

The Harvester



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To Serve The Lord



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God's "Manifold Wisdom" Revealed

By Brian R. Kenyon

Of all the verses in Ephesians, perhaps none sum-up the purpose of God in Christ more than Ephesians 3:10-13. These verses deal with the declaration of God's purpose in Christ as it relates to both the spirit world and the physical world. Paul wrote,

To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God, ¹¹According to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Eph. 3:10-11)

God's Wisdom

Paul used the word "manifold" to describe God's wisdom. "Manifold" comes from a Greek word that combines a word meaning "many" with a word meaning "various kinds of." Thus, "manifold" carries the idea of "variegated," or "very many sided." This word is "poetic in origin, referring to an intricately embroidered pattern of 'many coloured cloaks' or the manifold hues of 'a garland of flowers'" (O'Brien 245). God's wisdom thus consists of a vast spectrum of angles, which can be known only through the unfolding of His eternal plan (cf. Eph. 1:3-14).

A comparison of God's wisdom to the light reflected from a 1970's disco ball may be helpful. The disco ball was covered with hundreds of little mirrors. As light hit the ball, the many mirrors reflected the light in all directions. Think of the church as the mirror covered ball; God's wisdom as the light. The many facets of God's wisdom are reflected by the church!

Made Known to the Spirit World

God's manifold wisdom is made known to the spirit world (Eph. 3:10a), described as the "principalities and powers [rulers and authorities, ESV] in heavenly places"

(cf. Eph. 1:21; 6:12; Col. 2:15 cf. Rom. 8:38). "Principalities" is from a Greek word (*arche*, ἀρχή) that generally means beginning, and it includes the meaning ruler, authority (cf. Eph. 6:12). The word can also be used of "angelic and demonic powers," because they were thought of as having political organization (Bauer 112). "Powers" is from a Greek word (*exousia*, ἐξουσία) that basically means "power exercised by rulers or others in high places by virtue of their position" (Bauer 278). It can also refer to "spiritual potentates, the more powerful among spiritual created beings ... demons" (cf. Col. 2:15) (Thayer 225). Together, "principalities and powers" can designate the entire realm of created spirit beings, but the focus here seems to be upon the evil spiritual forces. Bruce refers to these as cosmic spiritual powers thought to "control the movements of the heavenly bodies ... thus to control the destinies of mortals" (171).

God's eternal plan affects not only the seen, human world, but also has a dimension that even shakes the wicked spirit world. These spiritual forces are said to receive the evidence of Christ's victory, which will ultimately lead to their submission. Paul also confirmed this elsewhere. In Colossians 2:15, he said that by Christ's nailing the "handwriting of ordinances that was against us" to the cross, He "spoiled principalities and powers" and "made a shew of them openly, triumphing over them in it." The

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NKJV translates, “Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it.” In Philippians 2:9-11, Paul said that “at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth.” The vindication of Christ’s Lordship at the resurrection “brought an end to the malign regime of these spirits and their tyranny over human life in the shape of [supposed] fate and astrological fear” (cf. Eph. 1:19-21; Rom. 1:4) (Martin 43). The church must still war against these spiritual powers (Eph. 6:10-13 cf. 2 Cor. 10:3-5), but the strength of these powers is no match for the resurrected Christ and His church (Eph. 6:10-20; Rom. 8:31-39; Col. 2:15; Jas. 4:7; Rev. 20:1-15). The repercussion of Christ’s work in the purpose of God is felt not only in this world, but throughout the spiritual world as well!

Made Known Through the Church

God’s manifold wisdom is made known through the church (Eph. 3:10b). The explicit expression translated “by the church” is only here in the Greek New Testament. “By [through, ASV]” (διὰ, dia) indicates instrumentality. Thus, the church is the means by which the “manifold wisdom of God” is made known to the “principalities and powers.” While the practice and verbal proclamation of the Gospel by church members is one way God’s wisdom is made known “through the church” (cf. Eph. 1:13; 6:19-20; 1 Cor. 1:17; Gal. 1:6), much more is involved. The church is a continuing revelation of God’s wisdom. By its very existence, the church is the “theater of God’s works ... God’s display, picture window” (Barth 364). This continuing revelation of God’s wisdom through the

church is not only for the benefit of this world, but also as a tangible reminder to the evil spiritual powers that their authority “has been decisively broken and that all things are to be subject to Christ” (O’Brien 247).

How does the church by its very existence make known God’s “manifold wis-

dom”? First, consider the Creator of the church. Jesus Christ is not only preeminent over this world by virtue of His creating it, but He is also preeminent over the church by virtue of His creating it (Col. 1:12-20). He is God, existing from eternity (Jn. 1:1-3). He became flesh to dwell among people and show the way to eternity with God (Jn. 1:14; 14:6-7). He is “God with us” (Mt. 1:21-23). His coming in the flesh and dying for our sins was predicated on the precise free-will maneuvering of human history, which began shortly after the sixth day of creation (cf. Gen. 3:15). From eternity to the cross, God’s wisdom in the Creator of His church has been made known!

Second, consider the composition of the church. Most significantly, the church is composed of people who have been delivered from “the power of darkness” and “trans-

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lated [conveyed, NKJ]” into “the kingdom of his dear Son” (Col. 1:13). Also, because of what Jesus did (Eph. 2:12-22), the church is composed of people from all cultural backgrounds, including those who once despised each other (i.e., Jews and Gentiles cf. Jn. 4:9). Only through God’s wisdom could the Gentiles be “fellowheirs, and of the same body” as the Jews and “partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel” (Eph. 3:6). Additionally, the church is composed of people living by faith (2 Cor. 5:7; Heb. 10:38), knowing what they believe (Rom. 10:17; 1 Thes. 5:21), and fearless in their approach to the Almighty God through their Mediator, “the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5 cf. Eph. 3:11; Heb. 4:16; 10:19).

Third, consider the comprehensiveness of the church. The wisdom of God, through the church, has shown itself to be manysided beyond measure and in a way that has never before been known! Although the earthly ministry of Christ was a personification of God’s wisdom (1 Cor. 1:24), the church is the entity through which God chose to make known the many facets of his wisdom. Thus, one who rejects (by word or deed) the importance of the church of Christ rejects the wisdom of God (cf. Rom. 1:22-32).

Purposed from Eternity

What Christ and His church accomplished was purposed from eternity (Eph. 3:11). “Eternal purpose” (literally, “purpose of the ages”) implies that all phases of the church have been planned from eternity and accomplished through Christ (cf. Acts 2:23; Eph. 1:3-6; 2 Tim. 1:9; Tit. 1:2). Paul used a word for “purpose” that is not the most common, and thus indicates that “the purpose of God is so grand, so far reaching, so unexpected, that the ordinary word for ‘purpose’ will not do” (Morris 96). What God has done through the church is far greater than anything with which human purposes can be compared (cf. Job 38–41). Paul’s use of “Christ Jesus our Lord” (Eph. 3:11b) emphasized every aspect of God’s plan in Christ—His preparation for coming (“Christ,” or Messiah); His incarnate life (“Jesus”); and His absolute authority (“Lord”).

Motivation for Living

Paul concluded this section, “In whom we have boldness and access with confidence by the faith of him. ¹³Wherefore I desire that ye faint not at my tribulations for you, which is your glory” (Eph. 3:11-12). The thoughts shift from that which involves the church “in heavenly places” (Eph. 3:10-11) to that which involves the church here and now in this world. “In whom,” a key phrase in Ephesians, indicates that only through union with Christ are these blessings appropriated (cf. Eph. 1:3-14).

Those in Christ have access to God with confidence

(Eph. 3:12). The idea is not merely that the way is open so that one may enter when ready, but rather there is the idea of “‘a bringing to’—the thought of an introducer” inviting and encouraging entrance (Morris 97). Note the vocabulary: “boldness,” which is “courage, confidence, fearlessness, especially in the presence of persons of high rank” (Bauer 630), and “access,” which means “freedom or right to enter.” Elsewhere, the two Greek nouns appear separately in parallel statements (Rom. 5:2; Eph. 2:18; Heb. 3:6; 4:16; 10:19, 35; 1 Jn. 2:28; 3:21; 4:17; 5:14). Ephesians 3:12 is the only place the two words are found together. Since they are governed by a single Greek article, “they are probably best regarded as forming one idea . . . while the phrase ‘with confidence’ qualifies the second noun and strengthens the notion so that the whole expression signifies ‘the boldness of confident access,’ or ‘the boldness to enter confidently’” (O’Brien 250).

“By [through, ASV] the faith of him” describes the reason why Christians have the boldness to confidently enter the presence of God. “The faith of him” may focus on the faithfulness of Christ to the Father’s will (i.e., “through his [Christ’s] faithfulness” cf. O’Brien 249) or it may refer to the Christian’s faith in Christ (cf. the way Paul uses “faith” in Eph. 1:15; 2:8; 3:17; 6:16, 23), but in either case, the Christian can have the boldness to confidently enter the presence of God based not upon his or her own standing but upon the work of Christ (cf. Heb. 4:14-16; 10:19-22).

Because of this confidence, those in Christ must not become discouraged (Eph. 3:13). Paul drew this conclusion from what had been said concerning the church’s affect upon the cosmic powers (Eph. 3:10), the “eternal purpose” of God being accomplished (Eph. 3:11), and the boldness all Christians have to confidently enter God’s presence (Eph. 3:12). Because there is no object of “faint not,” various suggestions have been made as to whom Paul fears is in danger of losing heart (himself or the Ephesians). Given the context of Ephesians as well as the attitude of Paul toward suffering, the view that Paul is asking the Ephesians not to “faint” at his sufferings is best supported. “Faint [lose heart, NJK]” is from a word that means “to become good for nothing, to grow faint, and hence to become discouraged” (Wood 48). Paul did not want the Ephesians to lose heart at his “tribulations.”

Persecution was a part of Paul’s ministry (Acts 9:16; 1 Cor. 4:9-13; 2 Cor. 11:23-33; 12:9-10; 13:4; Gal. 6:17 cf. “the prisoner of Jesus Christ,” Eph. 3:1), yet compared to Christ, he was far behind and sought to “fill up” what he lacked (Col. 1:24). To the Ephesians, Paul’s arrest and imprisonment might have appeared to have thwarted the gospel and their involvement in it, but Paul informed them

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that his sufferings were “for you [on your behalf, NAS]” and they were “your glory.” Although this latter expression has been taken several ways, it is best to understand “glory” in the usual sense of the “state of being in the next life ... participation in the radiance of glory” (Bauer 203). Earlier references in Ephesians denote God’s glory (Eph. 1:6, 12, 14, 17), but this is a glory in which Christians participate, both now (Eph. 1:18) and ultimately on the last day (Eph. 2:7 cf. Col. 1:27; 3:4; 2 Thes. 2:14).

There is an inherent relationship between suffering and glory (2 Cor. 4:17; Rom. 8:17-18; 1 Pet. 2:20-21). Paul elsewhere speaks of his suffering leading to salvation and eternal life for others (2 Cor. 1:6; 4:8-12 cf. 2 Tim. 2:10), which is the sense here. In Ephesians “suffering is the prelude to glory, except that in this case the suffering is Paul’s while the glory will be his readers” (O’Brien 251).

Conclusion

When the church fails to live up to the plan God has decreed for her from the “foundation of the world” (Eph. 1:4), she betrays the very reason why she was created (cf. Jn. 17:20-21). The local church cannot fulfill her part in making known the “manifold wisdom of God” when

she tolerates sin and division (cf. 1 Cor. 1-4). Individual Christians cannot fulfill their roles in the church, making known the “manifold wisdom of God,” when they do not live distinct lives for Christ. God’s wisdom being reflected through the church will not be manifest when Christians either do not do what is right (Mt. 5:13-16; Jas. 1:27) or do what is contrary to God’s will (Eph. 5:11)! When Christians are not what they ought to be, the word of God is blasphemed (Rom. 2:24; 1 Tim. 6:1; Titus 2:5). Let us take seriously our part in allowing the church reflect the “manifold wisdom of God.” 

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