

Life Group Study Guide

Ephesians—carefully, reverently, prayerfully considered-- will change our lives. This study is based on a sermon preached Sunday morning at WEFC entitled: *The Ministry of Mystery* and reflects on **Ephesians 3:1-13**.

Before you begin: Take some time as a group to *pray* that God would be at work in your minds and hearts. There is a real difference between knowing and understanding something intellectually and having a heart that is deeply affected by the truth. Pray that the Holy Spirit will help you to *understand* God's word, *welcome* it into your heart, and then *apply* it faithfully to your lives.

Have someone from your group volunteer to read aloud **Ephesians 3:1-13**:

For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles—² assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you,³ how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly.⁴ When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ,⁵ 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.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.

⁷ Of this Gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power.⁸ 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,⁹ and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things,¹⁰ so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.¹¹ This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord,¹² in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him.¹³ So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory.

This text represents something of a sidebar in the flow of Paul's letter. Have a look at **v. 1** "For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles— and **v.14** "For this reason" I bow my knees before the Father". Both verses start with the same phrase, suggesting Paul began **ch. 3** intending to start a prayer, but then as he hears himself speak, he realizes he needs to address the elephant in the room. He's writing from "prison" (**v.1**)! Not wanting his readers to be discouraged, he breaks off his sentence and explains to them in **vv.2-13** why they should not "lose heart" (**v.13**).

Discuss why Paul calls himself "*a prisoner of Christ Jesus*" and not "a prisoner of the Roman empire" (cf. **vv.1-2, 8; Acts 9:15**).

In this passage, Paul explains the **mystery** into which he has received insight and his **ministry** of that mystery. Then, in light of those two things, the **martyrdom** (the suffering), he is more than willing to experience to fulfill his calling.

1) The Mystery (vv.1-6)

Typically, we use the word "mystery" for something inexplicable. If we don't understand something, we shrug and say, "It's a mystery to me!" However, Paul uses "mystery" differently. How is the meaning of "mystery" in the New Testament more similar to a mystery genre novel or film than it is to something incomprehensible (cf. **Eph. 3:3-5, 9; 1:7-10**)?

At the end of **v.5**, we see that God's once-concealed mystery, is revealed by "*the Spirit*." But then, in **v.9**, Paul says God has given him the job "*to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God*." What a task! How is it possible that God has called Paul to do something only the Holy Spirit can do? Discuss what this tells us about how the Spirit accomplishes God's purposes.

In **v.6**, Paul tells us precisely what the mystery is: "*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*." In **Eph. 1:7-10**, Paul had "*written briefly*" (**v.3b**) that the "*mystery of [God's] will*" was to "*to unite all things in [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth*." Discuss the relationship between **v.6** and God's cosmic plan in **1:9-10** (Hint: **Rom. 8:21**).

In our passage, Paul wants us to understand "*the mystery of Christ*" to mean the reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles, who were *once* hostile to each other, but *now* are one in Christ. He said, at the end of **v.6**, that this happened "*through the gospel*." If the Gospel is how all people, Jews and Gentiles, are brought into the body of Christ and made one new race, then we better know what the Gospel is! Paul states the process by which Jews and Gentiles were made one in **Eph. 2:13-14**. Have someone with a Bible read it aloud and consider as a group how the Gospel is preached every time we take Communion as a church?

In Christ, God gathers the nations into his house, as full members of his family, together with the Jews. By the Gospel, we have peace with God and with each other. That's the mystery that was hidden in plain sight in the Old Testament but was obscured by sin and ignorance and God's concealing influence (cf. **Gen. 12:3; Gal. 3:7-9; Is. 2:2; Is. 49:6**).

2) The Ministry

It's wonderful to know that a way home has been opened and that this way home, once obscured by darkness, has now been well lit by revelation and truth. But the question still remains, how will people get to know about the way so they can follow it? That was the concern that fueled Paul's ministry, and it's the next thing we need to understand in our passage. We need to see the connection between the Gospel and the Great Commission.

"Of this Gospel, I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power. ⁸ 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" (Eph. 3:7-8).

Consider Paul's conversion described in **Acts 9**. Why would Paul deem himself "the very least of all the saints"? How was Paul's ministry ("to preach to the Gentiles), a "gift of God's grace"? Is it surprising to you that Paul considers the very calling that resulted in his imprisonment to be a gift? Discuss why he sees it this way.

It's clear from **v.8** that Paul understood preaching Christ to the Gentiles to be his ministry. Preaching is the ordinary means by which the extraordinary purposes of God are accomplished. In **v.7**, Paul says, "Of this gospel, I was made a minister." The Greek word translated minister is *diakonos*, from which we get our word "deacon". The word means "**servant**." This matters, because if Paul said, "Of this gospel, I was made an apostle" then we could tune out because Paul would have been talking about himself and not about us. Not all Christians are apostles or pastors, but all Christians are servants or deacons of the Gospel. We are *servants* with a message of God's goodness in Christ to proclaim.

We also know that this is a job not just for apostles and pastors because of what Paul says in **v.10**: "so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places." God's chosen plan for bringing the nations back into fellowship with himself and one another is a Gospel preaching church! This leads us to an important question: **How is the Gospel Preached "Through the Church"?**

Paul clearly had a unique role in bringing the Gospel to the Gentiles. But it's equally clear that Paul includes the church in the call to preach the Gospel. What he brought to them, they now must bring to the nations. How is a similar pattern still followed weekly in the local church today?

Another way the Gospel is preached through the church is by means of our fellowship. The church, in how it's put together and in the manner of its internal fellowship, is treated in the Bible as a miracle in and of itself. It's made up of people from all walks of life worshiping alongside each other. Discuss the variety displayed in the assembled church. Why is your small group a wonderful supplement but not an adequate substitute for the Sunday gathering? The diversity and unity of the church is a miracle that cannot be explained apart from the cross of Jesus Christ. Discuss how assembling *physically* is meant to showcase the wisdom of what God has done in Christ. Who is watching us according to **v.10b** (cf. **Eph. 6:12; Col. 1:16**)? How's that for a reason to come to church? The angels are waiting to see and praise God for your participation in the corporate life of the church!

In what way is the Gospel *not* preached when the church stays home and watches the service online? Why is targeting your Sunday worship gathering toward a specific demographic of people something Paul would likely condemn?

In our text, Paul gives us one other thing that we do as a church to preach the Gospel. Something that shocks the angelic ranks in the heavenly places. He says,

¹¹ This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, ¹² in whom we [Jew and Gentile] have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him" (vv. 11-12).

The angels never thought that in Christ, God would break down the most profound barriers of sin and alienation that existed in humanity and between Himself and us. Who had access to the presence of God in the Old Testament? Why does our bold, confident access surprise the angels? (cf. **Gen 3:8; Heb. 9:7**)

3) The Martyrdom

Paul ends this digression: *"So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory" (v. 13)*. He was suffering. He was paying a heavy price to take the Gospel to the Gentiles, but what was it compared to their salvation? What was his loss compared to their gain? How much more significant are the mystery and the ministry than any hardships we might endure on behalf of them? Read **Acts 9:15**. Paul always knew that this was what his Christian life was for. He knew he existed for the purpose of bringing glory to God by spreading the good news and that it would involve suffering. So, he tells his readers, don't lose heart, my life is for you're glory! How is this a profoundly Christian revelation? Discuss how your lives might be dramatically transformed if you were gripped by the same fact that gripped Paul.