

Ephesians 3:8-11 "The Unfathomable Riches of Christ"

Ephesians 3:8-11 ⁸ To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, ⁹ and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things; ¹⁰ so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly *places*. ¹¹ *This was* in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord,

Last week we saw how Paul began to explain his participation in the lives of the Gentiles around the world, to the degree that God called him out specifically to be the apostle to the Gentiles. This of course was something God always had in mind for Paul. Shortly after his conversion we're told that God called him out to minister to the Gentile world.

ACT 9:10-15 "In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!" "Yes, Lord," he answered. ¹¹ The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. ¹² In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight." ¹³ "Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. ¹⁴ And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name." ¹⁵ 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."

Paul certainly recognized his duty before God and realized that to be called by Christ meant to follow Him. It was his privilege to fulfill his ministry as it was given to him by the Lord, which he realized was in God's sovereign will.

GAL 1:15 -17 "But when God, who set me apart from my mother's womb and called me by his grace, was pleased ¹⁶ to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not consult any man, ¹⁷ nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went immediately into Arabia and later returned to Damascus."

One of the things that impressed Paul was that despite his persecution of the Church, God had, from eternity past, set him aside to be a servant of Christ in His church. The irony did not escape Paul and it humbled him, as it should humble all of us.

And this is sort of what Paul is trying to convey to these Gentile believers. He's shown them that despite how the Jews have insisted that the Gentiles had no part in the Kingdom of God, our Lord had always intended for them to mutually share in these blessings.

This is part of the mystery Paul explained in EPH 3:6 "This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus."

And now Paul explains that he too is part of this mystery as he is the one chosen by God to bring this good news to the Gentile world as an apostle. And that's where we ended last week.

EPH 3:7 "I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power."

As we pick up this morning we see that Paul fully understands that he didn't deserve this gift of salvation, nor the gift of being a servant of the Most High God in the capacity of an apostle.

EPH 3:8-9 "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, 9 and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things."

I'm sure there are those who would accuse Paul of over-stating his situation to really bring attention to himself. It's kind of like the super-star athlete who says, "well I'm not really that good", as he tries to give a sense of being humble when in fact he's looking for all the attention he can get.

This truly is not what Paul is trying to do. When he says that he's least among the saints, he is not saying that he is least in the sense of accomplishment. He knew the hard work he put forth for the sake of the gospel. But he knew he didn't deserve it because of the dastardly way he treated Christ's people prior to him coming to the Lord. He sums it up this way when writing to the Corinthians.

1CO 15:9-10 "For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of

God. 10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them - yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me."

There is something to be said about having been forgiven of much, as in Paul's case. It does, in most cases, produce gratitude. But what if you and I were not persecutors of the Church or murderers, or thieves? Can we appreciate our salvation as did Paul and respond in a similar way by following Christ and making Him the passion of our lives?

The answer is, absolutely! It's not simply the size of our sin which should motivate us to appreciate our salvation, it's the size of our guilt before a holy God outside of Christ, which results in an eternal punishment, and the size of His grace and mercy toward us.

All sin of any size condemns us to hell. This was the apostle James' point in JAM 2:10 "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it."

Our appreciation, and really Paul's, was realizing from what we were delivered and then unto. We were delivered unto something we didn't deserve. Realizing that without Christ intervening on our behalf, by dying for the penalty of our sin, we would spend eternity separated from Him in hell. That ought to motivate every one of us as it did Paul.

This is what he is trying to teach these Gentile believers in Ephesus. He's trying to help them see that, as we appreciate this great salvation, this free gift of eternal life, it should affect our lives to the very core. It should ignite us to lives of worship and obedience. And that's what this entire letter is really all about; worship and obedience.

Remember how he begins this letter by worshipping God.

EPH 1:3-6 "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. 4 For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love 5 He predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will - 6 to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves."

He opens this letter by bringing us to the throne of God. But he'll end this letter by showing us how being at the throne of God motivates us to labor in this world to the glory of God.

And so, though Paul sees himself as least among the saints, he also realizes that that should not stop him from fulfilling his ministry. He must go to the Gentile world, as well as the Jews, and take this grace which was given to him and share it with a world which is dying in its sin.

Part of his ministry was to preach of the "unsearchable riches of Christ." Well, if it's unsearchable, or unfathomable as the NAS puts it, how can you preach about it? That's the beauty of the gospel of grace. To the extent that we can grasp this gift revealed to us in the Word of God and in Christ, we only scratch the surface, which should always motivate us to learn more of our God and grow and stretch and to appreciate all the more what we have in Christ.

We should never become content with our walk with Christ and our love for Him. We must continue to love Him more and more, because as we love Him more and more we will serve Him more and more. When we take a look at the life of Paul we can begin to get a glimpse into the love Paul had for Jesus through his service.

And this love took him to the ends of the world, "to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things." (verse9)

This mystery included the revelation that the Gentiles would share in the blessings of the Kingdom of God through faith in Christ.

EPH 3:10-11 "His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, 11 according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord."

This is an interesting couple of verses. Here we're given some insight as to the intent of God's will as it relates, not just to human beings, but to heavenly realms. And the way in which these heavenly realms are given revelation about this redemption of men is found in the Church.

First of all, let me say that there has been a false application of this and other verses about the role of the Church as it relates to possessing this ability to instruct of heavenly things, primarily the gospel.

There are a number of Churches in the world today that claim to be the sole depositor of truth and in turn believe they are the only true Church, outside of which one cannot be saved. Gregory Boyd,

who is the Assistant Professor of Theology at Bethel College in St. Paul Minnesota., wrote in the 1991 Winter edition of the Christian Research Journal, about his former membership in the Oneness Pentecostal denomination.

"The most problematic aspect of my theology when I was a Oneness Pentecostal was the belief that no one other than us Oneness Pentecostals was going to heaven." I might add that not all Pentecostal denominations believe this, but this is indicative of the Oneness Pentecostals.

One of the largest churches in the world also contends that it and it alone is able to properly interpret Scripture and therefore it holds the keys to all revelation given from God.

This is one reason that this Church did not encourage lay people in the Church, up until just recently, to possess or read the Bible without an explanation given from "The Church". And by the Church they mean the rulers and authorities of the Church, the Pope being the one who ultimately holds all power over the Church as the Vicar of Christ on earth.

They would also contend that only through the Roman Catholic Church can one have salvation. If you do not come through them, then you do not have forgiveness for your sins and you are therefore still in your sins. Pope Innocent III made this very clear in the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 when he said, "There is but one universal Church of the faithful, outside of which no one at all is saved."

Pope Boniface VIII declared in a document called Unam Sanctum in 1302, "We declare, say, define, and pronounce that it is absolutely necessary for the salvation of every human creature to be subject to the Roman Pontiff." This has not changed today, as the Roman Catholic Church still holds to the same teachings.

This places salvation in the hands of a particular group as the only dispenser of salvation rather than in the hands of Christ who is the only One who can administer it according to His will and grace. To suggest that one cannot be saved outside of a particular church, or that one cannot learn the truth of salvation outside a particular church is to miss the point of the grace of God that is revealed in the written word of God.

But, having said that, this does not mean that the Church is just some sort of optional club Christians belong to. And it doesn't

mean that there isn't one true Church. Let me deal with the latter issue first.

When we talk about the one true Church we are not talking about a particular denomination or religious group as having a monopoly on God's truth. What we're talking about are all believers who belong to a local congregation who preach and teach the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and His word.

In Theological terms this is referred to as the visible and invisible Church. The visible Church is made up of people we can obviously see and interact with who conform to a local body of believers of like mind concerning Jesus Christ's redemption on our behalf.

This is demonstrated in a way where there is a visible representation, not just in a group of people gathering together, but in the way they visibly affect their world as they walk in the Spirit and in the fruit of the Spirit.

To be a light in a darkened world necessarily means to be recognized. What we don't want to do as lights is to draw attention to ourselves but to the one who is the light of the world as He has given us His light and life. It is Jesus Christ we want people to see in our lives.

In this visible Church the world can know that there is a group of people who gather in the name of Christ who are visibly manifesting the love of Christ. Some might confuse this visible church with a building where these people gather. The building isn't the church, though it may certainly house the Church who are the people of God, who profess faith in Christ.

This brings up the second aspect of the Church; the invisible Church. This term is used by Theologians to describe the inward work of the Spirit. Lots of people profess faith in Christ. But does that necessarily make them a Christian? Lots of people walk down an aisle and pray, but does that necessarily make them a Christian? Lots of people have signed salvation cards where they document the day they made that walk, but does that necessarily make them a Christian?

The answer is obviously no. But many of these same people are on the roles of local Churches all around the world. They've made professions of faith. So, do you mean to tell me that they don't make up the visible church? Not at all. But you and I would never be able to ultimately make the judgment that some of these people

don't truly know Christ. We might have an indication from the way they live or don't live for the Lord.

But ultimately only God knows the heart of a person. And so a person who has professed Christ must be treated as one who has a relationship with Him, unless they renounce Him which would make it clear. Since only God ultimately knows the heart, people's true hearts for God are invisible to we who only see with eyes which measure those things we can observe in a person's life.

And so, when Paul talks about the Church he is talking about a variety of things. He is always referring to a local body which makes up a part of other local bodies all around the world, being one entity from God's perspective. But he is referring to local bodies who preach and teach the true gospel. At the same time he knows there will be people who will be in those local bodies who truly don't know Christ but are going through the motions.

But if they're not overtly doing things which would deny the truth we must accept them on the basis of their profession, not ultimately know the deepest part of their hearts. To demonstrate who does know the heart we see a most classic example of this truth as seen in the statement of Jesus Christ Himself who spoke of some who professed Christ but really didn't know Him.

MAT 7:22-24 "Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' 23 Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!' 24 "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock."

Does all of this mean that we can't know for certain that we have salvation? Not at all! But it does show us that simply naming the name of Christ, or even being associated with a group of people who name the name of Christ, does not make one a Christian.

It's humbly coming before God and placing our faith in the One who died for the penalty of our sin, as we relinquish any of our good deeds to try and earn that salvation, and fall completely on the mercy and finished work of Christ.

EPH 2:8-10 "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - 9 not by works, so that no one can boast."

This grace which Paul has been talking about to these Ephesians is what we ought to be excited about because it's a gift which we didn't deserve, and yet in Christ we have full assurance of where we will spend eternity if we've truly placed our faith in the Messiah who came to actually purchase this salvation for us in His blood.

Again, this is why the apostle John could boldly say in 1JO 5:11-13 "And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. 12 He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. 13 I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life."

All true believers make up this invisible Church, this true Church which Christ has purchased with His blood. But they are exhorted to be a part of the physical or visible manifestation of this true Church in the world, as they are connected to a local body of believers who embrace this true Gospel.

Does this mean that every Church which preaches the true gospel is a perfect manifestation of the visible Church? If that were the case you wouldn't have so many different denominations. But when Paul was making the case in this letter about being united as one body, he was talking about being united under the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

That's essentially what he said in EPH 3:6 "This mystery is that the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel."

And so, you'll see one Church saying that we water baptize by sprinkling, while another says it must be by immersion. One church may say that Christ will come back before the tribulation while another says He'll come back in the midst of it. One church may teach that certain gifts of the Holy Spirit are not in affect today while other churches teach they are all in affect.

All of these issues are important issues, but they alone are not what distinguishes us from other religions of the world. What distinguishes us is Jesus Christ, fully God and fully man, being crucified for the penalty of our sins, and raising bodily from the dead three days later defeating sin and death and giving us the victory and forgiveness of our sin as we place our faith in Him alone.

That's what ultimately determines the true Church whether it's Baptist, Pentecostal, Lutheran or whatever. Is the true gospel being taught? And from there we must determine how the rest of the doctrines of God's word are being treated and choose local bodies which are faithful to the Scriptures.

And so, when Paul speaks, as he does in verse 10, "that through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms," this is what he's referring to; that this tremendous task is not done exclusively through lone ranger Christians who will not come under the authority of a local body.

Nor is it meant to be accomplished through organizations which are outside of the body of Christ. It is meant to be done through the means Jesus Himself has instituted, which is through individuals in the Church, under the authority of that Church; those local groups of people identified as the Church, and making up the one true Church, as God empowers it through His Holy Spirit.

I'll touch more on this when we come to the end of this chapter which brings it up again. The reason I touch on it this morning is because there are many people who want to trash the Church as a man-made organization, when in fact it is a living dynamic organism which has as its life source and head, the living Christ who rules over all aspects of His church.

And so to deny or to suggest that the church, as a local body, which makes up the many parts of the universal church of Christ, is not that important, is to deny the infinite worth God places on it as His very special people called out by His name as He is presently actively involved in it as the Head of His body.

By the way, as a side-note, this is also the reason that Christ can judge the Church as a whole just as He did with Israel, which was the O.T. representation of God's people, called out by His name, to represent Him in this world.

Like Israel, there will be a day of reckoning when Christ will show clearly those people who belonged to the visible church only and those who are also part of the invisible church, indwelt by the Spirit of God who called them from light to darkness through regeneration.

1 Peter 4:17 ¹⁷ For *it is* time for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if *it begins* with us first, what *will be* the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?

Ultimately, the visible church will move in the same direction that Israel moved in, which is apostasy, an abandoning of the Lord, which Paul also addresses in his second letter to the Thessalonians that I taught on in the second chapter of that letter. You can go to that series on our website. But back to our text.

EPH 1:22-23 "And God placed all things under his [Christ's] feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, 23 which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way."

It's a privilege to be a part of the body of Christ as our Lord is using it to bring glory to Himself and to also instruct the world, as well as angels, as to how the grace of God is being made manifest in the world. This is what Paul means in verse 10 when he says, "the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms,..."

Now in what sense does Christ make known this wisdom to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms"? Some have suggested that it refers to showing demonic angels how Christ has conquered Satan.

But the context of this letter from the outset would not support that idea very well.

EPH 1:18-20 "I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, 19 and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, 20 which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms,..."

Well, if the heavenly realms, and the angels contained therein, are being referred to, why would they need to be informed of the manifold wisdom of God? And yet, we see all throughout Scripture of the angels' interest in the grace of God given among men and their supreme joy in seeing it come about in the life of even one person.

LUK 15:10 "In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

1PE 1:12 "It was revealed to them [O.T. prophets] that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things."

In God's plan He uses you and me to minister to angels in the sense that we cause them to give glory to God for so great a grace as is manifest in our lives. How well do we give angels the opportunity for seeing Christ in us as we live in this grace to God's glory?

Of course, in turn, angels minister to us, but it's amazing that God would allow them to be blessed by His people in Christ as we are faithful to our Lord. All of this "according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord." (EPH 3:11)

With this perspective it gives our salvation a more mystical and glorious accomplishment, because it goes beyond how we are perceived in this world, it is even used to allow angels to glory in the finished work of Christ in our lives.

This too, is one reason Paul begins this letter by exclaiming in EPH 1:3 "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ."

Our salvation is derived from heaven and we will ultimately spend it in the heavenly realms with Christ as heaven and earth become one, to borrow a line from the hymn, "This is my Father's world," a reference to the new heavens and new earth on the last day. This is why it's so important to understand that this present world is not our home and to live in such a way as to demonstrate it.

This is also why we must keep seeking the things above and not get hung up on the temporal. When all is said and done we must always have an eternal perspective on our salvation knowing that our eternal God and Savior has made it all possible.

It is a glorious heavenly gift from Christ. It is a gift we must be thankful for every day of our lives as we rely on His Spirit to go forward in His power with the greatest news this world has ever known. This news which unites Jew and Gentile alike in Christ.

ROM 1:16-17 "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. 17 For in the gospel a righteousness

from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."