

• Paul explains his ministry

1. Paul's apostolic ministry was powerfully imposed on him

• God's power at work

• God's grace

2. Authority combined with humility

• Paul regards himself as unworthy

3. Paul marvels at the greatness and the wonders of the gospel

• God's grace to reveal the hidden mystery

Paul is in the process of explaining his own place in God's purpose of revealing the gospel to the gentiles.

1. **Paul's call to apostolic ministry was powerfully imposed upon him.** In no way did Paul choose himself to apostolic work. *'Of this gospel I became a servant according to the gift of God's grace given me, according to the working of His power'*<sup>1</sup>. He did not take the slightest step in this direction by his own choice and will. He was seized by Jesus<sup>2</sup> in about AD 34 at a time when he was violently opposed to the Christian church. His call to be an apostle came on the same occasion<sup>3</sup>. Even after his conversion Paul did not push himself swiftly into ministry among gentiles. It was not until about AD 45 that Barnabas travelled to Tarsus, found Paul, and persuaded Paul to assist the work among gentiles in Antioch<sup>4</sup>.

To save Paul, to extract him from his previous life, to enlighten him, to give him the authority of the Holy Spirit as he spoke for Jesus, to give his words effectiveness and accompany them with signs of authenticity – it all required the working of God's power. There was nothing manipulative in any of this. Paul never pretended God's power was at work when it was not so. No deceit, no pretence was involved. He used no trickery, but simply taught the word of God plainly.

His ministry was according to the gift of God's grace. Paul was used by God as a result of God's graciousness. His gift as a preacher and apostle came through the generous spiritual enablement that come upon Paul from God.

2. **Paul's apostolic ministry combined authority with extreme humility.** On the one hand, he speaks with great authority. He has received revelations from God, and he knows it! He has a call from God in his life, and he knows it. Yet on the other hand, Paul speaks with extreme humility. *'To me, less than the least of all the saints, this grace was given to preach to gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ'*<sup>1</sup>, *and to make plain to all people what is the administration of the mystery hidden for ages in God...* Paul regards himself as totally and utterly unworthy. He knows that everything that has made him what he is has come to him entirely because of God's kindness to him.

3. **Paul marvels at the greatness and the wonders of the gospel.** What increases the sense of privilege that is in his heart is the marvel of the message itself. He preaches 'the unsearchable riches of Christ'. It is such a vast theme. One thinks of the glory of Christ Himself, His amazing combination of meekness and majesty, deity surrounded by weakness. One thinks of what flows to us from Him: wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, final glorification. We praise God for 'the treasures of wisdom and of knowledge', the clothing of His righteousness over our weaknesses, His sympathy, His being tempted at all points, His faith, His boldness, His character as a godly man, the life and energy that He puts into us, the power of His Holy Spirit, the fruit of the Spirit that He works into us, His companionship, His guidance ... The theme is 'unsearchable'; one never gets to the bottom of it, never gets to the end of it.

This grace was given to preach to gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ<sup>1</sup>. 'This grace was given ... to make plain to all people what is the administration of the mystery hidden for ages in God.' Paul was (i) opening up a treasure- store; and he was (ii) revealing an amazing mystery.

The gospel was hidden for centuries. Why did God take so long before He revealed it? One reason was to make it quite clear that men and women could never provide salvation for themselves. Salvation in Jesus Christ, God's Son, could never have been invented by any man or woman. For a start, the 'natural man' does not see the greatness of his sinfulness. He or she would never even realise such a salvation is necessary! The origins of salvation are mysterious. The precise way God brings His good news to our world, using a persecutor

☞<sup>1</sup> 3:7  
☞<sup>2</sup> see  
Philippians  
3:12

☞<sup>3</sup> see Acts  
26:16-17

☞<sup>4</sup> Acts  
11:22-26

☞<sup>1</sup> 3:8

☞<sup>1</sup> 3:8

like Paul, using weak sinful people like you and me, is all something that never could have been imagined. The **future** of the gospel is mysterious was well. 'I do not want you to ignorant of this mystery', he says in Romans 11:25. All Israel shall be saved<sup>□1</sup>.

□1  
Rom11:26a

• *The gospel hidden for centuries*

A 'mystery' (as Paul uses the word) is something that could not naturally be known but which God has now revealed. Paul knows that his work is wonderful: to make plain to all people what is the administration of the mystery hidden for ages in God.

#### 4. Even the angels marvel

4. **Even the angels will marvel at the wonders of the gospel.** *This gospel was 'hidden for ages in God (who created all things) □1 in order that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known to the principalities and the authorities in the heavenly places through the church □2, according to the eternal purpose which God accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord □3.*

□1 3:9  
□2 3:10  
□3 3:11

• *God's wisdom displayed in the church*

One reason why God kept the gospel secret for a long time was to display it in all its glories to the angels. As the angels look at the church they see 'the manifold wisdom of God'. Not only does God have great knowledge; He has marvellous wisdom – skill at getting things done! The angels have been watching what God is doing, following the history of Israel, and now gazing in wonder at God's re-structured Israel, the church. This is why the church is so important. The church is God's way of displaying His wisdom to the angels. □1

□1 see also 1 Peter 1:12

• *God's wisdom is eventually more obvious*

Paul slips in the phrase, 'who created all things'. It lets us know that God is well able to supervise what is happening in His world. The words 'in order that...' follow the reference to hiddenness. The point is: God hid His salvation to make His wisdom eventually more obvious.

• *God's eternal purpose*

It is God's eternal purpose to display His great wisdom. It has been on His mind since before the foundation of the world. His plan is now accomplished in Christ Jesus. It is already taking place. The function of the church is to be a screen on which the amazing varied wisdom of God is displayed.

#### 5. Boldness and confidence

5. **Such a gospel gives us boldness and confidence.** There are two implications in what Paul has said:

□1 3:12  
□2 3:13

• *In prayer*

(i) Such a gospel should give us boldness in prayer. *'In Him we have boldness and access with confidence through His faithfulness' □1.*

• *In times of trouble*

(ii) It should give us confidence in trouble: *'So I am asking you not to lose heart because of my sufferings on your behalf; these are your glory' □2.* If God has an eternal purpose to display His wisdom, they should trust God to know what He is doing when His servant Paul is in prison. Actually Paul's sufferings are 'their glory'. Sufferings they endured, sufferings which they saw illustrated in Paul, were only laying up treasure in heaven for him and for them.



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