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By the Book™ A Chapter by Chapter Bible Study
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Let's Begin

Most of us are familiar with the ingenious but fictitious private detective, Sherlock Holmes, created by Scottish author, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Holmes was known for his meticulous observatory powers. From the most insignificant details, he deduced facts which subsequently led to solving one mysterious crime after another. For Sherlock Holmes, mysteries were like puzzles; it was a matter of simply putting all the pieces together.

Life is filled with many mysteries. Some mysteries come to light as time goes by. However, some things are so tucked away, no possibility exists the mystery will ever be known. In fact, some things only God knows (Deut. 29:29).

And, were it not for God revealing the mystery, not even the observatory powers of Sherlock Holmes could understand it. Why? Because when the Scripture speaks of mystery, it is not the same as solving a puzzle or gaining clues as in detective work. Instead, Biblical mysteries are actually unknowable; that is, unknowable apart from God revealing the answer. Hence, mystery and revelation fit like a hand in a glove.

Paul was custodian of three such mysteries, mysteries previously unknown but revealed by God: 1) Christ and His cross (1 Cor. 2:7); 2) Christ and His church (Eph. 5:32); 3) Christ and His coming (1 Cor. 15:51-52). God gave Paul these secrets to pass along to us for strength and maturity in our faith (cp. Rom. 16:25).

As we begin our study of Ephesians 3, let's follow the outline below:

- I. Understanding the Mystery of Christ (vv. 1-11)**
- II. Undertaking the Ministry for Christ (vv. 12-21)**

I. Understanding the Mystery of Christ (vv. 1-11)

Remember: a Biblical mystery is not a code to be cracked, but truth that is revealed. God has a strategy to tell the world He loves them. His principles never change, but His methods, His strategies, do.

Paul writes, "For this cause I Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles, If ye have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given me to you-ward: How that by revelation he made known unto me the mystery..." (vv. 1-3). The "dispensation of the grace of God" was given to Paul not to keep; but rather to reveal to others. In fact, the very reason for Paul's being a "prisoner of Jesus Christ" was for them to know God's mystery finally revealed through the Apostle to the Gentiles.

First, observe the *revelation* of this mystery (vv. 3-5, 9). According to Paul, for ages the mystery had been hidden even from God's faithful prophets in the Old Testament. The Sovereign Lord knew His strategy. What God was up to in the space-time world was no afterthought. It was not a make-shift, last minute counter-move to accommodate the fickle choices of sinful men. Instead the mystery was deep within the Father's heart long before He created the cosmos. Our Triune God shared it with no one else.

Given the nature of the Divine mystery—that is, its *unknowableness*—no one could ever discover its content nor stumble across its truth. Paul elsewhere asks, "For who hath known the mind of the Lord?" (Rom. 11:34). And, the Lord Jesus Himself thanked the Father because He had "hid these things from the wise and prudent" and "revealed them unto babes" (Matt. 11:25). Again, while faithful, Spirit-inspired Old Testament prophets had clues all around, they did not receive revelation of the mystery unfolded for the age to come.



Paul said this mystery “is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit” (v. 5).

Second, let us note the *explanation* of the mystery. Paul reveals the content of the mystery, and far from being complicated, the mystery is captured in one short statement, “That the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel” (v. 6). Understand: it is not that the Gentiles would now be saved, nor that the Gentiles would in the new age be blessed through the Jews. The Old Testament abundantly revealed both these truths (Mal. 1:11; Gen. 12:3).

Reflection Connection

Meditate a few moments on the common ways we use the term “mystery.” How are our common usages different from the way the Bible uses “mystery”? Explain.

Rather the mystery pertains to God doing something absolutely new on the earth. And, what is this new phenomenon unfolded before the eyes of the human race in the new era? The mystery is the church! (Eph. 5:32) A new race of people, a new spiritual breed birthed at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-6). One day the church did not exist and the next day it did!

Three “bodies” exist which may be called “Christ’s body.” First, Christ has a *material* body. In other words, this is His literal, physical body born at Bethlehem, touched by real people, crucified by Roman soldiers, but raised, glorified, ascended, and seated in Heaven. Second, Christ has a *memorial* body. Every

baptized believer symbolically partakes of Christ’s *memorial* body when he or she observes the Lord’s Supper. Third, Christ has a *mystical* body. The *mystical* body is the church made up of both believing Jews and believing Gentiles, both races of whom are equally co-heirs, co-members, and co-partners in Christ’s body, the church.

Indeed, given the unfolding of God’s mystery to Paul, the Old Testament distinctions between Jew and Gentile are dissolved in Christ. That does not mean God has no dealings with Israel in the future. It does mean all dealings He has with any people are based upon their relationship to Jesus Christ. And, since the Old Testament prophets never saw the church, the mystery Paul is revealing revolutionizes God’s Kingdom, creating an entirely new spiritual community—the church.

Third, observe the *demonstration* of this mystery. Paul writes, “To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly *places* might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God, According to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord” (vv. 10-11). The angels before God’s throne beheld God’s face; however, they knew not of the unfolding plan for the church until God revealed it. In fact, it is the church which teaches angels the “manifold wisdom of God”; that is, the redemption from sin through God’s amazing grace. Interestingly, the Bible reveals angels’ keen interest in what goes on in the church (1 Cor. 4:9; 11:10). Nothing, however, stirs their interest more than gaining a peek at the plan of salvation (1 Pet. 1:12).

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II. Undertaking the Ministry for Christ (vv. 12-21)

Secret societies exist. Men attempt to keep their mysteries secret. Not our Lord. Mysteries in the Bible are mysteries once unknown but now revealed for all persons everywhere to know. Note again what Paul writes from the former section. “And to make all *men* see what *is* the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God, who created all things by Jesus Christ” (v. 9). God wanted all men everywhere to repent (Acts 17:30); therefore, He let us in on His plan.

The church today more than ever must realize we are a vital part of getting His message everywhere. He wants us to become His servants and share the Divine mystery made known to the entire globe. With this in mind, Paul reveals in a more detailed manner the strategy God has in mind to canvass the world with Christ.

First, Paul reveals the person God chooses. As we have already seen, Paul concedes concerning himself, that he is “less than the least of all saints” to receive the grace to serve and preach to the Gentiles the “unsearchable riches of Christ” (v. 8). Not only did he feel himself at the bottom, but under the bottom. God has a way of choosing the least among us to be His best (1 Cor. 26-28). He takes a nobody and makes a somebody. The spirit of humility was nothing less than the spirit of Jesus (Mark 10:45).

A question each of us should ask himself or herself is, am I small enough for God to use? Unlike the heroes of this world, in God’s Kingdom, the way to stardom is to be a zero.

Second, Paul reveals the power God releases. No one has been more drastically affected by converting to Christ than the Apostle Paul. God invaded his life, transformed his life, and filled his life with stunning power (Acts 9:1-15). No wonder Paul confesses over again the “effectual working of his power” (v. 7). When God puts you and me into His service He will give us grace and power to faithfully serve Him.

Know, however, God will not release His power in our life to use on our own plans and desires. The tragic fall too often comes to many young disciples, disciples who have tasted His power for ministry but chose to presumptuously take God for granted. Just because God’s power has been bestowed, and fruits have come from service, does not mean God will not remove His power if His power is abused.

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Third, Paul reveals the preaching God blesses. It never fails: God blesses the preaching which tells others about Jesus. The content is always the same—*preaching the unsearchable riches of Christ* (cp. v. 8). The term translated “unsearchable” means it cannot be traced out (see this week’s Golden Greek Nugget). Like the ocean depths which cannot be plummeted, the treasure storage which cannot be exhausted, and the panorama of space which cannot be navigated, so the riches of Christ cannot be searched!

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What a message to preach the church possesses: the virgin birth of Christ, the virtuous life of Christ, the vicarious death of Christ, the victorious resurrection of Christ, and ultimately, the visible coming of Christ! He is more wonderful than we could ever imagine. God blesses the preaching about Jesus Christ.

Fourth, Paul reveals the prayer God answers (vv. 14-21). From a dirty dungeon, Paul pens this Ephesian epistle. However, how did Paul view his imprisonment? Rather than pity himself as being falsely accused or unjustly treated at the hands of the Romans, Paul saw himself as a “prisoner of Jesus Christ” bearing “tribulation” for the Gentiles (vv. 1, 13). Paul would not wallow in self-pity; instead his prison chamber became a prayer-closet through which he reached up and brought heaven down. We need to understand the truth the Apostle so diligently practiced: *a praying person cannot be imprisoned.*

In fact, the entire latter portion of chapter three contains the second of two prayers recorded in Ephesians (cp. 1:17-23). And, it is from this prayer, the servant of Jesus Christ learns several characteristics of the kind of prayer God answers.

First, note the *humility* of Paul’s prayer (vv. 14-15). As we noted above, humility strikes at the very heart of Jesus’ service to His Father. Paul’s humility may be seen in the posture he assumes, “For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 14). While there is no specific command in Scripture about one’s posture, earnestly praying saints are often found on their knees. Being a symbol of submission, no greater gesture of humility can be offered. In addition, at times out of sheer desperation one may be driven to his or her knees in prayer. Paul was no stranger to praying on his knees.

Second, note the *heart* of Paul’s prayer (vv. 16-19). Compare the prayer in chapter 1 with the prayer we now consider (1:17-23). In chapter 1, Paul’s focus centered on knowledge, whereas this present prayer focuses on our actions; that is, practicing what one knows. God surely wants us to know who we are. It is altogether different to be who we are and behave according to what we know.

The heart of Paul’s prayer is being a servant of Jesus Christ. And to be a servant, we must be *enabled* to serve, or as Paul puts it, “to be strengthened with might...” (v. 16). Our inner life must be clothed with the nourishment of the Lord Jesus Himself. Furthermore, in order to serve well, we must not only be *enabled*, but also our hearts must be *enthroned*. Paul longed for Christ to “dwell in their

Reflection Connection

Pause for a moment and reflect on the temperament of your own prayers. Upon what do you focus most? Least? Do you think your own private prayer life is typical of most other Christians?



hearts" (v. 17). The term translated "dwell" is indicative of permanence, a settling down. It is the opposite of motel living. When Christ comes, He comes to stay!

A servant is one who is *enlightened* through prayer. Paul uses terms like "rooted and grounded" (v. 17), "comprehend" (v. 18), and "passeth knowledge" (v. 19) to demonstrate the believer is enlightened through prayer to the Lord Jesus. Indeed, without such enlightenment, service to Him would end in futility.

Finally, as another characteristic of the prayer which God answers, observe the *halleluiah* of Paul's prayer. He writes, "Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, Unto him *be* glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen" (vv. 20-21). Paul bursts into doxology. He cannot contain himself. The power of God working in our lives is able to do more than we could ever imagine. And, healthy prayer always ends in utter praise to the Lord God.

Golden Greek Nugget

Paul speaks to the Ephesians concerning the "unsearchable riches of Christ" (v. 8). The Greek term translated "unsearchable" is the word *anexichniastos*, which means "that which cannot be traced out." It is a rare word, only used twice in the New Testament (here and Rom. 11:33). In the Septuagint (LXX, the Greek translation of the Old Testament), the term is used of the mighty men "without number" whom the Almighty shall break as a sign of His sovereignty (Job 34:24). Even in eternity, Christ's riches will never be exhausted.

Wrap Up

In this study, we have Divine mystery revealed to us. God's church is made up of men and women and boys and girls without respect to any ethnic barrier. The message we have for the nations is, Jesus saves anyone who will sincerely turn to Him for salvation from their sin. And, as the church, we are stewards of this mystery. We are commissioned by the Lord Himself to go globally, winning all we can to Him until Jesus returns.

