

EPHESIANS

(Study 5) Ephesians 3:1-21: Week beginning 10 March 2008

For much of the letter so far, Paul has been spelling out to his readers the awesome privileges of being *in Christ* (1:3). God has given us every spiritual blessing in Him (1:3-14); we are the beneficiaries of God's glorious inheritance for us and His awesome power (1:15-23). We who were dead have been made alive by God's grace (2:1-10); we who were far off have been brought near as God makes us fellow-citizens with His people (2:11-22). Now Paul turns to pray for his readers (3:1), but as he does so, he remembers he is himself a prisoner for the Ephesians, and takes the opportunity to explain why he's suffering (3:1-13). Broadly, the thrust of this first section is: "Now you ought to be able to see why the suffering was worth it!". Next (3:14-21), he returns to tell the Ephesians what he is praying for them.

"Now d'you see why my sufferings for you were worth it?" (1-13)

This section is bracketed by Paul's reference to his sufferings. He's *the prisoner of Christ Jesus* (1) and he asks them *not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory* (13). He is writing from prison (as 6:20, where he mentions his *chains*, also makes clear). He does not say from which prison, or where; but the book of Acts makes clear that much of the persecution Paul faces stems from his determination to make it known that Gentiles who turn to Christ may enjoy all the privileges of salvation without having to become Jewish (see, for instance, Acts 22:17-29.)

Paul's concern here is that his readers don't become *discouraged because of [his] sufferings for [them]*¹ (Eph 3:13). Does this, perhaps, mean that because Paul was opposed and unpopular, his Gentile readers might begin to doubt their full salvation as Gentiles and want to become Jewish? Or that his Jewish readers might follow Peter's unhelpful example in Galatians 2:11-13, drawing back from fellowship with Gentile Christians? Or that the Ephesians might consider Paul an oddball, facing all that suffering, and not want to listen to him, or to suffer for the gospel themselves? Whichever it is, we will see Paul's answers...

Verse 2: The English word *administration* (NIV) normally carries for us connotations of running something, which is nothing to do with this; perhaps a more suitable equivalent for the Greek word is ESV's *stewardship*. God gave Paul this message to look after.

Verses 3, 4, 6, 9: *mystery* is a key word here. You will see from the context that what Paul is referring to is in fact an ex-mystery! His repeated emphasis is that God has made this known! I take it that he likes using this word because it expresses people's need to know: for to them, also, it is a mystery until the truth is told them. (Not a mystery in the sense of something they are puzzling over, but in the sense of something they simply don't know until told.)

Verse 4: *In reading this* - i.e. in reading the letter so far, where Paul has spelt out the extraordinary benefits of being "in Christ".

Verse 10: The church is the way God makes His wisdom known all over the universe!

Questions

2-3. God revealed a mystery to Paul. Why does he call it a *mystery*?

¹ this, and the references to his imprisonment, are the only references in the letter to Paul's specific circumstances at the time of writing.

3-5 How has this mystery been made known?

6. What is this revealed mystery? (In your own words...)

6. What does he say about the status of those who are Christian?

7-9. What task did God then give Paul?

7-12 Make a list of all the reasons why Paul feels compelled to keep on making this truth known, in spite of everything.

13. Are we tempted either to distance ourselves from Paul, or to cool off in our desire to make the gospel known? How does Paul's argument in these verses encourage us to value this message and make it known ourselves?

Paul's prayer for his readers (14-21)

Paul returns to the prayer he was about to introduce in 3:1. *For this reason* shows that his goals for his friends stem directly from the amazing gospel benefits he's outlined. He wants them to know them, feel them, be convinced by them. When (17) he prays for Christ to dwell in their hearts, he is in a sense praying for more of what they already have (1:14).

14-17a: What does Paul pray for these people?

What does Paul say here about God?

17b-19: Now what does Paul pray?

Why d'you think he's so keen for them (and us) to grasp this?

20-21: What does Paul claim here? What difference should it make to us?