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GOD'S ETERNAL PURPOSE AND YOU

Ephesians 3:9-13

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Ephesians Lesson 21

God's Eternal Purpose and You Ephesians 3:9-13

Let me share with you what goes through my mind as a pastor when I read a text like this one, which scrapes the heavens by talking about God's eternal purpose. I wonder, "How do these verses relate to people in this church who are struggling with troubled marriages; trying to rear their children; worried about paying bills; juggling busy schedules; and who are grappling with powerful temptations and sins?" Thinking about God's eternal purpose may be interesting for theologians and philosophers, but how does it help people who wrestle with the kinds of ordinary challenges that life throws at them?

To answer those questions, I first must assume that Paul knew that the people he wrote to in Ephesus were normal people with these same sorts of problems. True, they didn't have mortgages to pay or the modern media bombarding them with worldly temptations. But, they had common, everyday problems to face. So Paul must have thought that it would help them to understand something about God's eternal purpose as it related to them, the church in Ephesus. They needed to know this and so do we.

So then I have to grapple with, how do the truths that Paul sets forth here help us to live more godly lives? What prompted Paul to write these things?

As I thought about these questions, it seemed to me that what Paul is doing is raising our vision for what God is doing with the church. All too often, even among Christians the church is viewed as maybe nice (if it's a relatively good church), but rarely as necessary. Many who claim to be born again view the church as optional. If it meets your needs, that's fine! But, if it doesn't, then don't bother with it. It's really not that important in the overall scheme of things.

Of course, in the world, the church has even less importance. What matters to the world are things like multi-national peace treaties, the threat of terrorism, global warming, the AIDS epidemic,

the upcoming election, and the fluctuations in the stock market. The church wouldn't make it into a list of the 50 most important matters facing America right now. This marginalizing of the church seeps into our thinking, so that we miss God's perspective and priority for His church.

What matters to God is the church. Christ said, "I will build My church" (Matt. 16:18). That's what He is doing. That's where His focus lies. "Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her" (Eph. 5:25). God's eternal purpose centers on Christ and His church. If we want our lives to count for eternity, we've got to get God's vision and purpose for the church and live accordingly.

Perhaps you've heard the story of three men who were working on a stone pile at a construction site. A curious passerby was eager to discover what was going on. He asked the first worker, "What are you doing?" "Chiseling stone," was the reply.

Trying for a better answer, he asked the second worker, "What are you doing?" "Earning a living." Another washout.

He had one more hope. He asked the third worker, "Sir, what are you doing?" He dropped his sledgehammer, stood erect, and with a gleam in his eye exclaimed, "I'm building a great cathedral!"

All three men were doing the same job, but only one of them saw how his role fit into a larger, more important vision. Paul wants us to see how our lives fit into God's glorious eternal purpose for His church. When we see this, it will help us very practically to deal with life's difficult trials. He is saying,

Since God's eternal purpose is to make known His manifold wisdom through the church, we must pray and not lose heart in our trials.

First, Paul sets forth God's eternal purpose (3:9-11) and then he gives two practical applications (3:12-13).

1. God's eternal purpose is to make known His manifold wisdom through the church (3:9-11).

This is not an easy topic, so track with me! I will try to explain it under five headings:

- A. God has an eternal purpose and nothing can thwart it.

We saw this in Ephesians 1:9-12:

“He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth. In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will, to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ would be to the praise of His glory.”

God’s eternal purpose is to sum up all things in Christ. He is the centerpiece of history. All of the Old Testament looks forward to Christ. All of the New Testament testifies of Him. All of history will climax when He returns in power and glory to reign. Since He is the head of His body, the church, it is central to God’s purpose. It is in the church that God is bringing together both Jews and Gentiles, reconciling them to one another and to Himself through the cross (2:11-22). Paul says (3:8) that his ministry, in addition to preaching to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, is also (3:9) “to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things.”

What does he mean? One key to understanding Paul here is to resolve why he refers to God as the one “who created all things.” If we go back to Genesis (1:26-27), we learn that God created man as male and female to rule over creation and to reflect His image. You have to ask, “Reflect His image to whom?” There weren’t other people on the earth yet. I believe that God wanted Adam and Eve to reflect His image to “the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places,” that is, to the angels, both good and evil. Behind the scenes of human history is this cosmic spiritual battle between the forces of good and evil. God’s purpose for man (male and female) was to rule on earth and reflect His image. That purpose was temporarily thwarted by the fall, but it is being recovered by the new creation, the church (2:15).

While books have been written on what the image of God in man means, at least part of that image includes the unity and love that exists between the members of the Trinity. Thus when Paul discusses Christian marriage (Eph. 5:22-33), where husbands are to

love their wives and wives are to submit to their husbands, he ties it all in to the original creation of man and woman (Eph. 5:31) and then adds (5:32), "This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church." He is saying that Christian marriage is a smaller picture of Christ and the church, and that both marriage and the church are linked back to God's purpose in creation, that we would rule on earth under His lordship and that we would reflect His image to the angelic hosts.

There are some further parallels to consider. Just as Eve was taken from Adam's body in his sleep and then given back to him as his wife, so the church was brought forth through Christ's sleep (death) and given to Him as His bride. Just as Eve was a part of Adam's body, so the church is Christ's body. Just as male and female together were to reflect God's image in the original creation (Gen. 1:27), so now it is the Bridegroom (Christ) and His bride (the church) that are to reflect His image as we dwell in His love and willingly submit to Him. It is in this sense that we are His fullness (1:23) and that Paul can pray that we would be filled up to all the fullness of God (3:19), so that there will be glory to God in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations (3:21).

This is all kind of mind-bending! What Paul is doing is elevating our understanding and vision for what God is doing through the church. Stay with me!

B. God's purpose was a mystery hidden for ages, but now brought to light through Paul.

"Mystery," as we have seen, refers to something that was previously unknown, but now has been revealed. "The mystery of Christ" (3:4) refers to God's eternal plan to sum up all things in Christ, the Savior (1:9-10). But, one application of this mystery was the previously hidden aspect of God's uniting the Jews and Gentiles on equal standing in the one body of Christ (3:6). The Old Testament predicted the salvation of many Gentiles, but it did not reveal that God would unite them as one body with the Jews in the church, seat them with Christ in the heavenly places, and display His manifold wisdom through them throughout the ages.

If we ask the question, "Why did God hide this truth for thousands of years?" the answer is, "Because He so willed." He is

the Sovereign of the universe, and as the Sovereign, He has the right to do as he pleases. In Acts 14:16, Paul tells the pagans of Lystra, "In the generations gone by He permitted all the nations to go their own ways." He could have intervened much sooner and made known His way of salvation if He had chosen to do so, but He didn't. As Paul puts it in Galatians 4:4, "But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son...." God knew the right time to send His Son and He did it right on schedule. He has a purpose and nothing can thwart it. Although His purpose was hidden for ages, now it has been revealed. With Paul, we should always be amazed that we have become the objects of His grace!

- C. God's purpose was carried out through Christ Jesus our Lord.

"Carried out" translates the Greek aorist tense of the verb, "to do." It points to an accomplished action. God's purpose was accomplished through Christ Jesus our Lord through His death and resurrection. It was at the cross, especially, that God demonstrated His manifold wisdom. People often wonder, why did God allow the fall of man into sin? He easily could have made man like the elect angels, so that we would not have sinned and then would be incapable of sinning.

While we need to be careful not to press the issue too far, we can say that God permitted the fall and ordained the cross because it demonstrated His wisdom and glory in a way that no other plan would have shown. God's sending His own Son to bear the penalty that we deserve displays His wisdom, love, and justice in ways that would not have been seen otherwise. His wisdom is displayed in choosing a person who is both divine and human, because no other person could have fulfilled the role of mediator and substitute for our sin. He had to be infinitely holy and apart from all sin. He had to be a person infinitely dear to the Father, to give infinite value to His sacrifice. No created person, whether man or angel, would have been fit for this task. Only Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, qualified. (I am indebted here to Jonathan Edwards, "The Wisdom of God displayed in the way of salvation," *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* [Banner of Truth], 2:142-144.)

- D. God's purpose is to make known His manifold wisdom to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

Most of us don't often think about the angels, but Paul brings them into the center of God's eternal purpose! We know that the holy angels are in God's very presence (Isa. 6:1-3). They are at war with the fallen angels (Dan. 10:13). The holy angels were especially involved in praising God at the birth of the Savior (Luke 2:13-14; Heb. 1:6). They have a special interest in the church, so that Paul tells the Corinthian women to wear long hair (or a head covering) in the assembly because of the angels (1 Cor. 11:10). They rejoice at the salvation of sinners (Luke 15:10). Throughout eternity, we will join the angels in heaven, singing praises to God because of the salvation that the Lamb secured for us (Rev. 7:9-12).

Some scholars think that Ephesians 3:10 refers only to the holy angels, some think it refers to the fallen angels, and some to both. I think it probably refers to both. (The fallen angels are referred to by the same terms in 6:12; in 1:21, it probably includes both.) To the fallen angels, the church, which exists because of Christ's triumph at the cross, displays God's wisdom and reminds them of their impending doom. The fallen angels thought that they had triumphed at the cross, but God displayed His wisdom by using that very means to gain ultimate and final victory (Col. 2:15).

As for the holy angels, through the cross they "see a great and wonderful manifestation of the glory of God" (Edwards, p. 147). Edwards points out that the happiness of angels, as well as of people, consists very much in seeing the glory of God. And, he says (*ibid.*), "Perhaps all God's attributes are more gloriously manifested in this work, than in any other that ever the angels saw." God's mercy, grace, love, justice, and power are all magnified in the substitutionary death and bodily resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus Peter tells us that the angels long to look into the matter of our salvation (1 Pet. 1:12).

E. God's purpose is to make His wisdom known through the church.

F. F. Bruce (*The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* [Eerdmans], pp. 321-322) says, "The church thus appears to be God's pilot scheme for the reconciled universe of the future, the mystery of God's will 'to be administered in the fullness of the times,' when 'the things in heaven and the things on earth' are to be brought together in Christ (Eph. 1:9-10)." He adds that the

church, created by God's reconciling the Jews and Gentiles into one body, is God's agency to help bring about the final reconciliation. John MacArthur explains (*The MacArthur New Testament Commentary, Ephesians* [Moody Press], p. 97), "Every sinner who repents and turns to Christ adds another spiritual stone to God's temple, another member to His Body, and becomes another forgiven and cleansed sinner who is made eternally one with every other forgiven and cleansed sinner."

We show this wisdom of God to the principalities and powers by being the church that God created. John Piper says ("The Cosmic Church," http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByScripture/3/289_The_Cosmic_Church),

We don't usually hit targets that we are not aiming at. And the target for the church is to demonstrate to the evil powers of the cosmos that God has been wise in sending his Son to die that we might have hope and be unified in one body, the church. Therefore, when we fail to live in hope and to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, we send this signal through the galaxies: God's purpose is failing; he was not wise, he was foolish.

Again, the overall point that Paul is driving home is to elevate our understanding of the importance of the church in God's eternal purpose, so that we will give it the proper priority in our lives. He wants us to understand what a great privilege it is that God has chosen us to be the agents of carrying out His eternal purpose through the church. The church is not just a nice place to drop by on Sundays if you're not doing anything more interesting! The church is God's vehicle for making known His manifold wisdom, not only on earth, but also to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. So we must see how our lives count for eternity.

After setting forth God's eternal purpose, Paul applies it in two ways:

2. Because we are at the center of God's eternal purpose, we must pray and not lose heart in our trials (3:12-13).
 - A. Because we are at the center of God's eternal purpose, we must pray (3:12).

As I understand Paul's flow of thought between God's eternal purpose and prayer, it is this: Prayer is the primary means by which the church exercises God's authority and brings about His rule on earth over the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. This is reinforced in 6:18-20, where immediately after telling us to put on God's full armor so that we can stand against the devil, Paul calls us to prayer for all the saints, that the gospel may go forward.

This means that prayer (to use John Piper's analogy) is not an intercom to call the maid to bring more refreshments to the TV room. Rather, it is a walkie-talkie to call the general to send more troops and supplies to the front line. Our focus in prayer should be, "Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10). Prayer is to help advance God's eternal purpose in Christ through His church.

Also, note Paul's emphasis on the boldness and confident access that we have in prayer through Christ. Martyn Lloyd-Jones writes (*The Unsearchable Riches of Christ* [Baker], p. 96), "Of all the blessings of Christian salvation none is greater than this, that we have access to God in prayer." "Boldness" means that we can come before God without fear of rejection or penalty. "Confidence" implies familiarity. If you were an aide to the President, the first time you approached him in the Oval Office, you probably would be a bit hesitant and unsure of yourself. But after you've gone there a hundred times, you'd enter with confidence. "Access" means that you have the privilege of admission. If you have access to an exclusive club, the person at the door knows you and lets you in, whereas he will stop someone without access. We have boldness and confident access to God in prayer.

How is this possible? Paul mentions it twice: "in whom," and "through faith in Him." It is only in Christ and through faith in Christ that we can approach God's holy presence to ask Him for what we need to further His kingdom. Prayer is our means of seeing God's eternal purpose enacted on earth.

B. Because we are at the center of God's eternal purpose, we must not lose heart in trials (3:13).

Paul's focus was not on himself, even though he was the one in prison, but on these Ephesian believers. He didn't want them to

become discouraged on account of his trials, because they would result in the Ephesians' ultimate glory. In Romans 8:18 Paul wrote, "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us." As he goes on to share in that chapter, God works all things together for our good, using even the trials to conform us to the image of Jesus Christ. So even if persecution comes against us, we should not become discouraged, but rather remember that we are at the center of God's eternal purpose. Our good and ultimate glory are included in His purpose. The greatness of the cause is worth the hardship of the suffering.

Conclusion

When Apple Computer fell on difficult times some years ago, their young chairman, Steven Jobs, went to New York to try to convince Pepsico's John Sculley to move west and run the struggling computer company.

As they sat in Sculley's penthouse office overlooking the Manhattan skyline, Sculley started to decline the offer. He said that Apple would have to offer him an astronomical salary and benefit package. Flabbergasted, Jobs gulped and agreed—if Sculley would move to California. But Sculley would only commit to being a consultant from New York.

Finally, Jobs confronted Sculley: "Do you want to spend the rest of your life selling sugared water, or do you want to change the world?" It knocked the wind out of Sculley. He hadn't thought of it that way. He accepted the offer and moved west. (From, *Leadership*, Spring, 1991, p. 44.)

Many Christians don't commit themselves fully to the local church because they're too focused on themselves and they don't have the big picture. The church is at the center of how God wants to change the world. It is His eternal purpose to display His manifold wisdom through the church. We should respond by committing ourselves to it and praying for God to use it mightily. We should be willing to endure hardship to see it become all that God wants it to be.

Application Questions

1. How would this church be different if you got a vision of God's eternal purpose? Be specific and practical.
2. What practical effect would it have if Christians realized that their daily behavior was revealing something to the rulers in the heavenly places?
3. Someone asks you, "Why did God permit evil into this world?" Your response?
4. Discuss: Prayer is not an intercom to call the maid for more refreshments, but a walkie-talkie to the general from the front lines for more resources for the battle (adapted from John Piper). How would this change your prayer life?

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