



Ephesians - Chapter Three

Summary of Chapter Three

Paul starts by ensuring his readers are aware that one of God's great mysteries is revealed in the Gospel that Paul was appointed to bring to them; that the Gentiles are included in all the promises that he has made to his chosen nation Israel and, indeed, as their equal partners in the Kingdom of God. The secret that had been kept for long ages, although some of the prophets had alluded to it, was that God had drawn up the blueprint for this all inclusive family long before Creation.

Paul follows up this revelation with a call for his readers not to be disheartened by his own imprisonment, but to ensure that the secret that had been made known was spread far and wide by those who had accepted the call to come to Christ. The message that needed to be told by the church, especially to rulers and those in authority, was that wisdom was key, and that it was God's wisdom that would rule over all else.

Paul concludes the chapter by revealing that it is his prayer that his readers will be so captivated by their new found knowledge of God in Christ, and the riches of his wisdom for their lives, that they will respond to his love in such a way that will see them go from strength to strength in their faith and actions.

V Ephesians 3:1-13 - Paul's Ministry to the Gentiles

Paul explains his calling and ministry as an apostle to the Gentiles. This was to assure his Gentile readers that their share in the inheritance is authentic because of its divine origin.

V.a Ephesians 3:1-6 - Paul's apostolic ministry

Paul elaborates on his divine call to apostleship. He was sent by Christ as a gracious gift to the Gentiles.

¹ This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles — ² for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given to me for you, ³ and how the

mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, ⁴ a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ.

Ephesians 3:1-4

This is the reason. Paul breaks off his thought here only to resume it again in v.14, where the opening phrase is repeated, similar to that in 2:1 and 2:5. However, on the two occasions here it is a phrase linking between the previous statements and those about to be discussed.

I Paul. This is one of only six occasions where Paul refers to himself by name in the body of a letter. The others are 2 Corinthians 10:1, Galatians 5:2, Colossians 1:23, 1 Thessalonians 2:18 and Philemon 9. On each occasion it inevitably carries special significance.

A prisoner for Christ. Paul suffered imprisonment or confinement several times in his service of Christ: <<*After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely*>> (Acts 16:23), them being Paul and Silas; <<*Then he ordered the centurion to keep him in custody, but to let him have some liberty and not to prevent any of his friends from taking care of his needs*>> (Acts 24:23), him being Paul; <<*I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called*>> (Ephesians 4:1), <<*It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel*>> (Philippians 1:7), <<*Aristarchus my fellow-prisoner greets you, as does Mark the cousin of Barnabas, concerning whom you have received instructions – if he comes to you, welcome him*>> (Colossians 4:10), <<*Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God*>> (2 Timothy 1:8), <<*Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother*>> (Philemon 1), and: <<*yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love – and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus*>> (Philemon 9).

For the sake of you Gentiles. Paul was the apostle, teacher, and preacher to the Gentiles: <<*For this I was appointed a herald and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying), a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth*>> (1 Timothy 2:7), and: <<*For this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher*>> (2 Timothy 1:11), so the sufferings he experienced during his ministry were on their behalf: <<*but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labours, sleepless nights, hunger*>> (2 Corinthians 6:4-5), and: <<*Are they ministers of Christ? I am talking like a madman – I am a better one: with far greater labours, far more imprisonments, with countless floggings, and often near death*>> (2 Corinthians 11:23).

For surely you have already heard is a phrase Paul will repeat: <<*For surely you have heard about him and were taught in him, as truth is in Jesus*>> (Ephesians

4:21). Paul may not have known the recent Ephesian converts, especially in the outlying villages whose situation was mentioned in the Author and Title section of the series introduction, even though he had spent three years in Ephesus, something he confirmed in his farewell address to Ephesian elders in Miletus: <<*Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to warn everyone with tears*>> (Acts 20:31).

The commission of God's grace that was given to me for you was Paul's calling by the Lord in Damascus shortly after his initial encounter with the Risen Christ: <<*But the Lord said to him, 'Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name'*>> (Acts 9:15-16).

Paul had written of the mystery of God's will in Ephesians 1:8b-9. See the associated comments. This mystery is now revealed: Christ has come to unify Jew and Gentile in one body through the Gospel, about which Paul had just written in a few words; see the parallels of the mystery and its revelation with Ephesians 1:9 and 1:17.

Christ explained this mystery to Paul by revelation on the road to Damascus, as recorded in Acts 9:1-7, and more fully at other times, such as Acts 22:17-21, 2 Corinthians 12:1-7, Galatians 1:12 and 2:2.

Paul may have been in prison as he wrote these verses but his enthusiasm could not be contained as he builds up to this great revelation. His vision is as free as the wind and as wide as the horizon, and he wants everyone who reads this letter, then and now, to share the vision and to join in the work.

⁵ In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: ⁶ that is, the Gentiles have become fellow-heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

Ephesians 3:5-6

Not made known. While Moses and the prophets had written in former generations of this mystery, i.e. Christ and his salvation to the ends of the earth: <<*Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures*>> (Luke 24:27), <<*If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me*>> (John 5:46), and: <<*Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that was to be yours made careful search and inquiry, inquiring about the person or time that the Spirit of Christ within them indicated, when it testified in advance to the sufferings destined for Christ and the subsequent glory. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in regard to the things that have now been announced to you through those who brought you good news by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven – things into which angels long to look!*>> (1 Peter 1:10-12), and while God had even promised to Abraham that all the nations of the earth would be blessed through him: <<*I will bless*

those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed>> (Genesis 12:3), the full realisation of who Christ was and the extent of the salvation that would come to the Gentiles was not clear until after the giving of the Spirit: <<None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But, as it is written, 'What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him' – these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God>> (1 Corinthians 2:8-10).

Apostles and prophets. There are several interpretations of this phrase as discussed in the comments on Ephesians 2:20.

The Gentiles have become fellow-heirs. Paul explains the content of the mystery mentioned in vv.3-4: Gentile and Jewish Christians are now united in God's new family as equal heirs with one another and with Christ: <<*it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ – if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him*>> (Romans 8:16-17), and: <<*There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise*>> (Galatians 3:28-29). Although it was a mystery and hidden from the Jews who expected the law to be central forever, it was something that the OT prophets wrote about: <<*In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it*>> (Isaiah 2:2), <<*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations*>> (Jeremiah 1:5), <<*You shall allot it as an inheritance for yourselves and for the aliens who reside among you and have begotten children among you. They shall be to you as citizens of Israel; with you they shall be allotted an inheritance among the tribes of Israel*>> (Ezekiel 47:22), and: <<*Look at the nations, and see! Be astonished! Be astounded! For a work is being done in your days that you would not believe if you were told*>> (Habakkuk 1:5).

V.b Ephesians 3:7-13 - The mystery and wisdom

God's wisdom is revealed in Christ. Before being revealed, it was a mystery.

⁷ Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given to me by the working of his power.

Ephesians 3:7

A servant refers to the minister or official charged with an area of responsibility. Paul was duty bound to proclaim the Gospel: <<*If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid on me, and woe betide me if I do not proclaim the gospel!*>> (1 Corinthians 9:16), yet he regards this burden as the gift of God's grace because he served out of gratitude for the grace that he himself had received.

That was given to me by the working of his power. Paul was called directly by the Risen Christ to this ministry. This included the spiritual gifts, the power of the Holy Spirit that produced the conversion of many, both Jews and Gentiles. God is given the credit, the glory, for he is the giver of the greatest gift, the very embodiment of his grace in Christ Jesus. Paul confirms this: <<*For this I toil and struggle with all the energy that he powerfully inspires within me*>> (Colossians 1:29).

⁸ Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ,
⁹ and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; ¹⁰ so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

Ephesians 3:8-10

The very least of the saints. This is not false humility on Paul's part, since he is acutely aware that he had once been a persecutor of Christ and his church: <<*He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?'*>> (Acts 9:4), <<*as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless*>> (Philippians 3:6), and: <<*I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief*>> (1 Timothy 1:13). Even in that state, God still condescended to his depth, to favour him with the boundless riches of Christ.

Saints here and in v.18 is a reference to all believers as discussed in comments on Ephesians 1:1.

This grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ. Paul considers it a great privilege to be given the task of taking the Gospel to the Gentiles and he wants to ensure that it is not he but God that gets the glory for the work that is being achieved.

The mystery hidden for ages in God. Paul spreads the light of the former mystery of God's plan for man's salvation through Christ. The fellowship now revealed in the Church includes all people who accept Christ as now equal, no matter their past or present situations. God's plan was from the beginning of the world. He knew man, having free will, would choose to play it on his own, disregarding God's word, bringing sin and death. Part of his plan was therefore to provide the perfect redemption, both righteous and just, through Jesus Christ; this came to pass according to his time schedule, openly, before all people; now the message was being spread by the eyewitnesses near and far.

God who created all things. This is a fact confirmed by God himself through his prophet: <<*I made the earth, and created humankind upon it; it was my hands that stretched out the heavens, and I commanded all their host*>> (Isaiah 45:12); at least, he did so through his Son: <<*Long ago God spoke to our*

ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds>> (Hebrews 1:1-2).

The wisdom of God in its rich variety means it has many facets and aspects, like an intricately cut diamond: <<*Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God>>* (1 Corinthians 1:26-29). The use of this statement seems to indicate Paul's familiarity with the apocryphal book 'The Wisdom of Solomon' for it is very similar to the language used therein.

Now be made known is a reference to this age, in contrast to the time before Christ's first coming. The knowledge of God's wisdom is to be disseminated around the world through the church.

The rulers and authorities in the heavenly places probably refers to the angelic beings. God's redemptive purposes are of interest to angels: <<*It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in regard to the things that have now been announced to you through those who brought you good news by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven – things into which angels long to look!>>* (1 Peter 1:12), who themselves must marvel at how God is changing and reconciling fallen humans into a new creation through his Son. The whole host of heaven are better able to glorify God when they behold, in wonder, what God has done and does in creating the church: <<*And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God>>* (Revelation 7:11). Refer to Psalm 148 and Revelation 19:1-8, and the comments on Ephesians 6:12.

There are some scholars and commentators who also believe that the fallen angels, including Satan, are intended here as well, and this cannot be discounted, as the knowledge of Christ and the work God has achieved through him may well have an impact on them as well, one way or the other.

¹¹ This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, ¹² in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him. ¹³ I pray therefore that you may not lose heart over my sufferings for you; they are your glory.

Ephesians 3:11-13

The eternal purpose. God's redemption in Christ originated in the fathomless sea of eternity with God's 'rich variety of wisdom' (v.10). It was planned in eternity past and will continue onwards forever. See the emphasis on God's plan and purpose in Ephesians 1:3-14.

Carried out in Christ Jesus. God's plan of salvation to the ends of the earth had to be put into effect in human history, which God did through the earthly work of his incarnate Son.

In whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him. It is by faith in Jesus that believers are brought into a relationship with their creator. It is through his sacrifice that they have salvation and reconciliation, and the right to call out to him in praise and prayer, with boldness and confidence. It is only in his name and for his sake that all prayers are heard by the Father.

An amazing privilege for those who believe in Jesus is that they can actually come into the Father's presence even as sinful beings, for Jesus has paid the ransom price of redemption and has gone in ahead of them: <<As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him>> (Daniel 7:13). Those who follow can do so in praise and worship of their God and Father: <<Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name>> (Psalm 100:4), <<Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need>> (Hebrews 4:16), and: <<Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God>> (1 John 3:21).

I pray therefore that you may not lose heart over my sufferings for you; they are your glory. Paul expresses his desire that his present tribulations, such as being in prison, will not discourage them from pursuing and being faithful and strong in their new way of living in Christ. They must take from this situation how valuable and, ultimately, the most important reason for being persecuted is his complete faith in God and the Gospel he preached to them, by which they were converted. To him, it was the best outcome, for it showed that the truth of the Gospel was having an impact on those in authority who opposed God, which is to the glory of those who believe. It must also be seen as the best outcome for them. This situation, Paul reminds them, is of eternal value, as Christ is the centre of their lives, both now and forever. There is nothing of equal or higher value in anything or anyone on this earth, ever. There is also nothing and no one to fear.

VI Ephesians 3:14-21 - Prayer for the Readers

Paul resumes his thought broken off in v.1 and reports his prayer for the readers' strength and understanding of God's power (vv.14-19). He concludes by blessing God (vv.20-21).

¹⁴ For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name.

Ephesians 3:14-15

For this reason. Paul had broken off his thought in v.1, so he repeats this phrase to indicate that he is returning to that original thought.

I bow my knees before the Father. When Paul considers the majesty of God's worldwide work of redemption in Christ, he responds in the only appropriate way: humble adoration of God the Father, the Great King. The posture of kneeling was

one that traditionally showed the greatest reverence and respect, such as a subject would do before their king, even those who would do so to mock Jesus: <<*They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!'*>> (Matthew 27:29b). It was the posture taken publically by King Solomon before God when he dedicated the newly built temple: <<*Solomon had made a bronze platform five cubits long, five cubits wide, and three cubits high, and had set it in the court; and he stood on it. Then he knelt on his knees in the presence of the whole assembly of Israel, and spread out his hands towards heaven*>> (2 Chronicles 6:13).

Prayer brings together love and power: the relation of love that grows up between God and the person who prays, and the flowing of power from God to, and especially through, that person as a result.

To be named in biblical usage refers to the definition of one's identity. God the Father, the creator of all things (v.9), is also the one who names, i.e. defines the identity of all creatures, even to the extent of naming every family in heaven and on earth. God's present action in the naming of every family is a further affirmation of his sovereignty over all creation. It indicates that God has one family: believers in Christ on earth, the spirits of just men made perfect, and the holy angels in heaven. All are the children of God.

This is an indication of how special God views humanity for he delegated the naming of the rest of his creation to man: <<*So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name*>> (Genesis 2:19), yet he kept the naming of human families for himself.

¹⁶ I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, ¹⁷ and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. ¹⁸ I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Ephesians 3:16-19

I pray that shows that prayer was never far from Paul's mind in all situations, even as he composed this letter. Paul demonstrates to all the power of prayer and the way that it should be a natural extension of everyday living.

The Holy Spirit applies to believers the personal presence and power of God so that they may be strengthened in your inner being or 'inner man', referring to one's inner self as a human being.

Christ already dwells in Christians, but Paul prays here for his indwelling with power. Here, Paul speaks of the indwelling Spirit and here of the indwelling

Christ, suggesting the deity of the Spirit as well as the Son. The terms Spirit and power are frequently associated, for the Holy Spirit imparts power for ministry.

Rooted and grounded in love. Love is the natural and necessary outcome of a living faith that is the fruit of Christ's work in the Christian. Those who are rooted in Christ are like the seed planted in good soil: <<*Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold*>> (Mark 4:8), or who remain attached to Christ: <<*Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me*>> (John 15:4).

The power to comprehend. Godliness leads to greater understanding of God and his works, as King David wrote: <<*I understand more than the aged, for I keep your precepts*>> (Psalm 119:100), with wise words coming from his son King Solomon: <<*if you seek it like silver, and search for it as for hidden treasures – then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God. For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding*>> (Proverbs 2:4-6).

Breadth and length and height and depth express the immeasurable dimensions of God's riches in Christ, a concept from the OT: <<*It is higher than heaven – you know? Its measure is longer than the earth, and broader than the sea*>> (Job 11:8-9), and: <<*For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love towards those who fear him*>> (Psalm 103:11). To take this concept one step further, his readers are to search out, in every possible direction, the extent of God's love. Obviously, this is way beyond even their best imaginations, because it must also include eternity, from before the Creation to after its destruction and the eternal state. This also includes the concept that God's love can reach every person, and that every person can be certain of God's presence with them in every place, situation and moment.

To know what surpasses knowledge is the sublime privilege of the Christian. The purpose ultimately is to be filled with God's fullness.

²⁰ Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.

Ephesians 3:20-21

Now to him refers to God the Father who is the giver of all things, including his only true Son.

To accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine provides an indication of the true greatness of God's work and love, which is far greater than human comprehension: <<*From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him*>> (Isaiah 64:4), and a Scripture worth repeating here is: <<*But, as it is written, 'What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him'*>> (1 Corinthians

2:9). A good example is where Solomon asked for wisdom in order to rule well as king and God gave far more than he asked for: <<**wisdom and knowledge are granted to you. I will also give you riches, possessions, and honour, such as none of the kings had who were before you, and none after you shall have the like**>> (2 Chronicles 1:12).

The power at work within us is a reference to the work of the Holy Spirit within each believer individually and through the church corporately. The words of this verse are often given as a benediction in churches and it is easy to see why. But the power of God that can be unleashed if individuals and the church ever really grasp the realities of what God has done in them through Jesus then the world will really see a revolution for the goodness of God in all areas of life.

To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus. Praise for God was never far from Paul's mind, lips or pen!

Paul conceives of the church as a unified whole, and not as individual, isolated entities: <<**There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all**>> (Ephesians 4:4-6).

To all generations, for ever and ever. The church is intended to be an important part of God's redemptive work throughout the remaining period of human history. It will then continue to exist in a new role in the age yet to come.

The first half of this letter is concluded. Many see it as a letter of two halves: doctrine in chapters 1-3 and practical application of the Christian faith in chapters 4-6, but reflection of the first three chapters reveals that much of it is prayer to God and the offering of praise to him, interspersed with the doctrine that results from these two fundamental actions. The daily application that comes from prayer and praise are also undertaken prayerfully!