

Introduction

In the 1700s Maximillien Robespierre promised freedom to the French people in the form of a fairer representative government. What they got, however, was called the “Reign of Terror” that lasted eleven months. It included mass executions by guillotine as those with power sought to compel obedience to the state. Those in charge, including Robespierre himself, called themselves “terrorists”.

Today we tend to think of terrorism not as something an oppressive government conducts but as a tactic used by those fighting against an oppressive government. Today the terror in terrorism is still most often perpetrated against ordinary citizens. Terrorism is even more egregious when it has government backing.

Consider one of the more famous terrorists in history. He also oversaw public executions as a means of frightening people into compliance with his particular understanding of the world and his nation’s role in it. Like Robespierre he sought to enforce compliance through fear—through *terror*. He had government sanction to do this. Those in charge of his nation approved and essentially encouraged his reign of terror, even authorizing him to travel to foreign nations where his fellow citizens might be living. The need for forced compliance was so great he was, essentially, exempt from prosecution for his reign of terror.

It turns out he was not actually exempt from judgment, though he himself did not face it. Instead, the Lord Jesus interrupted Paul’s reign of terror, having suffered for Paul’s sins, and called him to serve Jesus instead of violently opposing him. Despite his crimes, for Paul there would be no judgment, no condemnation, no *retribution*. Jesus took those things upon himself. Instead, there would be blessing and honor and the gift of an incredible role to play in the fledgling church he had been trying to wipe out.

It seems preposterous that the Lord would call such a man to have such an influential role in the formation of the church. Paul, perhaps more than the other apostles, had tremendous impact on the nature of the church and its spread across the nations. Even more preposterous than this, however, is who God uses still today to prove his point, and his point is the gospel of Jesus. We’re in Ephesians 3.

^{Eph 3:7} Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God’s grace, which was given me by the working of his power. ⁸ To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, ⁹ and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, ¹⁰ so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. ¹¹ This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, ¹² in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him. ¹³ So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory.

The Gift of God's Grace

In verse 7 Paul refers back to the gospel message he just described. God in Christ through his Spirit is creating one new man out of the two hostile groups of Jew and Gentile. This was God's plan from the beginning. He always intended his people be a diverse group of people united by their faith in him. While this had been his plan from the beginning it was hidden; no one understood it. This mystery must be revealed in order to be comprehended, and this mystery was revealed to the apostles and prophets.

It is this gospel Paul refers to in verse 7. It is the good news that God in Christ through his Spirit is reconciling people from every tribe and language and people and nation to himself *and to each other* that Paul received. He says specifically he was made a *minister* of this gospel. This is the word for deacon. Paul was made a servant of the gospel of Jesus.

He says being made a servant of the gospel was the gift of God's grace. Remember Paul's story. His entire life was in opposition to the Lord Jesus. He had dedicated himself to wiping out all Jewish Christians—those who claimed Messiah had been crucified. Luke tells us he was *ravaging* the church in and around Israel. Then the Lord Jesus showed up to pour out his grace on Paul by the working of his power.

Paul's conversion and salvation were a miracle, a demonstration of God's incredible power. In an instant he changed Paul from one who hated Jesus into one who called out to Jesus in faith. Here, however, Paul is referring to more than his salvation. He means his very ministry, his service to God and to the world, is a gift of God's grace. He makes this plain in verse 8.

He claims he is the “very least” of all the saints, and he makes up a nearly nonsense word. The word “least” is superlative. There cannot be less than the least. There is little, then there is less, and finally there is least. In English we often use the suffix -er to make a comparative. I am hungry, but he is hungrier. We use -est to indicate a superlative—the *most*. I may be hungry, and he may be hungrier than I, but she is the *hungriest* of all. She has the *most* hunger. You cannot be more hungry than the one who has the most hunger.

Paul combines the comparative (-er) with the superlative (-est). He says he is the *lesser-est*, or maybe the *leaster* of all the saints. This isn't false humility; Paul understands that no one deserves salvation. It comes only by God's grace. Given his history of persecuting the church, he further understands that while no one deserves salvation, he actively deserved the opposite. His rebellion against God was above and beyond, yet through the working of God's power he was given this gift of God's grace and became an apostle.

He says the grace he was given was to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ. What a gift! He's declaring that while he is an apostle, joining the Twelve in the *office* of apostle, he is no superhuman. He is no super-saint. He has a unique and distinct role in the church, but he is not on a pedestal. He is no better than any other saint. In fact, he is *leaster* than the saints of God.

As an apostle he is a messenger of Christ. This message is the gospel of Jesus. He describes it here as “the unsearchable riches of Christ”. The word “unsearchable” is used in the Greek Old Testament to mean great and glorious, without number and without measure. You can't get to the end of the riches of Christ. It is impossible to search through the riches

of Christ because the more you search, the more you discover you haven't even come close to the end yet. When you enter Christ's treasure room you discover that the more you walk into it, the further back the back wall is. It gets further away, not closer! His treasures are so vast!

Paul's task was to proclaim this gospel to the Gentiles—to the nations, those who formerly were separated from the people of God. The work of God in Christ was to destroy the wall that separated the nations. His work was not merely to *allow* them to join the people of God, it was to create one new people of God, his church. He says in verse 9 his responsibility was to bring to light the mystery of God's plan that was hidden for ages. Now, in Christ, his plan is fully revealed, and this plan is good news for the nations.

It's really easy for us to miss the wonder that is the gospel. We're included in God's plans for the world! You don't have to have the right background. You don't have to come from the right family line. You don't have to come from money or from influence. You don't have to have the right education or know the right people. You don't have to have the most to offer. In fact, you don't have to have *anything* to offer. God's grace is *his* unsearchable riches in Christ—not *yours*!

Made Known

In verse 9 Paul adds a little qualifier that may seem out of place. His role as an apostle is to make clear what is God's plan for the world. This plan, this *mystery*, was "hidden for ages in God, *who created all things*". Why would he add this? Paul is speaking directly about God's sovereignty over history! He created the world, which means he has the right to determine the purpose for the world and to guide human history toward that purpose! It is, quite literally, *his* world, and we're just living in it!

In verse 10 Paul declares what the purpose of God's world is, ultimately. The mystery of Christ, God's plan that he kept hidden until he revealed it in Christ, is that *through the church* the manifold wisdom of God would be made known. He specifically says to whom it would be made known: to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

These rulers and authorities are spiritual beings that we cannot comprehend. They are likely good and evil, just as on earth there are good and evil people who interact with each other regularly. Surely it includes angels and demons, and who knows what other sort of beings God has created in the heavenly places. One thing is very clear: it is over these rulers and authorities that Christ's power and authority is far above. Whether they serve the Lord or they oppose the Lord, their power and authority is far beneath that of Jesus. We saw this in chapter 1.

Because we're human and because the physics of our universe are so finely tuned that with even the slightest change in some of the parameters the universe would cease to exist, we tend to think we're the center of all creation. Our default assumption tends to be that we're all that there is because this universe is so finely tuned for us to exist. Oh, sure, there are *angels and demons*, but they really just float in and around our world, right?

We know so very little. Paul refers to beings that seem to be outside of our sphere of existence. He says God is making known his manifold wisdom to these beings that we cannot even rightly comprehend. It is his "manifold wisdom" that is being made known. His wisdom is multifaceted. It sparkles like an expertly cut gem. It is *diverse*. The mechanism

for showing this multifaceted or diverse wisdom of God is Jew and Gentile united together in a local assembly of Christ. When God “shows off” he shows the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places his racial and ethnic diversity in his churches. Steven Baugh drives this point home.

The passive “make known” assumes that God is the one making his mystery and wisdom known to the celestial powers, but he uses an intermediary expressed in the phrase “through the church.” One might expect the revelatory mediators to be “apostles and prophets” (and teachers...), but it is in the church’s existence as a multicultural and multiethnic body dwelling in unity that the church witnesses to the power of the new creation. This activity implies the critical fact that the earthly gatherings of God’s people have a vital link with Christ in his high-heavenly exaltation, to where believers too have been raised and seated (2:6). Hence, the church is in essence both earthly and heavenly and is linked as a body to Christ its Head through the Holy Spirit.

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God is the one who makes his manifold wisdom known, and the means he uses is his church—his local assemblies united in Christ in the midst of great diversity. God reveals his greatness by uniting together a people in a local church who may have nothing in common save for their faith in Jesus. It is in the midst of diversity that God’s greatness is revealed. It is through his church that God shows off.

Paul is clear through his use of the divine passive—“be made known”—God is the one showing his manifold wisdom. When a local church exists as the people of God and is united in their faith in him despite being Jew *and* Gentile, despite being slave *and* free, despite being male *and* female, despite being Republican *and* Democrat, despite being educated *and* uneducated, despite being rich *and* poor, despite being different in every other way, God is glorified and his manifold wisdom is seen by those God to whom God is showing it.

Eternal Purpose

Paul says in verse 11 this, God’s revelation of his manifold wisdom to beings in heavenly places, was according to his *eternal purpose* that he has realized in Christ. Paul referred to the eternality of God’s purpose back in chapter 1 when he reminded the Ephesians they had been chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world and had been predestined to be adopted as sons in Jesus Christ according to the purpose of his will. This means God created the world with the express purpose of saving his people from their sins and uniting them together in one body.

God did not reveal this all at once. He worked out his plan in history, guiding history to its intended purpose. Remember, this is why Paul adds that odd clarification: God created all things. The reason he created all things is so that through the church his manifold wisdom would be revealed! Later in chapter 5 Paul will again make a reference to the eternality of God’s plan when he says that the entire point of a husband and wife forming a one-flesh union, the *act of marriage*, was to illustrate the relationship between Christ and the church. This means when God placed Adam and Eve in the garden and commanded them to be

fruitful and multiply, their physical union was, from the very beginning, intended to be a picture of the intimate union between Christ and his one body.

Paul further expresses a necessary outcome of this eternal purpose, this union with Christ. It is in Christ, he says in verse 12, “we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him”. When he says “boldness” he does not mean presumptuousness. It does not mean arrogance. It means we can approach the Father precisely because Christ sends us. We don’t have to fear approaching God for Jesus tells us to pray *in his name*, which means he sends us to the Father!

What the word “boldness” means is profound. It was used of the frankness with which a citizen could speak in the public assembly in Athens. This public assembly was the very expression of democracy and each citizen could speak boldly to his fellow citizens. Even more, it was used of the sort of communication you have with a close friend. It’s not only *what* you say, but *how* you say it. You can be far more frank with a close friend than you can a casual friend or a mere acquaintance. You can say things to a close friend in a way that you would never say to someone you had just met or even a coworker. You can be direct and open and completely honest because of the friendship you share. This is the boldness we have in Christ.

God’s eternal purpose he has realized in Christ results in this sort of intimacy with God. When I pray I can speak directly and bluntly to God for in Christ through faith I have this sort of access. It is access *with confidence*. Again, God is holy and I am not so I must never approach with presumption or even with demands. I can honestly and forthrightly pray to him, however, for his eternal purpose has been realized in Christ and one incredible outcome of this purpose is the access we are granted.

This is what Paul has been driving toward in his description of the work of God in Christ in saving Gentiles by creating a new man along with believing Jews. Gentiles are not saved as second-class citizens. They are adopted into God’s family as sons, that is, with full rights of inheritance. Their family background and upbringing and former sins have no bearing on their status as sons of God. The evidence of this is they, too, have boldness and access with confidence through faith in Christ.

Paul says this is God’s eternal purpose in Christ. Everything God has been doing in human history has been moving toward the creation of his church in all its diversity. Paul’s ministry as an apostle was to bring to light “the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God”. This plan, God’s eternal purpose, is revealed fully in Jesus.

Church, there is no Plan B for God. As I’ve said before, there’s not even a Plan A. There is *The Plan*, his Eternal Purpose, which is the revelation of the glory of God in the face of Christ. This revelation is made clear through his church. God’s manifold wisdom is revealed through the church. As the Lord saves men and women he adds them to his church, adding to his self-revelation through Christ by means of the people he saves and transforms. You and I are walking billboards advertising the glory of God.

Through the Church

The church exists to reflect the glory of God, to declare it to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. God does this *through the church*. He could have said through the miracle-laden ministries of the apostles. He could have said through the buildings constructed by his

people. He could have said cool and engaging programming for the community. He could have said fog machines, laser lights, and hip and edgy music. He could have said through amazing oratorical skills of his preachers. He could have said the health and wealth of his people, of their status as those who are hashtag-blessed-and-highly-favored. But he didn't. He said simply, "through the church".

He doesn't even say through the church *doing* something. When God reveals his manifold wisdom to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places, God is the one acting. God is the one revealing. The church is simply *being the church*. We'll begin seeing in a few weeks that there is much for the church to do. For these first three chapters Paul has been urging the church in Ephesus *to sit*. They must *rest* in the truth of the gospel. Only then will they be able to walk in that truth, and then finally stand against the onslaught of hostile spiritual forces.

When the church exists as the people of God in a particular location, God's manifold wisdom is on display. What does it mean to exist as the people of God? This is what Paul has explained throughout the first three chapters of this letter! God's people are those chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world, those who were predestined for adoption as sons of God through Jesus Christ.

The people of God are those who have redemption through his blood, who have their trespasses forgiven, and have received the riches of his glorious grace which he lavished on them. They are those to whom God has made known the mystery of his will, his purpose which he has set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him. They are those who, as sons of God, have received an inheritance and were therefore sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of their inheritance.

The people of God are those who were once dead in the trespasses and sins in which they once walked, following the evil spiritual forces active in this world. They were living out the passions of their flesh and were by nature children of wrath. Then God, being rich in mercy, and because of the great love with which he loved them, made them alive together with Christ. This union with Christ is in his death, burial, and resurrection. This union results in a life transformed into one of good works, which God prepared beforehand that they should walk in them.

The people of God are those who were from the nations, who were hostile with those God originally chose to be his people, hating them and being hated by them. They had been separated from Christ with no access to the promises of God. Though they had been without hope, in Christ the wall that separated them from God's people has been torn down when the Lord Jesus fulfilled the law that excluded them and created one new people out of the two formerly hostile groups of Jew and Gentile.

By making a new people of God he has united them together in Christ, in spite of the great diversity that remains among them. Though there are real and distinct differences, they are no longer strangers and aliens, but fellow citizens together with the saints, members of the same household of God, with all the rights and privileges of being God's sons through Christ.

It is this mystery that is revealed in Christ that shows the glory of God. It is the church existing as the church, in all its unity in the midst of its diversity, that shows the glory of God in full.

Boldness to Live

This ability to live for the Lord and reveal his glory through our salvation comes through the intimacy we have with him. Imagine waking up on a Saturday morning and walking into your kitchen where a strange man is standing there. He says, “Good morning! I’m hungry!” You would never respond with that old classic, “Hi, Hungry; I’m Dad!” You would demand, “Who are you, and why are you in my kitchen?” However, if your son then walked into the room and said, “Oh, hey, Dad...this is my friend Joshua. We’re looking for something to eat”, your response would be something more like, “Would you like an omelette?”

The connection to your son immediately changes your tone and demeanor toward the one who had been, just a moment before, a complete stranger with no right of access to your home. Simply because he is your son’s friend you went from being ready to throw hands with him to throwing eggs and butter in a pan for him.

This is the access we have to the Father through the Son. We are welcomed into God’s kitchen, but not as a visitor. We are welcomed as his beloved sons through our union with his Son. Our lives are lived with this intimacy with the Father. If you are in Christ then you *belong* in God’s household!

Hear the wisdom of God in this. Simply belonging to God and being part of Christ’s church results in a transformation that can only be explained by a miracle. It’s easy to point to Paul and see that one day he was breathing murderous threats against Christians and the next day he was himself a Christian willing to suffer for the nations he so despised.

We saw this in greater detail last week. The Jews had come to despise the nations during and after the Exile, believing the law had been given by God to Israel as an “impregnable fortification and walls of iron, that we might not mingle at all with any of the other nations”. The idea that the law was given to keep out the nations flies in the face of Israel’s own history.

When they left Egypt they left with “a mixed multitude” of people—men and women from all over the known world who either had traveled to Egypt on business or had moved there. They left with the physical offspring of Abraham and they, *together*, received the covenant from God and became the people of Israel. This is why Caleb *the Kenizzite*—the Kenizzites were a foreign people who occupied the land of Canaan—could represent the entire tribe of Judah as one of the twelve spies. This is why Rahab *the Canaanite*, despite her ethnic and even *moral* background, could marry the son of the leader of the tribe of Judah. This is why Ruth *the Moabite* could marry Boaz. God’s plan from the beginning was to include men and women from every tribe and language and people and nation.

As a Pharisee, Paul had a special hatred for Gentiles, thinking they were beneath him for the “superiority” God had given the people of Israel over the nations. Then Jesus interrupted Paul’s anger and hatred and his power overwhelmed Paul and began to transform him. For the next fourteen years or so Paul would spend time in Damascus and Arabia and Tarsus and then the church in Antioch, which became his home church. Think of that: for fourteen years after the Lord Jesus called Paul to serve him as an apostle, he did not, in fact, serve as an apostle. Paul had to grow in his new faith and had to leave behind his former way of life.

How many times did Paul say something to a fellow believer in the church only to be called out for it? “Paul! You can’t say that about Gentiles! That’s a terrible thing to say!”

How many times did Paul act as though his personal piety were the reason he was chosen by Christ for salvation? “Paul, Jesus didn’t save you because you were so zealous. He saved you because he is full of mercy, not because you deserve it.” How many times did he cling to his former identity as the thing that gave him meaning and purpose and value, only to be called out in Christian community for his idolatry? “Paul, you can be thankful for your upbringing, but who you are *in Christ* is what truly matters.”

Paul had to spend time in a local church where God would bring about the sanctification necessary for him to serve as an apostle. For fourteen years after his conversion Paul was active in a local church, participating in the life of the church, learning what it means that iron sharpens irons. He experienced life in the church and therefore the promise of the new covenant as he explained in chapter 1. In the church Paul experienced the work of the Holy Spirit through Christian community, causing him to grow in his faith and to grow in Christ-likeness. Then, when he was finally ready for vocational ministry, the Holy Spirit led the church in Antioch to send him out as an apostle to plant churches.

It was only through experiencing Christian community in the local church that Paul learned what it means to truly have access to God through the Lord Jesus. As we saw last week, he had so much to unlearn, and the Spirit used the diverse community of believers in his local churches to transform Paul. Paul had to learn that it wasn’t who *he* was that gave him access to God; it was who *Jesus* is that gives him access to God.

Application

Hear the wisdom of God in this. God desires to reveal his glory to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. These are some sort of beings God created that you and I are not able to comprehend. Whatever they are—whomever they are—God reveals his manifold wisdom to them through his church.

Being his children means we are being transformed by him, with the result that we begin to look more and more like our Father. We begin to resemble Jesus, our Brother. We are granted access to God through Christ and in this way his Spirit begins the work of transforming us. Listen carefully: salvation has never been primarily about a destination, but about a transformation. Yes, you will be with the Lord when this life is over, but salvation is *eternal life* and eternal life *begins now*.

God doesn’t point to heaven to make known his manifold wisdom. He points to his church on earth to make known his manifold wisdom. He shows the work he is doing in his people *right now*. I said earlier that you and I are walking billboards advertising the glory of God. We need to make sure we’re not engaged in *false advertising*. This is where God’s wisdom is seen in its brilliance.

The church exists as evidence of God’s power. Just as Paul was transformed from a terrorist who continually breathed murderous threats against followers of Christ into one who proclaimed the gospel of Christ, so God’s power is on display in us when he transforms us from those addicted to drugs and alcohol to those who cling to him and only to him. Just as Paul was transformed, so we are transformed from those who are addicted to our own self-image, to pursuing how others might perceive us, into those who gladly choose to reflect the glory of God through our transformed lives. Whatever it was God is saving you

from, whether pride or laziness or envy or anger or violence or immorality or selfishness or self-centeredness, the glory of God is reflected through our transformation.

This transformation, however, does not simply happen. God saves us and places us into his local church, where the gospel is not only proclaimed but *lived out* in community. As Paul explained to the Corinthians, the local church is the temple of the Holy Spirit, where God dwells among us. Yes, the Spirit is in you, but even more, the Spirit is in *y'all*. If we cut ourselves off from the local church, we effectively separate ourselves from the life-giving transformation that comes through participation in the church.

Participation in the life of the church is more than just showing up on a Sunday morning, singing a few songs, hearing an adequate sermon, and then having a private meal with just you and Jesus—along with everyone else who has a private meal. While it is more, *it is not less*. At a minimum participation in the life of the church is participating in the very thing that makes us the church, the *assembly*: you must assemble. But it is more. It is being involved in each other's lives, whether in a literal kitchen or a metaphorical kitchen.

Paul knows from personal experience how the Lord uses his church to bring about the growth and transformation of his people. Paul knows the Spirit of God is present and active in the church, bringing about God's eternal purpose. Paul knows that when God "shows off" he points to his church. This is why he continually urged the churches he planted to live together in Christian community, loving and encouraging and correcting and caring for one another.

Col 2:1 For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, ² that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, ³ in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

Colossians 2:1–3

We are not being knit together in love simply by showing up at the same place on a Sunday morning at the same time. This is not just "you and Jesus" but "we and Jesus" as we worship him together and engage in true, genuine community together—not only on a Sunday morning but as we live our lives together.

We welcomed Suzy into the church this morning through baptism. We declared she is a follower of Christ and what has already been loosed in heaven is now loosed on earth. This declaration and her union with Christ obligates us to Suzy—and it obligates Suzy to us. We have a responsibility to care for her and to help her grow in her faith. She has a responsibility to us, to care for us and to help us grow in our faith.

Membership in the church is not a throw-away sort of membership. This ain't Planet Fitness where you can easily cancel your membership. This is the place where God's work in the world is focused, as God himself brings about his eternal purpose that he has realized in Jesus Christ our Lord. This is the place God works so as to show the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places his manifold wisdom.

You know what's even more preposterous than God using Paul to accomplish his will and purpose in this world? What is even more preposterous is God uses *us* to do the same.