

## **Ephesians 3:1-13**

### **The Struggle Is Worth the Struggle**

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Loving people across cultures can be a struggle. I experienced this first hand when I was called to be an interim pastor while I was a seminary student. The church was an established, predominately white church in a community that experienced rapid Hispanic growth. On my first Sunday there, as my family walked from the van toward the church building, an older white man walked in the opposite direction toward his car. Passing my family, he spit on the ground and muttered, "I will NEVER sit under a black man!" Needless to say, we had fun in that church!

A few months later we celebrated the incredible things the Lord was doing. In all my years of ministry, I've never baptized as many people as I did in that church. Whole families were coming to faith in Jesus. It was so cool to see the Lord move as the gospel went forth, especially among the Hispanics settling into the neighborhood. But I remember one day when a deacon spoke with me for three hours about his disappointment over me. He accused me of discriminating towards the Hispanics in my messages, which was quite an accusation, since all my sermons were in English, and many who came spoke Spanish first. I couldn't believe that I had to explain myself for the increase in conversions and membership among our Hispanic neighbors.

Loving people across cultures was a struggle for this pastor. And it can get you in trouble, too:

- You might be viciously slandered if you pursue trans-racial adoption; people might accuse you of betraying your race.
- You could be pressured to end your interracial relationship lest you continue in sin.
- If you feel called to spend the summer at an overseas missions trip, your family might retort that you should focus on the unbelievers in their community and let those people over there deal with their own problems.
- You could seek to be an advocate for minorities and be criticized for not doing enough. You could be a minority seeking to be a bridge builder and be criticized as an Uncle Tom or an Oreo. It seems at times that loving people across cultures is a lose-lose situation.

It's not easy to love people across cultures. You might have to learn different languages, different foods, different customs, different clothes, different music, different perspectives, and so on. If loving people across cultures is so hard, and if it can get you into so much trouble, is it worth the drama and the trauma?

One person thought that the struggles of loving across cultures were worth it. His name is Paul, the apostle. By the time he writes the letter to the Ephesians, he is under house arrest. Why? He answers:

*For this reason, I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles*  
(3:1)

As a Jew spreading the gospel to the Gentiles, Paul's ministry is, by definition, cross-cultural, and it got him into more trouble than most of us will probably face. Yet by the time he writes verse 13, he tells the Ephesian believers:

*So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory (3:13)*

For Paul, the struggle is worth the struggle. And he wants the Ephesians and us to be encouraged, not discouraged, by his suffering. In fact, I believe that he wants us to be so encouraged by his suffering that we would join him in suffering for the spread of the gospel across cultures.

But why? Why is it worth the drama and the trauma? Why is it worth being worn and weary? Paul explains to us in these few paragraphs in 3:2-12— which are actually two long sentences— that God is doing something in cross-cultural ministry that is far more significant than you might first recognize. And this grand plan of God plan is **why the struggle is worth the struggle.**

The first reason that it's worth the struggle is that **we get to know God's secret.** God has entrusted us with a secret, a mystery. Look at the Scripture:

*assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, how the mystery was made known to me (3:2-3)*

God has made Paul a steward of his mystery, his secret. But this is a special kind of secret, one that's made to be known, not hidden. How is it known?

*how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, 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 (3:3-5)*

Follow the trail from God to us. First, this secret has been in God's mind from all eternity, but he hadn't told any of us. The previous generations did not have this informa-

tion. Notice also that the information is related to the person and work of Christ. Then, when Christ accomplished his work on earth and ascended to the Father's right hand, the Spirit revealed new elements of his plan to the apostles and prophets. This is kind of like a plot twist in a movie, or an Easter egg in a video game. Then Paul, one of the apostles, wrote it down. Then we read it.

We shouldn't be surprised, then, that most of the world is clueless about this part of God's plan. It's a secret! In order for them to get it, someone has to tell them. And we tell them when we share with them what was written down in the Scriptures. We have to unveil God's secret to them.

So what's the secret? Notice in verse 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 (3:6)*

The Greek is much more emphatic here with Paul's repetition of the preposition *syn*, which the ESV translates "fellow." We could translate the verse, "that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, fellow body members, and fellow sharers of the promise." Let's look at each of these:

- Fellow heirs: Gentiles believers receive an equal share of the inheritance with Jewish believers
- Fellow body members: Gentiles receive an equal place in the body of Christ with Jewish believers
- Fellow partakers of the promise: Gentiles receive an equal participation in the promise, perhaps a reference to the Holy Spirit, with Jewish believers

So God's secret is not that Gentiles are included in his blessings, for that has clearly not been a secret throughout the OT. Rather, the secret is that Gentiles are equal to

the Jews in the experience of this new reality in Christ. And this comes “in Christ through the gospel.” In verse 2 Paul calls this “the stewardship of God’s grace.” This is not a new political or populist movement. This equality is accomplished through the death and resurrection of Christ and is applied to us by God’s grace.

Now we can see why the struggle was worth the struggle. Paul is not discouraged; he’s honored to unveil God’s secret. And we should be, too. Gentiles get full membership into the blessings of Christ!

In our contexts, the divide is not between Jew and Gentile but Gentile and Gentile. Do you struggle to think of each other as equals in Christ. In what ways have you harbored a sense of superiority over another? In what ways have you looked down on a fellow heir, a fellow body member, a fellow partner because they come from a different context than you?

- Do you hold to racial/ethnic stereotypes, different assumptions you have on someone simply because of the color of their skin? Do you assume the worst about someone, or do you see them as Christ sees them?
- Do you hold to racial/ethnic prejudices, different judgments you have about someone simply because of the color of their skin? Or do you long for them to have no condemnation under Christ?
- Do you weep that there are black and brown people, even brothers and sisters in Christ, who could see a person choked to death by police on the street, or a woman gunned down in her home by police without warning, or a man chased down and struck by a pickup truck and later shot to death— all with the same skin color— and fear for their own safety and the safety of their children, as all the past experiences and stories come rushing back to their memory? Do you weep with us, or do you rest well, thanking the Lord

that it's not your problem? Have you forgotten that in Christ we are one body, that we all weep when one weeps (1 Corinthians 12:26)?

If your heart is out of sync with Christ's heart, with the very plan of God stated here in this Scripture, then you must repent. He has told us his secret; we cannot pretend like we do not know what he wants from us. He wants us to live in this bond, to see one another as God sees us, as equal heirs as his adopted sons and daughters. The struggle is worth the struggle, because we get to know God's secret.

Not only that, but **we also get to tell God's secret.** After revealing God's secret to the Ephesians, Paul marvels at just how far-reaching the implications of this message are. If this secret is true, then we must tell all peoples. Look at what he says:

*Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given to me by the working of his power. 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, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things (3:7-9)*

We preach the unsearchable riches of Christ. We bring to light what is the plan of the mystery. I love Clinton Arnold's analysis of the word "unsearchable" in his commentary. He notes that at the root of the word behind "unsearchable" is the word for "footprint." When it's used as a verb, it carries the idea of a tracker, someone who traces someone else's steps. Christ's riches are untraceable; we will never be able to exhaust his wealth, seeing that he literally has all authority in heaven and earth, and he has limitless grace for us sinners.

But why preach this? Because in light of God's plan, the secret that Paul just unveiled, all that Christ has is ours, too. If you know that Christ has inexhaustible riches,

and if you know that he freely shares his bounty with his people (he loves to make it rain on us), and if you know that anyone can get in on this now by faith in him, how can we keep silent? How can we not go to every neighborhood and every nation?

But there's another group that needs to hear this. Read on:

*so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places (10)*

If God's secret is true, then we must tell all powers. God has a message to tell the spiritual forces, the demonic spirits that have opposed his plan. Here's the message: God is spectacularly wiser than they are. Follow this: in 1:8-10, Paul mentions another aspect of God's mystery:

*in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth (1:8-10)*

God has purposed to bring all of heaven and all of earth under the rule and authority of his Son. The equality of Jews and Gentiles in Christ is phase one of this plan. The demonic forces have worked so hard to divide and to destroy humanity, but in Christ we come together. And their diabolical plot to kill him was actually the means by which he is exalted to the highest place and he gathers the peoples into one in him. Genius!

There are some who would try to separate the Great Commission and the vision of cosmic redemption. These are not at odds. On the contrary, the Great Commission calls for the unity, the fellowship, of ethnic peoples, and that is phase one of God's plan to unify the cosmos in Christ. When you pursue this multi-ethnic, multi-cultural

community and suffer for it, don't lose heart. You're proclaiming God's secret in the community and in the cosmos.

Loving people across cultures can be a struggle, and it can be hard. When you face the slander, the reviling, the rejection, the blackballing, The drama and the trauma, remember: we are given grace to know God's secret. And we are given grace to tell God's secret. So go to the hood. Go to the sticks. Go to the nations. Preach Christ to Jews and Gentiles, that we all enjoy equal access to the untraceable riches of Christ. And with the hope that one day we will gather as one from every tribe, every nation, every people, and every language before the throne of King Jesus, ***don't lose heart in the struggle***. We are a small part of God's plan to unite the cosmos in Christ. And **that's why the struggle is worth the struggle.**