

Stewarding the Mystery

No one enjoys suffering. When we suffer, we sometimes find ourselves doubting God or His promises or His love for us. This is especially true in the case of sufferings resulting from our obedience to and ministry in the gospel. The Apostle Paul is quite aware of this phenomenon, and so he addresses the subject of his own sufferings in his letter to the Ephesians.

Ephesians 3:1-13

For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles—² assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, ³ how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. ⁴ When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, ⁵ which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. ⁶ This mystery is, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

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 ² 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.

In this text, we learn how to respond to gospel sufferings.

1. **Rather than losing heart, we must rejoice in suffering for the gospel (vv.1,13)**

In v. 1 Paul calls himself a prisoner, but not “a prisoner of the Roman Empire,” or “a prisoner of Nero,” but a prisoner of Jesus Christ. This is key to understanding Christian joy in the midst of suffering. We belong to Christ, He orders all our moments and all our days for His glory and our good, and we gladly trust Him. Paul also says in v.1, “on behalf of you Gentiles” (literally “you nations”). Paul gladly suffered in order to accomplish the great ends of the gospel which were the salvation of all peoples and the glory of God. Having called himself a prisoner in verse 1, Paul then launches into a parenthetical discourse, explaining his glorious imprisonment in verses 2-12, and then ends with the encouragement of verse 13 “not to lose heart.”

Paul realizes how discouraging it could be to the Ephesians that their great apostle has been imprisoned since the last time they saw him five years before, so he takes a few moments to explain the reasons for his and their joy.

1. **In order to rejoice in our sufferings, we must contemplate the enormous value of two precious gifts from God (vv.2-12)**

A. The gift of the gospel message (vv.2-6)

In our text, we see the word “mystery” four times. This is another word for the gospel and it suggests several things:

- I. The source of the gospel is God (v.3)
- II. The content of the gospel is Christ (vv.4,8)
- III. The authoritative messengers of the gospel are the first-century apostles (v.5)
- IV. The recipients of the gospel are the nations (v.6)—notice that they are fellow heirs, fellow members and fellow partakers. Remember in Acts 22:21, the preaching of this truth was the main reason Paul was imprisoned in the first place.

Paul is saying that because of the great value of the gospel with which we have been entrusted, it is the highest honor to suffer for this sacred message. But that's not all.

B. The gift of the gospel ministry (vv.7-12)

Paul knows that the gospel ministry is also a sacred gift. In verses 7 and 8, we see the word “gift” or “given” three times. Ministering the gospel to others is an enormous privilege, because:

- I. It is by His grace (vv.7,8). Paul, whose Latin name Paulus means “little,” here calls himself the “least” of all the saints. He, who once persecuted Christians, is now given the sacred task of proclaiming Christ to others! This could only be by the grace of God.
- II. It is by the power of God (v.7b). Paul's conversion (Acts 9), his gifting for ministry (Eph. 4:7,8,11), and his spiritual empowerment (Col. 1:29) all come by the power of God.
- III. It is for the glory of God (vv.9-12). Look at how the gospel ministry glorifies God: a) a former persecutor preaches Christ, b) the darkened nations are now enlightened, and c) the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places are astonished at the wisdom of God in creating this new society called the church.

This is why Christians do not lose heart in our gospel sufferings, but, rather, rejoice.

Discussion Questions

1. How do/should twenty-first century American Christians suffer for the gospel?
2. What are our normal responses to gospel sufferings? Why?
3. Why did the Apostle Paul interrupt the flow of his presentation to address this topic?
4. How can we grow in our appreciation for the value of the gospel message and the gospel ministry?
5. How is God's “manifold wisdom” displayed in the proclamation of the gospel?

Going Deeper

1. In what ways have you been inappropriately avoiding gospel sufferings?
2. How would your life change if you valued the message and ministry of the gospel as Paul did?