

Ephesians 3:1-13
November 20, 2022

Open with Prayer

HOOK:

Q: What does it mean to you to be a “steward of God’s grace?” [Let people engage]

Transition: Paul was all about stewarding God’s grace. When God saved Paul, He entrusted to him the riches of the Gospel message. And one of the central truths of the Gospel is that it was not just for the Jews, but also the Gentiles! From the day Paul was saved, he developed a ministry, especially to the Gentiles, to let them know the Good News that they can be a part of the family of God through faith in Jesus.

In today’s text, Paul reminds the Ephesians that his ministry to Gentiles was based on the mystery, or “grace” that was revealed to him by the Spirit. Let’s read the text to learn about this mystery of grace and how he dispensed this mystery to the Gentiles. Let’s begin.

BOOK:

Paul the Preacher to the Gentiles

3 For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus (Paul’s imprisonment in Rome) for the sake of you Gentiles—

Paul Describes this Mystery

² Surely you have heard about the administration of God’s grace that was given to me for you, ³ that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. ⁴ In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, ⁵ which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets. ⁶ This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.

Paul Discusses his ministry of dispensing this mystery to the Gentiles.

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. ¹⁰ 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. ¹² In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. ¹³ I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.

Process Observations/Questions:

Q: What did you most like about this passage? What resonated with you? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you least like about this passage? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you find in this passage that you didn't understand? [Let people engage]

Q: What do we learn about Jesus in this passage? [Let people engage]

LOOK:

God had a “secret”—but God does not want it to be a secret anymore! If you understand your wonderful position in Christ, then live up to it—and share the blessing with others. This “secret” was important to Paul, to the Gentiles, and to the angels—and it ought to be important to you and me today.

Close in Prayer

Commentaries for Today's Lesson:

Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). The Bible Exposition Commentary (Vol. 2, pp. 29–30). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

It Should Be Important to Christians Today (Eph. 3:11–13)

When God saved Paul, He deposited with him the precious treasures of Gospel truth (1 Tim. 1:11). Paul in turn committed these truths to others, exhorting them to commit the truths to faithful men who would guard them and share them (2 Tim. 2:2). “O Timothy! Keep that which is committed to thy trust!” (1 Tim. 6:20) At the close of his life, Paul would say, to the glory of God, “I have kept the faith” (2 Tim. 4:7). During those apostolic days, the truths of the Gospel and “the mystery” were guarded, preached, and handed down to faithful men.

But a study of church history reveals that, one by one, many of the basic truths of the Word of God were lost during the centuries that followed. God had His faithful people—a minority—at all times, but many of the great truths of the Word were buried under man-made theology, tradition, and ritual. Then, God’s Spirit began to open the eyes of seeking souls, and these great truths were unveiled again. Martin Luther championed justification by faith. Other spiritual leaders rediscovered the person and work of the Holy Spirit, the glorious truth of the return of Jesus Christ, and the joy of the victorious Christian life. In recent years, the truth of “the mystery” has again excited the hearts of God’s people. We rejoice that we are “all one in Christ Jesus.”

Most of us identify Napoleon Bonaparte as the would-be conqueror of Europe. But not many would name him as a patron of arts and sciences. Yet he was. In July 1798, Napoleon began to occupy Egypt, but by September 1801, he was forced to get out. Those three years meant failure as far as his military and political plans were concerned, but they meant success in one area that greatly interested him—archeology. For in August 1799, a Frenchman named Boussand discovered the Rosetta Stone about thirty miles from Alexandria. This discovery gave to archeologists the key to understanding Egyptian hieroglyphics. It opened the door to modern Egyptian studies.

“The mystery” is God’s “Rosetta Stone.” It is the key to what He promised in the Old Testament, what Christ did in the Gospels, what the early church did in the Book of Acts, what Paul and the other writers teach in the Epistles, and what God will do as recorded in the Book of Revelation. God’s program today is not “the headship of Israel” (Deut. 28:1–13), but the headship of Christ over His church. We today are under a different “stewardship” from that of Moses and the prophets, and we must be careful not to confuse what God has clarified.

The reason many churches are weak and ineffective is because they do not understand what they have in Christ. And the cause of this is often spiritual leaders who are not good “stewards of the mystery.” Because they do not “rightly divide the Word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15), they confuse their people concerning their spiritual position in Christ, and they rob their people of the spiritual wealth in Christ.

This great truth concerning the church is not a divine afterthought. It is a part of God’s eternal purpose in Christ (Eph. 3:11). To ignore this truth is to sin against the Father who planned it, the Son whose death made it possible, and the Spirit who today seeks to work in our lives to accomplish what God has planned. When you understand this truth, it gives you great confidence and faith (Eph. 3:12). When you know what God is doing in the world, and you work with Him, you can be sure that He will work *in* you and *for* you. All of His divine resources are

available to those who sincerely want to do His will and help Him accomplish His purposes on earth.

The early church thought that the Gospel belonged to the Jews because it had come *through* them and *to* them first. Until Peter, by divine direction, went to the Gentiles in Acts 10, the Jewish believers thought that a Gentile had to become a Jew before he could become a Christian! God's Spirit gradually revealed to the churches that God was doing a new thing: He was calling out a people for His name from both the Jews and Gentiles (Acts 15:14). There are no national, racial, political, physical, or social distinctions in the church! "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female; for ye are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28).

But an understanding of God's program in this present age not only gives the believer confidence toward God. It also gives him courage in the difficult circumstances of life. Paul's sufferings for the Gentiles would mean glory for the Gentiles. In the Old Testament age, when God's people obeyed, God blessed them materially, nationally, and physically (Deut. 28); and if they disobeyed, He withdrew these blessings. This is not the way He deals with the church today. Our blessings are spiritual, not material (Eph. 1:3); they have *all* been given to us completely in Christ. We appropriate them by faith; but if we disobey God, He does not revoke them. We simply lose the enjoyment and the enrichment of them. Paul was certainly a dedicated, Spirit-filled man; yet he was suffering as a prisoner. Paul made it clear that physical, material blessings are not always the experience of the dedicated Christian (2 Cor. 4:7–12; 11:23–12:10).

I was driving to a preaching engagement, trying to follow a map I had found in the glove compartment of my car. (I am a very poor navigator, so my wife is usually the navigator in our family.) For some reason, I could not locate the interstate highway I needed, so I stopped to get directions at a filling station.

"You've got an ancient map there, Mister!" the attendant told me. "Here's the latest map. Follow it and you'll get where you are going." He was right. I followed the new map and arrived in plenty of time to preach.

People who do not understand God's "mystery" in His church are trying to make spiritual progress with the wrong map. Or, to change the figure, they are trying to build with the wrong blueprints. God's churches on this earth—the local assemblies—are not supposed to be either Gentile culture cliques or Jewish culture cliques. For a German church to refuse fellowship to a Swede is just as unscriptural as for a Jewish congregation to refuse a Gentile. God's church is not to be shackled by culture, class, or any other physical distinction. It is a spiritual entity that must submit to the headship of Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit.

Yes, God had a "secret"—but God does not want it to be a secret anymore! If you understand your wonderful position in Christ, then live up to it—and share the blessing with others. This "secret" was important to Paul, to the Gentiles, and to the angels—and it ought to be important to you and me today.

Hoehner, H. W. (1985). *Ephesians*. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 2, pp. 628-631) Wheaton, IL: Victor Books

F. Parenthetical expansion of the mystery (3:1–13)

Having discussed the union of Jewish and Gentile believers in the church (2:11–22), Paul was about to offer a prayer on behalf of these believers. But he stopped right in the middle of a

sentence (at the end of 3:1) and digressed on the subject of the mystery of Christ. He explained this mystery and his responsibility to dispense it. Then he resumed his prayer, starting with verse 14.

1. THE INTRODUCTION (3:1)

3:1. The words **for this reason** (also used in v. 14) specifically point back to 2:11–22, which dealt with the Jewish and Gentile believers being raised to a new plane. But they also more generally refer back to all the first part of the epistle in which Paul discussed God’s grace to the Gentiles. The words **I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles**, refer to Paul’s imprisonment in Rome because of his service for Christ (cf. 4:1; 2 Tim. 1:8; Phile. 1, 9), and more particularly because of his ministry as the apostle to the Gentiles (2 Tim. 1:11–12). Because of his faithfulness to the stewardship God had given him among the Gentiles (Eph. 3:2) bitter Jewish opposition arose against him. This resulted in his being attacked in Jerusalem and put on trial in Caesarea and Rome.

2. THE MYSTERY (3:2–6)

a. *The dispensation of God’s grace (3:2).*

3:2. Having broken off in the middle of a sentence in verse 1, Paul began one new long sentence that ended with verse 13 (one of eight lengthy sentences in Eph.; see comments on 1:3–14). It is a conditional sentence with 3:2 serving as its introduction (**Surely** in v. 2 is lit., “If indeed”) and verse 13 as its conclusion. Paul wrote of **the administration of God’s grace that was given to him** (v. 2) and concluded by asking them not to be discouraged over his imprisonment in Rome (v. 13). The details of his message and ministry are in verses 3–12. Probably the NIV used “surely” because the wording implies certainty that the Ephesians had heard of his responsibility. Now he spoke of it in greater detail. The word “administration” (*oikonomia*; cf. v. 9) has the sense of stewardship or a trust to be dispensed (in 1 Cor. 9:17 *oikonomia* is translated “trust” and in Col. 1:25 it is rendered “commission”). Paul was to administer “God’s grace” (cf. Eph. 3:7), which was given to him. He elaborated on this in verses 3–6. This grace was given to him to dispense to the Gentiles (v. 1) at Ephesus (**for you**), because he was an apostle to the Gentiles (Gal. 2:7; Eph. 3:8).

b. *The revelation of the mystery (3:3–5).*

3:3. **That is** further explains that **the mystery** is the “grace” mentioned in verse 2. That mystery (a truth hitherto unknown) is not defined till verse 6. The mystery’s disclosure was given to Paul **by revelation**, which in fact he had **already written briefly** about, not in another epistle, but in this one (in 2:11–22).

3:4. The Ephesian Christians would **be able to understand** his **insight** (*synesis*; cf. Col. 1:9; 2:2) **into the mystery of Christ** (cf. Col. 1:27; 2:2) by **reading** what he had “already written.” Paul’s next words (Eph. 3:5–6) would further enhance their understanding of it. His “insight” was not his own discovery; it was revealed by God.

3:5. Paul then revealed the time when the mystery was disclosed. The mystery **was not made known to men in other generations as it has ... been revealed**. This statement has caused some debate among Bible students. The problem hinges on the comparative adverb “as” (*hōs*). Some take this as restrictive (a comparison of degree), which would mean that the mystery was

partially revealed in the Old Testament but is now fully revealed in the Church Age. The thought of the verse should be, God has not revealed this mystery in the past *to the extent* He has now. Others see the adverb “as” to be descriptive (a comparison of kind), which means that no revelation of this mystery was given in the Old Testament but that this mystery was revealed for the first time in the New Testament.

The second view is a better interpretation for five reasons: (1) Though the restrictive sense for “as” is more common, the descriptive sense *is* used sometimes (e.g., Peter said that the disciples were not drunk “as” the Jews thought [Acts 2:15]). (In fact, sometimes “as” could be translated “because,” e.g., the second “as” in 2 Tim. 1:3.)

(2) The context supports this view for Paul wrote that this mystery was hidden in the past (Eph. 3:9).

(3) Colossians 1:26, parallel to Ephesians 3:5, does not use the comparative adverb “as,” but clearly states that the mystery was “kept hidden for ages ... but is now” (*nun de*) made manifest to the saints.

(4) The position of the temporal adverb “now” (*nun*) agrees with Colossians 1:26 in marking the contrast between the two Ages. In the past the mystery was not known but “now” it is. This is substantiated by the same temporal adverb (*nun*) in Ephesians 3:10: “The manifold wisdom of God” (which is the mystery) is “now” to be made known to the heavenly hosts. If the heavenly hosts did not know of the mystery in the Old Testament, how would people have found out about it? Since the heavenly hosts learned of the mystery through the church (which did not exist before Pentecost) certainly people in the Old Testament did not know.

(5) “Revealed” means “to uncover or unveil” something that has previously been completely covered or hidden. Therefore, it would be wrong to say the mystery was *partially* uncovered in the Old Testament.

Those who hold the first view (“as” is a comparison of degree) argue that passages such as Isaiah 2:1–4 and 61:5–6 indicate that Gentiles received God’s blessings along with Israel. However, these passages speak of the Millennium, not of the concept of Gentiles and Jews being in one body, the church.

This mystery was revealed **by the Spirit** (cf. Eph. 2:22), and its recipients were **God’s holy apostles and prophets** (cf. 2:20; 4:11). Some have promoted the idea that this revelation was given to Paul, but 3:5 explicitly states that it was given to the apostles and prophets and that Paul was one who was to disseminate it.

c. The constitution of the mystery (3:6).

3:6. Paul now defined the **mystery**. In three compound nouns he stated that the Gentile believers with the Jewish believers **are** (a) **heirs together** (i.e., “fellow heirs,” 2:19, KJV) of God’s riches (1:3–14), (b) are **of the same body** (cf. 2:16; *syssōma* occurs only in 3:6 in the NT), **and** (c) are **sharers together in the promise** (the messianic promise; cf. 2:12; Gal. 3:29) **in Christ Jesus**. (See comments on Eph. 2:19 and 3:5 regarding the relationship of the church and Israel.)

Thus, the mystery is not something mysterious, but is a sacred secret hidden in Ages past but now revealed. This is made possible **through the gospel**: believing Jews and **Gentiles** are in **one** body. The mystery is not that Gentiles would be saved, for the Old Testament gave evidence of that, but rather that believing Jews and Gentiles are joined **together**. That was a revolutionary concept for Jews and Gentiles alike!

3. THE MINISTRY (3:7–12)

Having described the mystery (vv. 2–6), Paul now discussed his ministry of dispensing this mystery to the Gentiles.

a. *The placement into the ministry (3:7–8a).*

3:7–8a. **I became a servant of this gospel** (cf. “gospel” in v. 6) denotes Paul’s rendering of service (cf. Col. 1:23). The word “servant” (*diakonos*) stresses not the idea of subjection (as does *doulos*, “slave”) but the idea of service or serving, as one who is a waiter (John 2:5, 9). This service has its basis in **the gift of God’s grace** (cf. Eph. 3:2) **given to Paul through the working of His power** (cf. 1:19; Col. 1:29). The Greek more clearly implies that Paul’s service was initiated by “the gift of God’s grace” and continues by “the working (*energeian*) of His power” (*dynameōs*). Ministering **this grace**—by God’s strength, not his own—was Paul’s responsibility though he considered himself **less than the least of all God’s people**. (“God’s people” renders *hagiōn*, “saints”; cf. Eph. 1:1, 15). This denotes Paul’s deep humility in view of God’s incomparably generous grace.

b. *The performance of the ministry (3:8b–9).*

3:8b–9. Two infinitives state Paul’s functioning in this ministry. First, he was **to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ**. Second, he was **to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery**. Though Paul ministered to both Jews and Gentiles (cf. comments on Acts 9:15), he was especially designated as the apostle “to the Gentiles” (Rom. 11:13; Gal. 1:16; 2:7–8).

The Gentiles can know something of the riches of Christ’s blessings (cf. “the riches of God’s grace” in Eph. 1:7 and 2:7 and the richness of His mercy in 2:4). Yet Christ’s fathomless spiritual wealth can never be fully comprehended (*anexichniaston*, lit., “not capable of being traced by footprints”; used only here and in Rom. 11:33). Paul was to disclose publicly *to everyone*, not just the Ephesians (cf. Eph. 3:2) this stewardship of God’s sacred secret (vv. 3–4, 6). This secret had been **hidden in God** (cf. v. 5), the Creator of the universe. Even before creating **all things** God had in mind this wonderful truth as part of His eternal plan (cf. 1:4, 11).

c. *The purpose of the ministry (3:10–12).*

3:10–12. The purpose (*hina*) of Paul’s ministry **was that ... the manifold wisdom (*sophia*) of God might be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms**. In classical Greek the adjective “manifold” (*polypoikilos*) referred to the beauty of an embroidered pattern or the variety of colors in flowers (cf. *poikilēs*, “in its various forms,” in 1 Peter 4:10). The “manifold wisdom of God” does not refer to redemption as such but rather to the new relationship between believing Jews and Gentiles in one body. The medium by which this wisdom is communicated is **the church**; the recipients are the angelic hosts “in the heavenly realms” (cf. Eph. 1:3). These “rulers and authorities” refer to both good and evil angels as seen in 6:12 (cf. 1:21). As the angelic hosts witness the church, they must admit that having Jews and Gentiles in one body is evidence of God’s wisdom.

This mystery—that both believing Jews and Gentiles are in one body (3:6)—was revealed to the apostles and prophets (v. 5) and was disseminated by Paul (vv. 7–9). Its **purpose** was that

angelic beings might see God's variegated wisdom. This whole plan was in accord with God's **eternal intent which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord** (v. 11). This means either that God is now carrying out His eternal purpose, or that He carried it out (accomplished it) in Christ about 2,000 years ago. The latter view is preferable because (a) "accomplished" is in the past tense not the present or perfect tense, and (b) the inclusion of believing Jews and Gentiles in one body was in fact accomplished by Christ's death.

Through faith in Christ Christians have the right of address (**freedom**, *parrēsia*, lit., "courage, boldness"; cf. Heb. 3:6; 4:16; 10:19, 35) and the right of access (**approach**, *prosagōgēn*; cf. Eph. 2:18; Rom. 5:2) to **God with ... confidence**. Though God's eternal plan was accomplished in Christ nearly 2000 years ago, believers can still address God and go to Him freely and confidently.

4. THE INJUNCTION (3:13)

3:13. This verse marks the conclusion of the sentence begun in verse 2. If the Ephesians truly understood "the administration of God's grace that was given to" Paul (v. 2), they should **not ... be discouraged because of his sufferings for them**. His sufferings were for their gain and **glory**. If Paul had not dispensed to the Gentiles the stewardship of God's grace, then Jews would not have been hostile to him, and he would not have been imprisoned. His preaching brought salvation to the Gentiles, but it incurred the wrath of many Jews on him. However, many others became members of the church, Christ's body, and this was their glory.

Dockery, D. S. (1998). The Pauline Letters. In D. S. Dockery (Ed.), Holman Concise Bible Commentary (pp. 578–579). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

THE DIVINE MYSTERY (3:1–13)

After discussing the union of Jewish and Gentile believers in the church (2:11–22), Paul began to offer a prayer on their behalf. However, he stopped unexpectedly in the middle of the sentence and digressed on the subject of the divine mystery. He explained the meaning of the mystery and returned to his prayer in 3:14.

Paul was assured that his readers understood something about his unique ministry. He indicated this saying, "Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me." Paul described the details of his unique and privileged ministry in. The word "administration" that he used to refer to this ministry has the sense of a stewardship or trust to be shared (translated "trust" in 1 Cor. 9:17 and "commission" in Col. 1:25). Paul was to administer God's grace, which had been granted to him, particularly to the Gentiles.

The apostle identified the unique aspect of his ministry as a "mystery" in 3:6. A mystery is something previously concealed but now made known in the gospel. In 1:9 "mystery" spoke of God's purpose of gathering together all things under the headship of Christ. In chapter 3 it refers to one aspect of that ultimate goal, the inclusion of Gentiles in the blessings of the gospel and the terms on which this is done.

Paul then moved another step in verses 7–12 to declare his unique role as a minister of the good news of salvation to the Gentiles. His service was carried out in the church in the service of the gospel. The church is the agency of the divine mission. Thus, the church is central to history, to the gospel, and to Christian living.

Fields, W. C. (1972). *Ephesians*. In H. F. Paschall & H. H. Hobbs (Eds.), *The Teacher's Bible Commentary* (pp. 746–747). Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers.

Paul's Mission (Eph. 3:1–21)

The first thirteen verses of this passage are a parenthesis. Paul begins a prayer on their behalf but pauses at the beginning to explain his relationship to this mystery of God that has unfolded in their midst. Verses 5 and 6 explain that the “mystery” of God’s intentions toward the Gentiles is now cleared up. In the old days godly men knew more about this subject than they understood. But through Paul’s unique mission to the Gentiles it now has been clearly demonstrated that God’s purposes of redemption always extended well beyond the Jews. In Christ, salvation is for all mankind. This all-embracing purpose of God had not been clearly recognized before. Christianity is not merely a reform movement within Judaism. The Christian mission is a worldwide mission.

Paul’s prayer for the believers is resumed in verse 14. He asks that Christ might become incarnate in them (vv. 14–17). He desires for them the strength and perception to understand the vastness of God’s love as revealed in Christ (vv. 17–19).

The apex of Ephesians is the magnificent doxology in verses 20–21. It states eloquently that God is able to perform his promises. The experience of salvation is personal, but it is not unrelated to the “glory in the church,” the fellowship of all believers.

Special point—In 3:3 he refers to the mystery “as I wrote (before) in few words.” This probably refers not to a previous epistle but to earlier references to the “mystery” in this epistle. The mystery was not the gospel itself, or in the nature of God’s message, but in the destination of the gospel. It was not just for the Jews, historically a chosen people, a messenger people for God’s love. The mystery had to do with God’s intentions for the non-Jewish world. The followers of Christ now see that God’s purpose is to redeem all who will accept salvation, Gentiles as well as Jews.

The Holy Bible: New International Version. (1984). (Ephesians 3:1-13). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.