiefs of sinners; even someone who is less than the least of all God's people!

It is the ultimate message of reconciliation and inclusion; everyone can know and be included in God's Grace.

And this is the message that he has become a servant of.

Some Bible versions translate the word as "minister of the gospel" here in the NIV it is translated "servant of the gospel."

Actually the literal translation is "slave of the gospel"

(It has sometimes been softened because of the connotations of slavery in America and Britain of 300 years ago)

Actually softening this has, I believe taken away from the meaning and force Paul intended it to have.

What Paul said and what he meant to say is that his whole life was an act of service to God as he worked out the truth that he was no longer his own, but had been bought at a price.

**"Slave" means a man who is not at his own disposal, but is his master's purchased property. Bought to serve his master's needs, to be at his beck and call every moment, the slave's sole business is to do as he is told. Christian service therefore means, first and foremost, living out a slave relationship to one's Saviour." 1 Corinthians. 6:19-20.**

What work does Christ set his servants to do? The way that they serve him, he tells them, is by becoming the slaves of their fellow-servants and being willing to do literally anything, however costly, irksome, or undignified, in order to help

them. This is what love means, as he himself showed at the Last supper when he played the slave's part and washed the disciples' feet.

When the New Testament speaks of ministering to the saints, it means not primarily preaching to them but devoting time, trouble, and substance to giving them all the practical help possible. The essence of Christian service is loyalty to the king expressing itself in care for his servants (Matthew 25: 31-46).

James Packer, [Your Father Loves You](#), Harold Shaw Publishers, 1986.

And so as he wrote the letter in chains from his prison, I believe he saw the chains, not as the chains of a roman prisoner, but as the marks of a slave of the Gospel.

And so he is able to say - and mean:

**"I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles" 3:1**

And I believe that having this perspective is actually freeing; he is not tied up and useless in prison, he is serving God's people - the Gentiles and advancing God's Message.

Paul knows it isn't his message, it's not his idea; it is God's. But he is so captivated by it that he has voluntarily, gladly given his life to serve it. He has become a "bondservant" → someone who has chosen to remain a servant for life, out of his love for his Master.

**"If you buy a Hebrew servant, he is to serve you for six years. But in the seventh year, he shall go free..."**

**"But if the servant declares, 'I love my master and my wife and children and do not want to go free,' then his master must take him before the judges. He shall take him to the door or the doorpost and pierce his ear with an awl. Then he will be his servant for life." Exodus 21:2, 5-6**

**(Act out - volunteer, ear, hammer, nail)**

Paul has seen in the Gospel something so amazing that he is ready to give his life to serve it.

We're often a bit more nervous about making a similar commitment in a society that stresses our personal rights so much.

We like the "God's sons" part, but not the "God's slaves" part so much. And yet through the New Testament this is the example set for us. We are told:

"Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:  
Who, being in very nature God,  
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,  
but made himself nothing,  
taking the very nature of a servant," Phil 2:5-7

As well as living this example, Jesus also taught the same thing:

"When he (Jesus) noticed how the guests picked the places of honour at the table, he told them this parable: "When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honour, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, 'Give this man your seat.' Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place. But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, 'Friend, move up to a better place.' Then you will be honored in the presence of all your fellow guests. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."  
Luke 14:7-11

Bloke in our wedding photos!

The position Jesus wants us to take is one of servant; slave. Slave to this message of grace - "We are all free to know God and share in His love and forgiveness"

And slave to God's people. If we want God to see us as great - we need to become the least; a servant to all.

That's our job description - and actually if we do live as God's slave, then we know God's joy and fulfillment.

Winston Churchill said that if we haven't found something worth giving our lives for, then we're not living.

And when this is our attitude - to be a slave of Christ, as Paul referred to himself, then God raises us up to be sons.

Jesus said:

"I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you." John 15:15