

Session 5

Revealed

God invites believers to proclaim the revealed mystery of the church.

Ephesians 3:1-13



What are some of your favorite mystery stories or shows? What makes that story or show interesting to you?

Many of us love a good mystery. Some stories touted as a mystery are not really mysteries but rather entertaining stories with hints along the way. The story is interesting, but the mystery was never shrouded in doubt. Yet other stories designated as mysteries take us on twists and turns that we are unable to solve until it is revealed in the end. What keeps us engaged is the lack of any hints. In Ephesians 3, Paul revealed a mystery hidden but made known.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

In the first two chapters of his Letter to the Ephesians, Paul followed a detectable pattern. He reflected on the riches of God's blessings in Christ Jesus (Eph. 1:3-14) and then followed up with a prayer for insight (1:15-23). In Chapter 2, he wrote about the unfolding of God's purpose in salvation by bringing new life to those dead in sin, both Jews and Gentiles. At the beginning of chapter 3, Paul is about to once again follow up with a prayer (v. 1). Then suddenly and somewhat unexpectedly he began a discussion of God's revealed mystery. Paul returned from this self-interruption and offered a prayer for the Ephesians' spiritual empowerment (vv. 14-21).

A close examination can trace the connection between chapters 2 and 3. Chapter 2 concluded with an affirmation that both Jews and Gentiles were being built together into God's family, the church. Paul affirmed that this racial reconciliation was part of the redemptive sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. In chapter 3, Paul went on to clarify that this bringing together of Jew and Gentile was actually a result of God's eternal plan. The emergence of the church—one new community—is no parenthesis in the outworking of redemption but the intended purpose of God.

When Paul returned to the interrupted prayer begun in 3:1, he once again prayed that the Ephesians would be empowered by the revelation of the mystery of Christ and the purposes of God. This new knowledge given to the body of Christ was not simply information to be accumulated. Rather, it was directed toward a greater end—that believers would be emboldened to proclaim this mystery of Christ in an appropriate and discerning manner. Part of the motivation to share the message stems from this revelation. Those who have it realize how much they needed to be told about it and therefore want to give the same benefit to others.

EPHESIANS 3:1-13

1 For this reason, I, Paul, the **prisoner of Christ Jesus** **A** on behalf of you Gentiles — **2** you have heard, haven't you, about the administration of God's grace that he gave to me for you? **3** The **mystery** **B** was made known to me by **revelation** **C**, as I have briefly written above. **4** By reading this you are able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ. **5** This was not made known to people in other generations as it is now revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: **6** The Gentiles are **coheirs** **D**, members of the same body, and partners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. **7** I was made a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace that was given to me by the working of his power. **8** This grace was given to me — the **least of all the saints** **E** — to proclaim to the Gentiles the incalculable riches of Christ, **9** and to shed light for all about the administration of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things. **10** This is so that God's multi-faceted wisdom may now be made known through the church to the rulers and authorities in the heavens. **11** This is according to his eternal purpose accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. **12** In him we have **boldness and confident access** **F** through faith in him. **13** So then I ask you not to be discouraged over my afflictions on your behalf, for they are your glory.

Passage Outline

The Mystery
(Eph. 3:1-6)

The Proclamation
(Eph. 3:7-9)

The Purpose
(Eph. 3:10-13)

Keywords

- A. Paul's obedience to Christ's call on his life led him to be incarcerated.
- B. The gospel is no longer a mystery because God made salvation available through His Son.
- C. This refers to special revelation of God's will and Word through direct communication or the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.
- D. All who are in Christ are equally in Christ, no matter their ethnicity, and will all inherit eternal life (Rom. 8:16-17).
- E. Paul viewed himself this way because of his previous persecution of the church (1 Cor. 15:9).
- F. Jesus' sacrifice means we can go to the Father and know He cares for us (Heb. 10:19-24).

EXPLORE THE TEXT

Paul stated two vital pieces of information about himself: his name and his status. Notice the self-awareness on the apostle's part. He recognized the true power behind the course of his life. What Paul referenced as a mystery could best be defined as an "open secret," not a puzzling riddle. The message of salvation in general, and its particular application to both Jews and Gentiles, is a revealed truth, not the product of human discovery. Paul explained that Gentiles had an equal status with Jews, all because of the revelation of the gospel.

How does the gospel demonstrate that all people can find a place in Christ's church?

While God is the principal character in the gospel narrative, Paul understood he had a part to play as well. Every believer is tasked to tell others about the grace of God they have received in Christ. Paul's sense of indebtedness to God drove the engine of his witnessing efforts.

Is sharing the gospel more of a responsibility or a privilege? What is the difference?

It is God's purpose to make the *multi-faceted wisdom* of the gospel known *through the church*. Our proclamation of the gospel before people and heavenly beings is God's *eternal purpose* and the theme about which Paul wrote to the Ephesians.

Since God's purposes include using believers to share the gospel with all people, what roadblocks get in the way of believers fulfilling that purpose? How does Paul's words address any of those potential roadblocks?

BIBLE SKILL: Study a word to gain deeper insight. – Focus on the word "access" in Ephesians 3:12. Look up the word in an English dictionary to discover its basic meaning. Think of modern-day situations where a person needs access to gain entry to something. Use a Bible concordance to find other passages that include this word is used. Scan the passages, looking for how the word is used in each instance. How would you describe the access provided to the Father through believing in Jesus?

Because of our faith in Christ, we have an intimate relationship with the Lord. This relationship fuels our witnessing. Rejection and suffering in this world are not the end of the story, for there awaits for Christ's own people a glory beyond comprehension.

What is the relationship between circumstances and a willingness to share the gospel? How can difficulties open the door for sharing the gospel?

KEY DOCTRINE: Evangelism and Missions – Missionary effort on the part of all rests thus upon a spiritual necessity of the regenerate life, and is expressly and repeatedly commanded in the teachings of Christ (John 20:21).

APPLY THE TEXT

- God offers salvation to all people, providing them a place in His church.
- Believers can tell others about the grace and richness of God that they have received in Christ.
- Believers find purpose in sharing the gospel with others.

As a group, list potential events or activities your group could host that might offer opportunities for gospel conversations with lost people. What steps does the group need to take to plan one such event or activity?

What people groups in your city are in the greatest need to hear the gospel? How could you build a bridge to that group that God might use to reach them?

What natural gifts and abilities do you possess that God could use to share a gospel witness through you? How can you use these gifts or abilities to share Jesus with one person this week?

Prayer Requests



DAILY EXPLORATION

Day 1: God entrusts every believer with the gospel.

Read Ephesians 3:1-2, noting how Paul introduced himself.

Paul's name said something about his spiritual experience. While his given name was Saul, named after the first king of Israel, Paul identified himself for the Ephesians by the name he went by after conversion, which means "small." This illustrated the trajectory of the apostle's life, once reminiscent of the leader who sought to tower over his people into a man who was humble before them.

This suffering endured by Paul was directly related to his embrace of the Gentile mission (Acts 21:17-34). Humanly speaking, he was in prison because he dared to believe that those outside the Jewish race were recipients of God's favor and grace and therefore proclaimed the gospel to them. Paul saw this as something entrusted to him by God's grace and for which he must give an account. The ultimate purpose of his calling was for the Ephesians, as *Gentiles*, which is seen in Paul's words *for you*.

How do you describe yourself when being introduced to new people? Consider your social media accounts. How can you better reflect God's work in you?

Day 2: God revealed that the gospel is for all people.

Read Ephesians 3:3-6, underlining what was revealed.

God's truth is not mystical knowledge, attained through some cryptic religious code. The problem is that sin blinds the human heart, and therefore revelation must be given. Revelation, however, doesn't exclude our participation. The means by which we come to understand is by reading the Word of God as revelation from Him. Only the Holy Spirit opens up our hearts to see the truth, but He uses both human teachers and our own diligence in study to do so.

God made known to Paul the Gentiles' inclusion in God's redemptive plan. Everyone who reads Ephesians, as well as the rest of Scripture, can also understand this revealed mystery. Previous generations did not know the particulars of God's plan. Although there was foreshadowing in the Old Testament about God's intentions for the Gentiles, it was not obvious to all how this would come to pass. Paul explained that Gentiles had an equal status with Jews, all because of the revelation of the gospel.

How do you think the gospel demonstrate that all people can find a place in Christ's church?

Day 3: Every believer is tasked with sharing the gospel.

Read Ephesians 3:7-9, highlighting “proclaim” and “shed light.”

Consider for a moment the situation in which Paul was writing: imprisoned in Rome because of his efforts to share the gospel with the Gentiles. He didn't see himself as deserving of any honor or special status because of his sacrifice. Rather, he identified himself as the beneficiary of God's goodness.

The first verb used by Paul to describe his delivery of the gospel was *proclaim*. It is not the specific word used to “preach” but rather a more general one that carries the idea of witnessing to the gospel. Every believer is tasked to tell others about the grace of God they have received in Christ. Paul's assigned task of proclaiming the gospel especially involved the Gentiles. He reveled in the beauty of how those who were unaware of God's desire to save them were now enlightened as to His purpose.

In verse 9 we see the second word that clarifies our proclamation of the gospel. To witness to Christ is to *shed light*. A primary characteristic of lostness is the absence of spiritual light. This heightens the urgency of the responsibility given to the church to declare the revealed mystery of verse 6, that salvation is offered to all people who believe in Jesus.

Do you view sharing the gospel as more of a responsibility or a privilege? Explain.

Day 4: God wants believers to be instruments of grace to others.

Read Ephesians 3:10-11, identifying God's eternal purpose.

It is God's purpose to make the *multi-faceted wisdom* of the gospel known *through the church*. Our proclamation of the gospel before people and heavenly beings is God's *eternal purpose* and the theme about which Paul wrote to the Ephesians. It has always been God's plan to use the church to make known the good news of salvation. God brought us back to Himself through Christ's sacrifice for our sin. And He also desires that we become His instruments of grace to others. God desires the salvation of all people with intensity equal to His passion that you would come into fellowship with Him through Christ. The next time you share the gospel with another person, you can say to yourself with all truthfulness, “I was made (and saved) to do this.”

Since God's purposes include using believers to share the gospel with all people, what roadblocks get in the way of you fulfilling that purpose? How does Paul's words address any of those potential roadblocks?

Day 5: Believers have boldness in sharing the gospel.

Read Ephesians 3:12-13, noting what believers should have through faith.

Boldness in sharing the faith is not always characteristic of the body of Christ. Many believers are timid and fearful of having gospel conversations with lost people. The word *boldness* means “freedom of speech.” This confidence is grounded in our confident access to approach God the Father.

Paul mentioned to the Ephesians his afflictions on their behalf, referring to his Gentile ministry. Perhaps they saw in Paul’s difficulty the world’s growing hostility toward the gospel. Perhaps we feel the same at times, watching a culture that is increasingly becoming more hostile to God and His truth. Regardless of the reception they found and that we might find, we have great reason to continue faithfully sharing our witness.

How have you seen difficulties in your own life open the door for sharing the gospel?

TALK IT OUT

Reflect on the truths found in Ephesians 3, sharing with other members of your Bible study group.

What mystery did God reveal to Paul? Why was this revelation radical?

What transforms any believer into a passionate proclaimer of the gospel?

What does God’s revealed purpose mean for us individually and corporately?



For additional context, read “Prisons of the First Century,” available digitally in the Fall 2019 *Biblical Illustrator for Explore the Bible* at LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator.