



Turning Lost Students into Christ-Centered Laborers

## THE GOSPEL ISN'T SIMPLY FOR US • Blessed to Be a Blessing

### What Do I Need to Know About the Passage?

Ephesians 3:1-13

In this section of Scripture, the Apostle Paul is explaining the special mission to which God called him, in preaching the gospel to the Gentiles. Often Paul writes with several purposes in mind. While he explains this amazing new turn in God's plan to include both Jew and Gentile in one body, the church, he has an eye on a current division in the Ephesian church that is taking place along Jewish and Gentile lines. In highlighting God's salvation plan to join Jew and Gentile in Christ, and therefore, the church, Paul is also underscoring the need for both groups within the church to get along.

#### Ephesians 3:1-2

The study highlights one point in this section, and that is Paul's attitude toward the ministry. He sees this ministry as God's "grace" to him. In Ephesians 3:8, Paul again refers to this ministry as God's "grace" to him, and states how unworthy he feels for the task.

The great missionary, David Livingstone, models this attitude in a speech that he gave at Cambridge in 1857. He said:

*For my own part, I have never ceased to rejoice that God has appointed me to such an office. People talk of the sacrifice I have made in spending much of my life in Africa. Can that be called a sacrifice which is simply paid back as a small part of a great debt owing to our God, which we can never repay? Is that a sacrifice which brings its own blest reward in healthful activity, ... peace of mind, and a bright hope of a glorious destiny hereafter? Away with the word in such a view, and with it such a thought! It is emphatically no sacrifice. Say rather it is a privilege.*

God wants us to minister, like Paul and David Livingstone, with a sense of gratitude for the opportunity, and our own unworthiness so that we'd rely on God for the completion of such a great task.

#### Ephesians 3:3-6

Paul here discusses that God's plan to bring salvation to the Gentiles was a mystery. By this he means it was not revealed in the Old Testament.

What was revealed in the Old Testament is that somehow God would use Israel as a means to bring salvation to the Gentiles. How that would happen was not disclosed. In Genesis 12:1-3, God promised to make Abraham into a great nation, which was fulfilled in Israel. He further stated that all of the nations would be blessed through Israel. They were blessed to be a blessing. So were we.

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### What's the Big Idea?

Paul was willing to persevere and sacrifice so the Gentiles could know Christ. The compelling reason as to why is found in the phrase, "God's grace that was given to me for you." Though Paul was "less than the least of God's people," he was the chosen recipient of God's grace. He understood that we are "blessed in order to be a blessing." We are not merely the objects of God's grace but the channels of it to others.

That is why he was engaged in taking the gospel to the Gentiles, and why Jews and Gentile should seek to love and serve one another in the body of Christ.

### What's the Problem?

We have the same tendencies that Israel did. They failed to fulfill the mandate of Genesis 12:1-3 to bless the world with the knowledge of God. We need the grace of God to help us overcome our selfishness, prejudice, and aversion to suffer so that we can be conduits of the gospel to a lost world.



As we saw in last week's study, however, Israel's heart went bad and they failed in their mission to bless the nations. When Jesus came Israel rejected Him, was herself judged for her unbelief, and the gospel message was sent forth to all the nations.

God's salvation plan took an unexpected turn, a mystery that was not revealed in the Old Testament. Now God's plan for salvation is through the church – which is a new “body” made up of believing Jews, as well as believers from Gentile nations. The church is a multi-ethnic kingdom whose only qualification for membership is faith in Christ.

Again, Paul's other motivation for mentioning all of this, is to spur the Jewish and Gentile believers in the Ephesian church to function together lovingly as one unified body. Paul anticipated that showing them God's amazing plan in putting Jew together with Gentile, would help.

It is interesting to note that God chose Paul, a devout Jew, who had actually, in his zeal, persecuted Christians to be the bearer of this message to the Gentiles. Paul's fanatical Judaism made him, once converted, a perfect ambassador: one who understood, better than anyone, the Jewish law and Jewish prejudice against the Gentiles.

#### Ephesians 3:8-12

The main purpose of this section is to demonstrate how the church reflects the wisdom of God in fulfilling His purposes. In Ephesians 1:9-10, Paul says that God's great plan has always been to bring “all things on earth” under the kingship of His Son. With the less than impressive spiritual life of the tiny nation of Israel, God's plans for global worship must have seemed to the world, as well as the heavenly host, as floundering. Worse still, when Jesus the Messiah did come, Israel actually rejected her savior.

Then, in a stunning turn of events, the Lord was resurrected and the gospel was propelled out to the nations, bringing worship to the true God from points all over the globe. This was a mystery, something that no one foresaw, which displays the manifold wisdom of God.

#### Ephesians 3:13

As this section of Scripture began with Paul stating he was a prisoner for Christ (verse 3:1), it closes with Paul returning once again to the subject of his suffering as an apostle. Suffering that among other things, included imprisonment.

Jesus says in John 12:24, “that unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.” Obviously, the major referent for the Lord's words was Himself. But, it was clear to Paul that these words had implications for all those who were willing to be apostles (sent ones) reaching new groups of people with the gospel. Suffering and sacrifice serve as fertilizer for the new life that springs up wherever the gospel goes. Paul gladly embraced this part of his missionary task, and found joy in participating in the sufferings of Christ.

All those who have a heart to be used as “sent ones” of the gospel must see it as an enormous privilege, for which they are completely unworthy. They must also embrace the hardship that accompanies the mission “rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering for the Name” (Acts 5:41).

## What's Our Response?

You want to see the members of your Bible study choose to be ambassadors to the world around them.

To do this, help them:

1. Internalize the concept that they have been blessed to be a blessing.
2. Identify a group of people to whom they can be ambassadors for Christ.
3. Reckon with the personal sacrifices this may require.
4. Discuss what initial steps they could take in order to act as apostles to this group. They might begin by praying for them, or by pairing up with another Christian in the study to put up posters for a Bible study in that area, or plan a specific outreach targeted at appealing to this group. Brainstorm ideas and see who might be interested in following through.

## What Are the Questions?

Ephesians 3:1-13

### LAUNCH

What is the greatest gift you ever gave?

If you could either receive an amazing gift or give one, which would you choose? Why?

### EXPLORE

Read Ephesians 3:1-8.

1. Look at vv. 1-2 and 7-8. What was Paul's attitude toward his ministry?
2. How was Paul's ministry the result of grace? Read 1 Tim 1:12-14.
3. What does this teach us about proper motivation and attitude in ministry? What would a wrong attitude toward ministry look like?
4. What was the expectation of Jews concerning the Messiah? What did they think would happen to the Gentiles when the Messiah came? What happened instead?
5. Read Genesis 12:1-3. How do you think God intended for Israel to bless other nations?
6. From what you know of the Old Testament what were some reasons that Israel failed in this mission?

7. Read verses 3-6. What are the contents of this mystery?

Read Ephesians 3:7-12

8. Look at vv. 7-8 and then read Philippians 3:4-7. An apostle is one sent to reach a specific group or people. Why do you think God chose Paul to reach the Gentiles? Would you have sent him?
9. What would have been some of the personal and cultural issues Paul would have had to wrestle with in preaching to the Gentiles?
10. In v. 8, Paul states that he has been appointed by Christ to preach to the Gentiles the "unsearchable riches of Christ." What would you say are some of the unsearchable riches that are found in Christ?

Read 3:13

11. Read 1 Corinthians 4:9-13 and 2 Corinthians 11:24-29. Summarize the suffering Paul is referring to as he carried out his apostolic mission.

### APPLY

12. Israel lost her desire to be a blessing to the nations. Where does our desire to be a blessing to others come from?
13. Paul likens Christ to a treasure chest in which you can dig forever yet never stop discovering new treasure. How have you experienced this in your own life? What keeps you from experiencing this?
14. This passage reminds us that God's grace flows into our lives not only for our own benefit but also for the benefit of others. Paul clearly saw how he fit into the big picture of God's plan. How do you see yourself fitting in?
15. As you reflect on your background – interests, athletics, major, and even the lifestyle from which God rescued you – to what group on campus do you feel God might want you to be an ambassador? What are some steps you might take?
16. In light of this passage what would make us willing in spite of the personal sacrifice?

## What Are the Answers?

1. Paul refers to this ministry as God's grace to him, and states how unworthy he feels for the task. He saw the ministry as an honor and a privilege.
2. Paul recognized that not only was his salvation a gift of God but his ministry was as well. He was the "least of all the saints" as a former persecutor.
3. Ministry is a gift from God. It is an opportunity to express our love to Him. A wrong attitude is when we feel we are doing God a favor, and feel competent to handle it on our own.
4. They thought the Messiah would return, vindicate Israel, and judge the nations. Ironically, Jesus came, was rejected by Israel, and the gospel message was sent forth to the nations, as Israel herself was judged for her unbelief.
5. More important than the answer is for the group to see this principle of 'blessed to be a blessing' as part of God's original plan for Israel, and part of a consistent theme in plan of salvation.
6. Empty religion replacing true worship, hypocrisy, nationalism...
7. 3:6 offers the best summary.
8. Paul's fanatical Judaism made him, once converted, a perfect ambassador to the Gentiles: one who understood, better than anyone, the Jewish Law and Jewish prejudice toward the Gentiles.
9. Jews saw Gentiles as vile and unclean in every way (how and what they ate, worshiped, dressed, and lived) and it would have taken considerable humility and sacrifice for a Jew to minister to them.
10. You're not looking for a specific answer but have a few to share to get the group started.
11. Allow the group time to look up the passages and summarize some of Paul's sufferings.
12. Our desire to bless others flows from our experience of God's grace.
13. You want people to reflect on the intimacy of their relationship with Christ: are they drawing nearer, stagnating, or drifting away?
14. This is intentionally vague, but ideally they would see themselves as having a role in God's global plan of redemption through reaching others with the gospel.
15. Allow the group to discuss.
16. The grace of God that has been shown to us, among other things.

## Memorize

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 3:8