

LESS THAN LEAST?

Ephesians 3:8-13

Less than least? --The grammatical impossibility

Praise for their part in God's plan 1:15-3:20

Paul has been speaking of the "great job" God has done in our lives. He is grateful that God has allowed him to be a small part of that process.

For his ministry with them 3:1-13

The nature of his ministry 3:1-7

It had not been previously understood that God would send the gospel to Gentiles to make them members of one body with Israel. He was called by God to announce what had been kept hidden from God's people previously – He is grateful for the privilege God gave him.

The grace Paul received 3:8-13

Paul was given the privilege of announcing the riches of Christ which had been provided for the Gentiles.

His was a significant role in God's program and he praised God for allowing him to have this part.

GOD'S GIFT 3:8-9 7 *I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. 8 Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, 9 and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things.*

Paul is convinced that God has given him a gift:

In v. 7 he refers to it as "*the gift of God's grace given to me, through the working of God's power.*"

In v. 8 he repeats: "*this grace was given to me.*"

Both of these verses make clear that Paul considers his ministry to Gentiles to be a gift that he didn't deserve.

Why doesn't Paul think he deserves it?

He refers to himself as "least of all saints" (less than the least!)

Unusual expression – makes "least" into comparative form = "leaster"

That is no more possible in Greek than in English but it serves to underline how unworthy he considers himself to be for this role. Some think he is using a play on words off the meaning of his name in Latin (*paulus*), which means little.

Kent Hughes suggests Paul's idea is "I am little by name, little in stature, and morally and spiritually littler than the least of all Christians. *I am Small Paul!*"

Paul never let his privileged position go to his head.

He didn't deserve the privilege—it was a gift of God's grace—His unmerited favor shown to Paul.

This is an exaggerated expression that makes clear that he puts himself at the end of the list of those he would have expected God to pour out this blessing on.

He gives further insight into his reasoning concerning his

unworthiness in 1 Tim **1:12-17** *I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service. 13 Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. 14 The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.*

15 Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. 16 But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life. 17 Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.

He considers himself an eternal example to others of God's grace. If God would save *him*, then He could save *anybody*!

Paul's comments concerning God's grace, reminds me of songwriter's words:

I am not worthy the least of His favor,
But Jesus left heaven for me.

That's the kind of grace God has shown to us, first in saving us, then in giving us the privilege of serving Him.

Each new privilege God gives us ought to humble us more, as we realize that we have nothing we haven't received as a gift from God.

Apart from His grace, we would still be wandering about in darkness!

What is the gift God gave to Paul? 8-9 *Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, 9 and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things.*

2 parts to the gift:

When we celebrate Christmas with our family, the children often give us 2-part gifts. As we're about to open a package someone notices and says, "Wait! Open this one first!" Then you discover a coffee grinder, along with a pound of coffee beans. Or the children get a new doll, and then doll clothes to go with it. The gift God gave to Paul is in two parts also:

1. To preach to Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ

In Christ God has made us incredibly rich!

unsearchable<=incomprehensible, inscrutable, unfathomable (<=lit., "can't be tracked out (<=footprint, tracks, clue))

Translators struggle with how to express this word. They suggest words like: inexplorable

riches, untraceable riches, inexhaustible, incalculable, infinite riches. It's more than we could ever grasp or fully explain!

Good modern equivalent => People "don't have a clue" about how great those riches are!

They defy the imagination!

Paul told the Corinthians: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love Him." (2:9)

Thus Paul is excited to tell us about it!

2. To make plain to everyone the secret dispensation which God kept hidden until Paul's day

It is clear that what Paul is making plain was a secret previously. He reveals a new way of doing things which was previously unknown.

This new plan was "*hidden in God.*"

No one could have understood it until God chose to reveal it.

GOD'S PURPOSE 3:10-11 What did God plan to accomplish through the church? (Why did God give this gift to Paul?) *His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, 11 according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

God did this so that He could use His dealings with the church to demonstrate to those He has placed in authority in the heavenly realms His multifaceted wisdom

- that they might see His "*many-colored*" wisdom
- just what a great plan he has designed.

Several passages of Scripture repeat the theme that the angels learn about God by watching us.

We are used by God as His object lesson for the angels to show them how great He really is.

He waited until now — now that He has established the church — to show them this incredibly great, wise plan.

What He has done has become a showpiece to reveal His great plan to the heavenly witnesses.

The church is God's masterpiece! We're it!

Kent Hughes: "The church is the graduate school for angels."

John Stott: "It is through the old creation (the universe) that God reveals His glory to humans; it is through the new creation (the church) that He reveals His wisdom to angels."

When God shows off this masterpiece, it becomes apparent just how wise our God is!

Some present this truth in a way that says that what was hidden was an afterthought—it only happened when God discovered that His plan for Jews wasn't working.

v. 11 makes clear that the church was no surprise to God.

This was part of His *eternal* plan.

He hadn't revealed the plan, but it was always His *eternal* purpose to bring Jews and Gentiles together in one body — the church

GOD'S PROVISION 3:12 What has God accomplished for us through

Christ that He is showing off to the heavenly authorities? **3:12** *In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.*

Through Christ God has given us 2 things: [NAS expresses lit. sense]

Two exciting key words, that were never part of pagans' relationship with God:

1. We have "*freedom*" (<="*boldness*" [NAS], confidence)

2. We have "*access*" to God

We can come into His presence with confidence

We are so intimately linked with Him, so truly one with Him, that we can approach God's throne boldly, without fear.

III.—a friend brings us into the presence of an important person

Better yet, Beatriz' explanation: "I'd run in and jump up on my daddy's knee and give him a big hug. In Christ we need no other mediator. **We can come boldly into God's presence!**

Cp. **Heb. 10:19-22a** *Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, 20 by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, 21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 22 let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith,*

We have these because we're trusting in Christ, NOT ourselves.

That's the problem with manmade religions.

They depend on us being good enough.

We can never be sure we'll make it because we can't know until it's all over, that if we are good enough, we've been good enough all the way to the end.

That's why the gospel is such good news!

It doesn't depend on *us*!

It depends on what Jesus did.

Therefore, we can come boldly into God's presence!

PAUL'S SUFFERING 3:13

Finally, **Implications of this message for the Ephesians 3:13** *I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.*

They have been discouraged because of his suffering for them.
He wants to correct that response.

Rather than be discouraged, they should be excited.

It's precisely because God has opened the door to them, that he is suffering. He is suffering for their sake.

If there was no cause, they really should be discouraged.

The Jews are after him because of them.

It's because God has made a difference in them that the Jewish people are after him.

Therefore, the cause of *his suffering*, should be the basis for their joy and rejoicing! It's because of their glory that he suffers.

Therefore, it's *good*!

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF PAUL'S MESSAGE FOR US:

1. Together with them, God has made a way for us.

WE have boldness and access into God's presence.

We should come boldly into His presence.

2. We are God's masterpiece.

It's interesting to notice the difference between God's view of the church and ours!

Every church has its problems.

Someone has said, "If you ever find the perfect church, don't join it; you'll ruin it!"

The Ephesian church had its problems. In the second half the book we're going to see that they were divided. They were critical of each other. They were fighting among themselves.

Yet Paul says, God is going to use them as His masterpiece!

If God could use the Ephesian church as His masterpiece, he can use *any* church as His masterpiece. *WE* are his masterpiece!

We should live in such a way that God can show us off to the heavenly hosts!

God intends for all His people to band together as a local part of His universal body, His masterpiece. He wants to bring us together and show us off before the angels!

Timothy Dwight: I love Thy Kingdom, Lord. The house of Thine abode,
The church our blest Redeemer saved with His own precious blood.

I love Thy church, O God! Her walls before Thee stand,
Dear as the apple of Thine eye, and graven on Thy hand.

For her my tears shall fall; For her my prayers ascend;
To her my cares and toils be given, till toils and cares shall end. ...

3. We have cause to rejoice and praise Him.

4. We have no cause to brag.

We have access to God because of what Christ has done, not because of anything we have done!

5. We should be excited about proclaiming this good news to others!

Sir Walter Mobley: "If one tenth of what we believe is true, we ought to be ten times more excited than we are!"