

Ephesians Chapter 3

The primary reemphasis is on the great mystery now revealed by God that Gentiles and Jews are one in Christ and that there is no longer any distinction.

The revelation of the mystery is discussed (in verses 1-3), the explanation of it (in verses 4-6), the proclamation of it (in verses 7-9), and finally the intention of it (in verses 10-13).

To be specific, he says (in verse 6), the sacred secret never before revealed is that “the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.”

That verse is essentially a summary of (2:11-22).

Verses 3:1-13

Now the apostle leads us to focus on five aspects of this divine mystery: its prisoner, its plan, its preaching, its purpose and its privileges.

Ephesians 3:1 "For this cause I Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles,"

The writer begins his second prayer in behalf of the readers.

“For this cause”:

This indicates the reason for his prayer; this expression refers to their being part of the church, which is “a habitation of God” (2:22).

Since God lives in the recipients, Paul prays for them.

“I Paul”:

From this point the apostle’s prayer is side-tracked until its resumption (in verse 14).

Before beginning his prayer, Paul decided to go over again some of those truths which prompted it, emphasizing their divine source.

The apostle knew the value of repetition in teaching and the importance of establishing authority when teaching such new and non-traditional doctrine.

We rarely understand a truth fully when we first hear it.

God’s truths are so marvelous and vast that we may never comprehend them fully in this life, no matter how many times we hear and study them.

This digression reveals Paul's own divinely appointed part in disclosing the enormous truth explained (in 2:11-22), that Gentile believers now stand on equal footing with their Jewish brethren in God's family.

The prisoner of Jesus may be read "a prisoner because of Jesus."

Paul's imprisonment is due to the Lord's work; it is not due to any wrongdoing on his part.

Although Paul had been a prisoner for about two years in Caesarea and two years in Rome, he did not consider himself to be a prisoner of any government or person.

Rather, he knew he was under Christ's control, and every aspect of his life was always in the Lord's hands.

He suffered imprisonment for preaching to Gentiles (see 2 Cor. 4:8-15).

For the cause of the Gentiles being offered Christianity is possibly what Paul is speaking of here.

Paul really would rather have brought his message to the Jews, but the Lord instead had sent him to the Gentiles.

The reason the Lord chose him to bring the message to the Gentiles could have been because he had been a Pharisee.

The fact that he was ministering to the Gentiles, would show the great change that had come when he received the Lord Jesus into his life.

Verses 2-13

In this parenthetical passage, Paul interrupted the thought begun in verse 1 to reemphasize and to expand upon the truths he had just written.

He was compelled to affirm his authority for teaching the oneness of Jew and Gentile in Christ (verses 2-7), a new and far reaching truth that most of the Ephesians doubtless found difficult to comprehend or accept.

Ephesians 3:2 "If ye have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given me to you-ward:"

On man's part the continuing requirement is obedience to the revelation of God.

This obedience is a (dispensation), or stewardship of faith.

"Dispensation ... given me": "you-ward":

Here means an administration or management.

Paul did not choose the stewardship of his apostleship or ministry.

God had sovereignly commissioned him with the calling, spiritual gifts, opportunities, knowledge and authority to minister as the apostle to the Gentiles.

“The dispensation of the grace of God”:

This means “the provision consisting of God’s grace.”

This refers to the divine ability given Paul which enabled him to successfully execute his apostolic ministry to the Gentiles.

Every believer is a steward of the calling, spiritual gifts, opportunities, skills, knowledge, and every other blessing he has from the Lord.

Everything we have belongs to the Lord, and we are therefore entrusted as stewards to manage our lives and everything we possess in behalf of the One to whom they belong.

We are faithful stewards when we use what we have, to minister to those within the family of God and witness to those who are without.

“As each one has received a special gift,” Peter admonishes us, “employ it in serving one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God” (1 Peter 4:10).

"Dispensation":

This in the verse above, means administration.

The job of bringing the message of grace to the Gentiles had been given to Paul by the Lord Jesus Christ.

Acts 9:15 "But the Lord said unto him, Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel:"

In the beginning when Paul had founded the church at Ephesus, they heard that God had called him to bring the gospel message to the Gentiles primarily and to all men as convenience arose.

This was, in a sense, Paul's converts and he felt responsible for them knowing the truth.

Ephesians 3:3 "How that by revelation he made known unto me the mystery; (as I wrote afore in few words,"

“As I wrote afore in few words”:

Refers to (1:9-10 and 2:11-22), where the author only touched on “the mystery” which God had “made known” to him.

In the most general of terms (1:9-10), identifies this “mystery” as the establishing of a new humanity under the headship of Christ.

A bit more specifically.

2:11-22 defines it as the inclusion of Gentile Christians along with Jewish Christians that are in God’s family.

But (3:6), will spell out with even more precision exactly what this mystery entails.

As we said above, Paul did not learn the good news of the gospel in the school that he had attended under Gamaliel.

His knowledge of the good news of Jesus had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit of God, while he spent 3 years in the Arabian Desert seeking truth of God.

Paul would never have sought for the truth about Jesus, had he not encountered the great Light on the road to Damascus.

The writing in a few words was earlier in this letter to Ephesians.

Ephesians 3:4 "Whereby, when ye read, ye may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ)"

It was Paul’s intention not simply to declare the mystery but to explain and clarify it.

When Ephesian believers, and every subsequent believer, would read his explanations (here stated as an assumed part of Christian living), Paul’s hope was that they would come to understand his God-given insight into the mystery of Christ.

There were many truths hidden and later that are revealed within the New Testament that are called mysteries.

Here is one: Jew and Gentile brought together in one body in the Messiah.

Paul not only wrote of the mystery that, in Christ Jew and Gentile become one in God’s sight and in His kingdom and family, but also explained and clarified that truth.

He realized that spiritual knowledge must precede practical application.

What is not properly understood cannot be properly applied.

Paul had just casually mentioned it before, and now he will go into greater detail about his encounter with Jesus Christ and with his subsequent study through the teaching which was by the Holy Spirit.

Some of the things, pertaining to Jews and the Gentiles, had to be unlearned of Paul, because in the law, the Jews thought of all Gentiles as unclean heathen people.

Ephesians 3:5 "Which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit;"

“In other ages was not made known”:

Though God had promised universal blessing through Abraham (Genesis 12:3), the full meaning of that promise became clear when Paul wrote (Gal. 3:28).

(Isaiah 49:6), predicted salvation to all races, but it was Paul who wrote of the fulfillment of that pledge (Acts. 13:46-47).

Paul disclosed a truth that not even the greatest prophets understood, that within the church, composed of all the saved since Pentecost in one united body, there would be no racial, social, or spiritual distinctions.

That the divine blessings of salvation would be extended to the Gentiles was made known from (Genesis 12:3) onward.

That Gentiles could be saved, therefore, was no secret.

“Not made known”:

But a mystery that was in Old Testament times was the incorporation of Jewish and Gentile believers alike as fellow members of the body of Christ.

This secret is “now revealed unto his holy apostles and” (Christian), “prophets.”

The other ages that Paul is speaking of, is pertaining to the days of the Old Testament.

The Law of Moses was full of ordinances and sacrifices, but offered very little personal fellowship with the LORD.

Christianity is so different from the law.

The law was fulfilled in Jesus and the Christians are no longer under the regulations the law put upon them.

“Sons of men”:

This refers to mankind in general, not just to God's chosen people, Israel.

Before the church age no person, not even the greatest of God's prophets, had anything but a glimpse of the truth that Paul now discloses.

The Old Testament teachings that relate to this mystery can only be understood clearly in light of New Testament revelation.

Man could not truly understand the things of God.

To speak of a person as a son of man, means that he is a flesh man.

Jesus paid our debt for us, and we Christians have been adopted into the family of God.

We are not any longer sons of men; we are sons of God. Sons of God are following the Spirit of God, not the flesh of man.

No one knew the full meaning of God's promise to Abraham that "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:3), until Paul wrote, "And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "All the nations shall be blessed in you" (Gal. 3:8).

No one knew the full meaning of Isaiah's prediction, "I will also make You a light of the nations so that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (Isa. 49:6).

Until it was explained by Paul to mean the offering of the gospel of Jesus Christ (the Messiah), to the Gentiles as well as the Jews (Acts 13:46-47).

The clues they had in the Old Testament were a mystery to them because too much information was lacking.

That is why Jews in the early church, even the apostle Peter (see Acts 10), had such a difficult time accepting Gentile believers as being completely on the same spiritual level as Jews.

And that is why Paul was concerned in this letter to the Ephesians to state and restate, to explain and explain again, that great truth.

Ephesians 3:6 "That the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel:"

As mentioned before, it is difficult for us to realize how incredibly revolutionary that truth was to Jews of Paul's day.

In spite of the fact that the Old Testament teaches that Gentiles will be blessed by God (Gen. 12:3; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14).

That Gentiles will bless God (Psalm 72).

That the Messiah will come to the Gentiles (Isa. 11:10; 49:6; 54:1-3; 60:1-3).

That they will be saved by the Messiah (Hos. 1:10; Amos 9:11).

And that they will receive the Holy Spirit (Joel 2:28-29).

The idea of including Gentiles in one body with Jews was the spiritual equivalent of saying that lepers were no longer to be isolated, that they were now perfectly free to intermingle and associate with everyone else as normal members of society.

The “mystery” of (verse 3), that has just been divinely disclosed (verse 5), has now been explicitly defined.

It is “that the Gentiles” are to be “fellow heirs,” that is they now enjoy equal share in a heavenly inheritance to which they, unlike the Jews, had no right by birth.

And they are “of the same body” as fellow members.

That is, the Gentiles have been incorporated into the divine family on the same equal footing before God.

They are just as intimately related to the Lord and just as much loved by Him as are their Jewish brethren are.

“Partakers of his promise”:

That is, they are fellow partakers of covenant promises from which they were formerly excluded (see 2:12).

In a word then, the “mystery” is that of Gentile Christians standing on the same even ground of grace before God and of their being equally included in the body of Christ (the church), along with Christian Jews.

All believers in Christ are heirs with Christ.

Romans 8:17 "And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with [him], that we may be also glorified together."

The promises were made to Abraham and his seed.

Galatians 3:29 "And if ye [be] Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."

All Christians, regardless of their status or position before their being saved, are now fellow partakers of everything that pertains to Christ through the gospel, which is everything that pertains to Christ.

The catch to all of this is do you belong to Christ?

It does not matter whether you are male or female, old or young, or ever whether you are black or white.

The thing that matters is, have you given yourself to Christ?

If you do, then you inherit the same promise of faithful Abraham.

Being in Christ through acceptance of the gospel is what creates among believers their perfect and absolutely new society.

There can never be true oneness apart from that reality.

And there can never be practical unity in the church until Christians realize and live by the positional unity they already have in Christ, their one Lord and Savior.

Ephesians 3:7 "Whereof I was made a minister, according to the gift of the grace of God given unto me by the effectual working of his power."

No man can make himself a minister (literal servant) of God, because the calling, message, work and empowering of genuine ministry to and for God are His prerogative alone to give (see Acts 26:16; 1 Cor. 15:10; Col. 1:23, 25, 29).

Minister is from diakonos, the basic meaning of which is servant.

In particular, a servant who waits on tables.

It later came to refer to servants in general.

By definition, a servant is one who acts on the commands of others, who recognizes and submits to a higher power.

His primary responsibility is to do what he is told to do.

Notice, that Paul did not make himself a minister.

He was called of God for the purpose of ministering to the Gentiles.

Paul is very aware that the grace of God given to him was not because of his deeds, because he had actually been persecuting the Christians when God called him.

1 Corinthians 15:10 “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with Me”.

It was not Paul’s education, natural abilities, experience, power, personality, influence, or any other such thing that qualified him to be a minister of Jesus Christ.

He was made an apostle, a preacher and a servant by the will and power of His Lord.

He felt unworthy of any reward, as if he had sought sacrificially to serve in this way.

Not many of us see the same type of dramatic thing that Paul did.

God stopped him in his tracks, and set him on a totally new path.

The power of God that was so evident in Paul's call was the extremely bright Light that Paul saw.

It therefore blinded him for three days and then he received his physical and spiritual sight as a gift from God.

This encounter with the Light (Jesus Christ), transformed Paul from a prejudiced Pharisee to a believing Christian.

Any person in the ministry of the church whom God has not appointed is a usurper.

No matter how seemingly good his intentions are, he can do nothing but harm to the work of the Lord and to the Lord’s people.

Then or now, the man who is genuinely called by God is in constant danger of losing his effectiveness by coming to think of himself as more than a servant.

When he loses his sense of servant hood, at that same time he loses his spiritual power and usefulness.

When he exalts himself and begins to work in his own human power and according to his own plans, he competes with God and forfeits his spiritual power.

To lose dependence is to lose everything, because everything that is of any value in our lives, including power for effective service, comes only from the Lord.

Ephesians 3:8 "Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ;"

Though an apostle and a specially chosen minister of the mysteries of the gospel, Paul considered himself:

“The very least of all the saints”:

The term “least” is a comparative, indicating less than the least.

That was not mock humility, but his honest assessment of himself.

In light of God’s perfect righteousness, Paul’s assessment of himself was not false humility but simple honesty.

He knew his unworthiness.

This shows just how humble this proud Pharisee had become.

He believes that he is not less than just the apostles, but all the believers who accepted Jesus without question.

He had not believed in the beginning.

He is questioning why God would choose someone like him, who had not believed in the beginning for such a large task as this.

Paul is saying, that this is not through his own ability he brings this message of the unsearchable riches of Christ.

It is Christ in him that is bringing this message to them.

Paul is the mouth that God is speaking to them through.

This is what makes Paul such a good teacher.

It is Christ bringing the message through him.

To the end of his life he considered himself the foremost of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15).

“The unsearchable riches of Christ”:

All God’s truths, all His blessings, all that He is and has.

The purpose of every preacher is to declare those riches, to tell believers how rich they are in Christ Jesus.

That is why it is so important for all of the Christians to understand the greatness of their position in the Lord.

Simply knowing about the riches of Christ is not enough, however.

When we fall into sin and disobedience we forfeit the present blessing of those riches, just as did the fleshly, disobedient Corinthian believers.

Like the Laodiceans, they thought they were rich and in need of nothing, not realizing that they were really “wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked” (Rev. 3:17).

We learned in a previous lesson that Paul was like an ambassador.

An ambassador brings the message of the one who sent him, not his own message.

Ephesians 3:9 "And to make all [men] see what [is] the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God, who created all things by Jesus Christ:"

Paul is saying, in effect, “I am not only called in the vertical area to preach the unfathomable riches of Christ, but in the horizontal area to teach about the administration, the stewardship or dispensation, of the mystery of the church age.”

The first area deals with our relationship to God and the second with our daily living and our ministry to each other as fellow believers.

The verse is better read, “And to reveal what is the plan (arrangement), of the mystery, for it has been hidden for ages by God who created all things.”

The two reasons for which God gave Paul this grace (“ability”) are;

- (1) to preach the gospel to Gentiles (verse 8) and;
- (2) to disclose God’s plan for implementing the Jew-Gentile mystery in human history.

This message had been concealed for many years, until the time of the cross.

The mystery of the fellowship, to me, is the fact that God would even want to fellowship with sinful man.

This was God's plan from the beginning.

He made man that He might fellowship with him as a Father does with a son.

Jesus created all things.

Jesus' name, at the time He created all things, was the Word of God.

John 1:1-3 "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." "The same was in the beginning with God." "All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made."

He took on the name Jesus, when He came to the world to save mankind.

Paul, while speaking to these people, knew they all believed that the Word of God had really created everything.

His concern was that they realize that Jesus was the Word of God.

Ephesians 3:10 "To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly [places] might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God,"

“Principalities ... Powers”:

Angels, both holy and unholy.

God through the church manifest His glory to all the angels.

The holy angels rejoice (Luke 15:10; 1 Peter 1:12), because they are involved with the church.

In heavenly places refers to the entire realm of spiritual beings.

Angels are also spoken of in such terms (in Eph. 1:21 and Col. 1:16).

In (Ephesians 6:12), Paul uses similar words regarding fallen angels.

God has brought the church into being for the purpose of manifesting His great wisdom before the angels, both holy and unholy.

The New Testament emphasis is on the holy angels’ concern with the church, but it is obvious that the fallen angels can also to some extent see what is going on, though they have no desire or capacity for praise.

Paul’s disclosure of this mystery teaches angels (“principalities and powers in heavenly places”), of God’s wisdom.

This is speaking to the end that those who God has given limited authority to in the heavenlies were not really aware of this, until Jesus was victorious on the cross.

Lucifer, the old devil, really thought that the cross was defeat for Jesus, when, in fact, it was His greatest victory.

The church of course, is the believers in Christ.

Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to the believers to teach us all things.

Jesus said Himself, that He had not hidden things from those who believe.

The Holy Spirit of God opens our understanding to the things of God.

Matthew 11:25-27 "At that time Jesus answered and said, I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes." "Even so, Father: for so it seemed good in thy sight." "All things are delivered unto me of my Father: and no man knoweth the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and [he] to whomsoever the Son will reveal [him]."

The worldly people have eyes to see, but they do not see, because their understanding has not been opened.

The wisdom of God is so far above the normal understanding that even the angels in heaven did not understand, until it was revealed to them by God.

Ephesians 3:11 "According to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord:"

Paul continues to explain that everything God has ever done, has had the ultimate purpose of giving Himself glory.

As Paul declares elsewhere, "there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and we exist for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him" (see 1 Cor. 8:6).

And "All things have been created by Him and for Him" (1 Col. 1:16).

The church does not exist simply for the purpose of saving souls, though that is a marvelous and important work.

The supreme purpose of the church, as Paul makes explicit here, is to glorify God by manifesting His wisdom before the angels, who can then offer greater praise to God.

The purpose of the universe is to give glory to God, and that will be its ultimate reality after all evil is conquered and destroyed.

The holy angels not only are interested in the salvation of men (1 Peter 1:12), but constantly watch the face of God in heaven to see His reaction to the treatment of His saved earthly children (Matthew 18:10, 14), standing ready to carry out any mission in their behalf.

In the classroom of God's universe, He is the Teacher, the angels are the students, the church is the illustration, and the subject is the manifold wisdom of God.

God is not like man that He should be influenced by circumstances.

Salvation through Jesus Christ our Lord was part of the eternal plan of God.

This was all decided by God, even before He made man.

His purpose was the salvation of man.

It was always the plan for Jesus to save His people who believed in Him, by giving Himself as sacrifice for them.

We are just as if we had never sinned, because of the blood that Jesus shed to pay our debt to God in full.

The law was fulfilled totally in this.

There was nothing left for us to sacrifice.

He paid it all when He took our sin on His body, and He became our substitute.

Salvation for all mankind is in the Lord Jesus Christ.

There is salvation in no other.

Ephesians 3:12 "In whom we have boldness and access with confidence by the faith of him."

When we put our faith in Jesus Christ we can freely come to God and share in all of heaven's unfathomable riches.

In Judaism, only the high priest could enter the presence of God in the Holy of Holies, and that but briefly once a year on the Day of Atonement.

For anyone else to come into God's presence meant instant death.

But now, Paul says, every person who comes to Christ in faith can come before God at any time and with boldness and confident access.

That is the privilege within the mystery of the church.

Heb. 4:15-16: "For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and may find grace to help in time of need".

We are not to be flippant or irreverent but are to come to the Lord with an honest, open heart, in freedom of speech and freedom of spirit.

Confident access is trust that knows no fear of rejection, because we belong to Him (see 1 Timothy 3:13).

"Access with confidence":

Every person who comes to Christ in faith can come before God at any time, not in self-confidence but in Christ-confidence.

This verse affirms that Christians “have boldness” (freedom of speech before God), “and access” (the right of entering His presence), “with confidence” (assurance of being heard by God), “by the faith of him” (through relying upon Christ to gain God’s ear).

The veil of the temple was rent from the top to the bottom at the moment Jesus cried out, “it is finished” while on the cross.

This signified that Jesus had opened the way to the Father for all who would believe.

Jesus is the Way.

No man cometh to the Father, but by Him.

He is the door that we must walk through on our way to the Father.

The door in heaven is now open to all the Christians.

We can boldly go to the throne of God, knowing that we are in right standing with God, because we are washed in the blood of the Lord Jesus.

We now pray directly to the Father in the name of Jesus Christ.

We Christians are now the sons of God.

We have been purchased with the precious blood of Jesus.

We are even allowed to use the special endearing name for the Father "Abba".

Only His children call Him by that name.

Romans 8:15 "For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father."

Ephesians Chapter 3 Questions

1. What did Paul call himself in verse 1?
2. What specifically was the cause Paul is speaking of in verse 1?
3. Was Paul a messenger to the Gentiles by his own choice?

4. What would the fact that Paul was called to minister to the Gentiles show?
5. What does "dispensation" in verse 2 mean?
6. Why did Paul feel responsible for the church at Ephesus?
7. How had God let Paul know about the mystery?
8. How long did Paul spend in the Arabian desert being taught of the Holy Spirit of God?
9. What caused the turn around in Paul's life?
10. The Jews had thought of the Gentiles as _____.
11. What are the other ages spoken of in verse 5?
12. The sons of men could not truly understand the things of _____.
13. The sons of God were taught of the _____.
14. Who are heirs with Christ?
15. Where do we find the Scripture that tells us that?
16. Who made Paul a minister?
17. What was the power in Paul's ministry?
18. When did Paul receive his sight again?
19. Describe the sight that was restored to Paul.
20. The Light of Jesus transformed Paul from a _____ to a believing Christian.
21. Why had Paul said, that he was least of all the saints?
22. What does verse 8 tell us that Paul preached?
23. What does verse 8 show us about Paul?
24. When was this mystery revealed?
25. What kind of fellowship did God want with man?
26. Who created all things?
27. Was everyone in heaven aware of the plan of salvation, before it happened?
28. What was the eternal plan for man's salvation?

29. What gives us the authority to pray directly to the Father?
30. What special name can only the children of God call Him?