

BECOMING A PEOPLE OF GRACE

STUDY TEN

The Mystery, the Ministry, and Me

Ephesians 3:1–13

One of the greatest lessons the Lord ever taught me is this: Nothing touches us that has not first passed through the fingers of God. Nothing!

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

IN addition to Ephesians, Paul wrote three other letters while under house arrest in Rome: Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. In each letter, Paul explained the reason for his arrest.

To the Ephesians, he stated that he was a prisoner “for serving the Lord” (Ephesians 4:1). He wrote to the Philippians, “I am in chains because of Christ” (Philippians 1:13). He asked the Colossians to pray for him for open doors to speak about Christ, noting, “That is why I am here in chains” (Colossians 4:3). And he put it plainly to Philemon that he was “a prisoner for preaching the Good News about Christ Jesus” (Philemon 1).

Paul saw himself as a standard-bearer for Christ, and he considered his suffering a privilege. He displayed his inmate identification as a badge of honor, declaring without a hint of shame, “I, Paul, a prisoner” (Ephesians 3:1). The Ephesian believers might have questioned God for permitting Paul to be arrested, but for Paul, God’s plan could be trusted even when it included chains. To borrow Peter’s words, Paul rested beneath “the mighty hand of God” and assured himself that God would “exalt [him] at the proper time” (1 Peter 5:6 NASB).

Paul never grumbled about his circumstances or viewed himself a victim. He didn’t even acknowledge Caesar as his captor. At no time was Paul a prisoner of Rome but always “of Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 3:1). Paul answered to a higher King who alone had ultimate say over him, not the Roman Empire with all its legions of soldiers. Only God had power to give or take Paul’s freedom—or even Paul’s life.



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Committed to Excellence in Communicating Biblical Truth and Its Application

The Mystery, the Ministry, and Me

Ephesians 3:1–13

Paul’s message about Christ came directly from God, and that’s the reason Paul was so committed to it. In this study, we’ll examine how God revealed this message to Paul and how Paul declared it. We’ll also see how God is working out His eternal plan to build a kingdom of people from every race and nationality that no prison walls can contain.



PREPARE YOUR HEART

Perhaps you’re experiencing limitations which feel like confinement. Maybe some authority has put you in “chains” through an injustice or false accusation. Ask the Lord to strengthen your confidence in His plan and sovereign rule. In the space below, tell the Lord your doubts or fears and seek His perspective as you open His Word.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

Read *Ephesians 3:1–13*. Identify the two major sections as you read: God *revealing* His plan to Paul (Ephesians 3:1–6); Paul *declaring* God’s plan to the world (3:7–13).



Observation: Revelation and Declaration of the Mystery

In the observation phase of *Searching the Scriptures*, we take note of the context of our passage within the whole of the book. Repeated words or phrases often link sections and can give us clues to Paul’s main points.¹



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What phrase is repeated in *Ephesians 3:1* and *14*? What clues do you find in 3:2–13 that indicate a digression from Paul’s train of thought in verse 1 and 14? Why do you think Paul decided to add this section?

Paul already explained God’s plan to unite Gentiles and Jews in Christ as one new people (*Ephesians 1:12–13; 2:14–15, 19*), calling it God’s “mysterious will regarding Christ” (1:9). However, Paul hadn’t explained how this “mystery” came to him and his role in it. So, he let his pen wander down this side path before circling back to his original intention to pray for his readers (3:1, 14–21).

Paul repeated the word *mystery* three times in this passage and a total of six times in his letter (1:9; 3:3–4, 9; 5:32; 6:19 NASB). We’ll decipher its meaning later, for now it’s simply worth observing as an important concept.

The Revelation of the Mystery—Ephesians 3:1–6

How did Paul come to know of God’s plan to unite Gentiles and Jews (*Ephesians 3:2–5*)? And why do you think no one knew the details of this plan before Paul?



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Read Ephesians 3:6 in the New Living Translation, New American Standard Bible, and The Message, in which Paul summarized the mystery God revealed to him. In the following space, put in your own words the message God gave Paul.

Although this message may not cause alarm today, it sent shock waves through the first-century Jewish community. Because the Jews believed God had chosen them only, their sense of spiritual privilege had fostered an attitude of racial superiority toward “unclean” Gentiles. For joining Gentiles with Jews in salvation, Paul deserved death according to Jewish law.² They refused to accept that Paul’s message was from God!

The Jews had seen themselves as God’s people. They were meant to be missionaries to the Gentiles, but they had forgotten that role. God revealed to Paul that Gentile and Jewish converts to Christ would become one great family of God. Paul was proclaiming a revolutionary paradigm shift. —Chuck Swindoll

The Declaration of the Mystery—Ephesians 3:7–13

How did Paul describe his feelings about being called to be God’s messenger to the Gentiles (*Ephesians 3:7–9*)?



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God appointed Paul to “preach” and “bring to light” (Ephesians 3:8–9). Specifically, what was Paul to preach? And what was he to bring to light?

What did Paul say is God’s purpose for the church (3:10–11)?

What is the result of Christ’s work on our behalf (3:12)?



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What encouragement did Paul give his readers (*Ephesians 3:13*)? Why should they feel honored that Paul is suffering on their behalf?

Paul may be under arrest, the champion of the Gentiles may be set aside, the outlook may seem bleak, but the “up-look” is clear. What Paul was going through had to happen in God’s mysterious plan, and the Ephesians would reap the benefits of Paul’s time in prison.
—Chuck Swindoll



Interpretation: The Mystery Revealed

In the interpretation phase of *Searching the Scriptures*, we seek to understand key words, such as *mystery*. In Scripture, a mystery is not a riddle to be solved, as a detective follows clues to solve a murder-mystery. Paul never set out to discover God’s mystery; God *revealed* it to him.

Read Paul’s account in *Acts 22:6–21* of when God revealed to Paul the mystery through two visions of Christ, first on the road to Damascus and then at the temple. What happened?



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The fact that God used visions to reveal something hidden gives us insight into the meaning of *mystery*. In his commentary on Ephesians, Warren Wiersbe explains the word:

In the New Testament, a *mystery* is . . . “a truth that was hidden by God in times past and is now revealed to those who are in His family.” A *mystery* is a “sacred secret” that is unknown to unbelievers, but understood and treasured by the people of God.³

Based on our study, can you restate as concisely as possible the sacred secret that was unknown until God made it known? If you need help, review [Ephesians 3:6](#).

As Paul preached salvation for all, churches welcomed Jewish and Gentile converts by the thousands. Jews and Gentiles, like two tectonic plates, were coming together in the church, and Christianity was pushing its way to the surface of society like a gigantic mountain range. Neither the Jewish authorities nor the entire Roman Empire could stop this movement from reshaping the world’s spiritual landscape.

Who was watching and marveling at the wonder of God’s new creation, according to [3:10–11](#)? What impressed them? For help interpreting Paul’s meaning in these verses, consult your resources or click the tab, [Constable’s Notes](#), at NetBible.org.



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Correlation: The Angels' View of the Church

What did Peter teach about the prophets' anticipation of the mystery of the church as well as its impact in the angelic realm (*1 Peter 1:10–12*)?

Whenever people heard Paul teach, they understood the body of Christ better. Gentiles felt part of it. Jews lost their prejudices in gratitude to God for His grace in saving them. Even the angels learned of salvation from the proclamation of “the mystery.” —Chuck Swindoll



Application: Christ Is the Message

It was a privilege for Paul to receive God's secret, shine Christ's light in the Gentile world, and even suffer on behalf of those who were blessed by it. What can we learn from Paul's example and teaching?

First, *the message of the church has eternal roots*. Before Adam and Eve, before there were animals, the oceans, or even the celestial spheres, God planned to bring about salvation and unity through Christ. Reconciliation through Christ was hidden to the prophets and angels, but the message is no longer a secret. Share it freely!

Second, *because our roots are in Christ, we have a secure relationship with the Father*. No forces on earth or in the spiritual realm can separate us from God. Enter His presence with confidence and with joyful trust as we seek His wisdom and ask for His help.

Third, *our relationship with God can help guard us from discouragement*. If anyone had a reason to tumble into despair, it was prisoner Paul. But he told others to not “lose heart” (Ephesians 3:13)! What kept Paul's spirit free while his wrists were locked in chains? His perspective that God was in control and no prison could hold him because God's grace had set him free.



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Which of these principles speaks most to your heart? What truth can you meditate on today as you face hardships?

In the next study, we'll see the natural response to such good news as we join Paul and fall on our knees in prayer, lifting our unchained hands to God in gratitude and praise!



A FINAL PRAYER

Father, thank You for revealing the sacred secret of salvation in Christ and our unity with all believers, regardless their race, nationality, or language. Your church is a multicultural community with members from every corner of our world, a variegated tapestry of grace. Help me to accept others and love all people in the name of Jesus, in whose name I pray, Amen.

ENDNOTES

1. To learn more about Chuck Swindoll's *Searching the Scriptures* method of Bible study, go to the Web page, "[How to Study the Bible for Yourself](#)."
2. The Jews determined to kill Paul in Jerusalem when a rumor spread that Paul had brought into the temple a Gentile convert from Ephesus named Trophimus. The Jews erupted in a riot—which led to Paul's arrest and eventual trip to Rome as a prisoner (Acts 21:27–36).
3. Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Rich* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1976), 68.

