

Message Mates and questions for discussion

Ephesians 3:1-13 Paul's ministry and its fit to God's plan

Paul's imprisonment has a direct connection to his God-given mission to the Gentiles. It happened because of his arrest in Jerusalem on charges of bringing a Gentile into the temple and thereby desecrating it, and because of his extensive ministry to Gentiles. This is clearly described by Luke in Acts 21 and 22. His incarceration is the glory of the Ephesian church because he has led them to a place of freedom and access to God. Why was the admission of Gentiles into full membership of God's people so contested? This problem may seem irrelevant to us, but imagine allowing dogs and cats events at the Toowoomba Show to be exhibited and judged together on the grounds that both are loved as pets, and groomed in similar manner.

Allowing non-Jews to be admitted in God's people without circumcision, food laws, Sabbath-keeping, observance of sacrifice rituals was considered by many Jewish leaders to be illegal and even blasphemous. Paul sees faith and trust in King Jesus as being the key entry point into entering God's presence. His ministry to Gentiles was not something he made up: Genesis 12:3, the story of Naaman's healing, the prophetic messages in Isaiah all foreshadow the blessings towards Israel as being extended to Gentiles. This is underlined by Jesus's ministry to Gentiles and, in Acts, the stories of the conversions of the Ethiopian eunuch, Cornelius, the birth of a Gentile church in Antioch and the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15). Into this context, Paul was expressly set apart for gospel ministry to Gentiles from the time of his own conversion.

Paul's role is to make clear the fulfilment of the ancient plan of God in which he would bless people throughout the world just as he had blessed and chosen the descendants of Jacob - Israel. He has revealed this mystery – “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” (Eph.3:6). Paul's ministry is God's mission. God intended that the new church comprising both Jewish and Gentile-origin believers in Jesus would foreshadow the ultimate victory of God and declare it openly to the principalities and powers. This explains why Paul is imprisoned and why his ministry is widely opposed. Likewise, for us in the church today, there is opposition to God's people and purposes – because we put on notice to the powers of evil that God's purposes will succeed and be victorious. Paul prays for the church, and we should too, today. Looking forward to Ephesians chapter 6 that is why we need the spiritual armour of God.

Draw encouragement from verse 12 – “in him and through him we may approach God with freedom and confidence”. We are now entrusted with the mission of God in our own time.

Questions for discussion

1. Why do we have prisons? What impact does prison have on those who are incarcerated?
2. Why was Paul in prison? Can you think of some modern counterparts where people suffer imprisonment for their faith?
3. What was the role of the apostles and prophets to whom God revealed the mystery of Christ – verses 4-5?
4. Can you think of some other illustrations like the ‘dog-cat showtime’ story that show the magnitude of the inclusion of non-Jewish believers into the people of God?
5. Are there other barriers that we put up that perhaps exclude people being accepted as fellow members of our church now? If there are, what could we do to change things?
6. Discuss God’s timing and plans. How did all of this come together in the overall Bible story? Is the plan current? Can we trust God’s timing and plans in our own time?
7. Are we putting the principalities and powers ‘on notice’ by our ministries like Paul did with his gospel ministry? What implications might that have on our praying?
8. Explore this passage for references to God the Father, Jesus the Messiah and the Holy Spirit. Are there clues in this passage as to how God works in and through us today?
9. How can we approach God with freedom and confidence today and in the coming week?