

Ephesians 3: "The Mystery of the Gospel Revealed"

Ephesians 3 is a pivotal chapter in Paul's letter to the Ephesians, addressing the Mystery of the Gospel, the unity of Jews and Gentiles in Christ, and the role of the Church in God's eternal plan. It is deeply theological, highlighting both the divine wisdom and the profound implications for the Church.

Context:

Ephesians 3 continues the themes from the previous two chapters. While chapters 1 and 2 expound on the spiritual blessings in Christ and God's redemptive work, chapter 3 focuses on the mystery of God's eternal plan as revealed through the Gospel. Paul's prayer for strength and understanding in the latter part of the chapter reinforces the magnitude of God's love and the importance of comprehending the fullness of the Gospel message.

Key Verses:

1. Ephesians 3:1–13 – The Mystery Revealed

Verse 1: "For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles..."

- **Greek word: "πρέσβυς" (presbytos)** – The term for "prisoner" (sometimes translated as "ambassador" or "slave") shows Paul's humble identification with his calling. He is willing to suffer for the Gospel, specifically for the Gentiles, a point he emphasizes throughout the letter.

Verse 3: "that by revelation there was made known to me the Mystery, as I wrote before in brief."

- **Greek word: "ἀποκάλυψις" (apokalypsis)** – The word for "revelation" means an unveiling or disclosure. This implies that God's plan, previously hidden, is now made clear, and it is not due to human wisdom or effort but a divine act of grace. The mystery Paul refers to is the inclusion of the Gentiles in the promises of God through Christ.

Verse 6: "...that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel."

- **Greek phrase: "σύσσωμα" (syssōma)** – The term "fellow members" refers to the Church as a united body. The metaphor stresses that Gentiles and Jews are now equal parts of the same spiritual body, a truth central to the doctrine of the Church. This inclusion into the body of Christ is a radical concept in the early church, as it dismantles the ethnic and cultural barriers that had previously divided humanity.

Verse 7–9: Paul's role in the mystery

Paul speaks about his calling to be the apostle to the Gentiles. "ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ" (*en ekklēsia*) – "In the Church" reflects the role of the Church in revealing God's wisdom and the manifold riches of His grace (vv. 8–9). This word signifies the ecclesiastical body but also stresses its mission as the instrument of God's purpose in the world.

Greek Key Words:

1. **Mystery (μυστήριον - *mystērion*):**

- This term appears several times in Ephesians, especially in this chapter. It refers to something hidden in the past but now revealed. It is not a riddle to be solved by human reasoning, but a divine truth unveiled at the proper time. Here, the mystery is the inclusion of Gentiles into the promises of God, as heirs of salvation through Christ (vv. 3, 6).

2. **Grace (χάρις - *charis*):**

- The concept of grace is essential in Paul's theology. The mystery of the Gospel is presented as an act of grace to both Jews and Gentiles. It is something neither can earn, but both receive as a gift. The term also signifies God's unmerited favor, empowering believers to live in the fullness of His will.

3. **Fellow heirs (σύνοικοί - *synoikoi*):**

- Paul emphasizes that Gentiles are not second-class citizens in the Kingdom of God. The word "fellow heirs" highlights equality and full participation in God's promises, alongside the Jewish believers.
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Dispensational Theology and Ephesians 3:

Dispensational theology interprets Ephesians 3 as an important chapter in understanding the transition from God's program for Israel to His program for the Church. The "Mystery" in this context refers to the previously hidden truth that God's redemptive plan for the Church includes both Jews and Gentiles.

Key Points in Dispensational Understanding of Ephesians 3:

1. **The Church as a distinct entity:**

- According to dispensationalism, the Church is a unique entity in God's plan, distinct from Israel. Ephesians 3:6 underlines the inclusion of Gentiles as "fellow heirs" and "fellow partakers" in the blessings of Christ, which was not fully revealed in the Old Testament.

2. **The Mystery of the Church:**

- The Church's role is described as a mystery, suggesting a hidden reality not known in previous ages. This mystery is not just the coming of the Messiah, but the union of Jews and Gentiles in Christ. This shifts the understanding from Israel's national promises to a broader, global vision of God's salvation.

3. **The fullness of God's plan:**

- Dispensationalists emphasize that Paul's focus on the mystery also indicates the completion of a stage in God's redemptive history. The Church, as part of this mystery, is now the central instrument through which God's manifold wisdom is revealed to the heavenly realms (vv. 9-10).

Applications to Today's Christian:

1. **Unity in Diversity:**

- The concept of Jews and Gentiles being "fellow heirs" should challenge modern Christians to embrace unity across denominational, racial, and cultural lines. The Church is meant to be a visible demonstration of reconciliation through the Gospel (v. 6). This applies to local church dynamics as well, encouraging believers to welcome and love all Christians, regardless of background.

2. **The Value of the Church:**

- Ephesians 3 teaches that the Church is the vehicle through which God's wisdom and grace are made manifest. Today's Christian can draw confidence from this, understanding that the Church has an essential, strategic role in God's eternal plan (v. 10). It emphasizes the importance of active participation in the body of Christ.

3. **God's Grace and Mystery:**

- The Mystery of God's plan, particularly the inclusion of Gentiles into His promises, highlights God's graciousness. Christians today can reflect on the fact that God's plan for salvation is not limited by human efforts or ethnic barriers. His grace extends freely to all who believe in Christ.

4. **A Life of Humility and Service:**

- Paul's own example of being a "prisoner for Christ" invites Christians to live lives of humble service, especially in the face of opposition. Paul's ministry is a model of sacrificial service for the sake of spreading the Gospel to all nations (vv. 1-2).

Scriptural References to Ephesians 3:

1. **Romans 11:25–26** – Paul speaks of the mystery of Israel's partial hardening until the fullness of the Gentiles comes in. This aligns with the theme of mystery in Ephesians 3, highlighting the unity of both Jew and Gentile in God's plan.

2. **Colossians 1:26–27** – Another passage in which Paul speaks of the mystery of the Gospel being revealed, showing the universal scope of Christ's redemptive work, much like in Ephesians.
 3. **Romans 16:25–27** – Paul reveals the mystery kept secret for long ages but now made known through Christ Jesus. This echoes the "mystery" of Ephesians 3:9.
 4. **Galatians 3:28** – Emphasizes the equality of all believers in Christ, which aligns with the theme of unity in Ephesians 3.
 5. **1 Peter 1:10–12** – Talks about the prophets searching to understand the mystery of salvation, which was fully revealed in the Gospel.
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Discussion Questions for Small Group:

1. How do you understand the concept of the "Mystery" that Paul speaks of in Ephesians 3? What does it mean for the Gentiles to be "fellow heirs" with the Jews?
2. In what ways does the unity of Jews and Gentiles in the body of Christ challenge your view of other Christians today? How can we apply this in our local church communities?
3. Ephesians 3 speaks of God's manifold wisdom being made known through the Church. How can our church better reflect God's wisdom to the world around us?
4. How does Paul's example of suffering for the Gospel encourage us to endure challenges for the sake of Christ?
5. Paul prays for spiritual strength in Ephesians 3:16-19. What does this prayer reveal about the nature of spiritual growth, and how can we pray for one another in a similar way?
6. What role does grace play in our understanding of God's plan for the world, as outlined in this chapter? How does it shape our daily lives as Christians?

Conclusion:

From a dispensational perspective, Ephesians chapter 3 highlights the mystery of the Church as a unique and distinct entity in God's redemptive plan. Paul reveals that this mystery, previously hidden but now made known, is that Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel (Eph. 3:6). This marks a new dispensation where God's grace is extended beyond Israel to all nations, unified in Christ. Paul emphasizes the church's role in manifesting God's wisdom and eternal purpose, demonstrating His manifold grace through the work of Christ and the Spirit. Dispensationalists see this chapter as pivotal in understanding the transition from God's focus on Israel to the establishment of the Church as a distinct body, which will play a central role in God's ultimate plan of redemption.