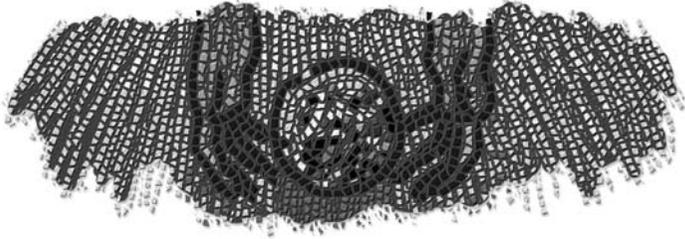


God's Mystery: The Universal Fellowship



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt. 10:5, John 4:9, Acts 10:26-28, Ephesians 3.*

Memory Text: “Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen” (*Ephesians 3:20, 21, NKJV*).

Mystery revealed and proclaimed. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul has already written about the unique unity Christ has established in the church. Writers before him have written about unity, but usually it was about unity among a single people, not among various classes, races, and nationalities, an idea that was all but unheard of in the ancient world. But Paul has written about a different kind of unity, one the world up to that point had never seen, the unity that comes through Christ.

Yet, he doesn't end there. He talks also about the church composed of these Jews and Gentiles and about what the Lord will do through this church. Most important, Paul points his readers to the love of God who has accomplished so many things for us through the sacrifice of Jesus.

The Week at a Glance: Why did Paul deem it such a “mystery” (*Eph. 3:3*) that Gentiles could also be partakers of God's promises in Christ? Why should this have not been such a mystery to him? What is the church to reveal to heavenly powers? What are the things God has done for us through Christ? What is Paul's prayer for the Ephesians?

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 12.*

The Contents of the Mystery (*Eph. 3:1-6*)

Look up the following texts. How do they help us understand why for Paul this unity was such a mystery? *Deut. 14:2, Matt. 10:5, John 4:9, Acts 10:26-28, Gal. 2:11-14.*

“Mystery” in the New Testament usage is not some hidden secret but a truth, heretofore unknown, that has been revealed by God in His own time through the Holy Spirit. Paul speaks of receiving such a revelation (*Eph. 3:3*). As Barclay comments: “Into [Paul’s] life had come the revelation of the great secret of God. That secret was that the love and mercy and grace of God were meant not for the Jews alone but for all mankind. . . . In the ancient world the barriers were complete. No one had ever dreamed that God’s privileges were for all people.” —William Barclay, *The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1976), pp. 122, 123.

Years ago American patriot Thomas Jefferson wrote the famous words, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal. . . .” However nice the sentiment, history shows that this view was anything but “self-evident.” On the contrary, all through history various groups believed themselves greater than, and superior to, other nations and people. This idea was so ingrained that even the ancient Israelites—who should have known better because of the revelation given them by God—were contaminated with this sense of self-superiority. Hence, someone as bright, as diligent, and as studious as Paul needed a divine revelation to purge him of his native prejudices. For him, the idea that Jews and Gentiles would be one was so incredible that he deemed it a “mystery,” a concept hard for most of us today to grasp (Why should this be a “mystery”?), because, in our day and age, these kinds of ethnic and national and cultural concepts of superiority, though existing, are looked down upon. Even if someone were to think themselves better than others because of their nationality or race or culture, it’s considered in very bad taste to express such a view. Thus, only as we come to understand a bit of the mind-set of Paul’s time can we grasp just how radical this idea of unity between Jews and Gentiles was to him.

In what ways might you harbor a sense of cultural or ethnic superiority? (Few cultures, if any, are immune to this problem.) Why are such concepts so contrary to the gospel of Jesus Christ?

Key Text: *Ephesians 3:3-6*

Teachers Aims:

1. To stress that only Christ through His church is capable of bringing humans into unity with one another, and with God.
2. To emphasize that this unity is a “mystery” to the world, because it is so foreign to human thinking.
3. To understand that this unity can exist only among a group of individuals who have taken God into their hearts.

Lesson Outline:

I. The Great Mystery (*Eph. 3:3*)

- A. In New Testament usage, the term *mystery* is, in fact, something not previously known that has been revealed.
- B. Christ has revealed His plan for unity in the church, a body He directly created.
- C. Paul himself found these acts of God puzzling, but wonderful.

II. For All People (*Eph. 3:6*)

- A. Christ’s call for human unity can be seen in the Old Testament but was often ignored.
- B. Like many of the other claims of the gospel, unity in Christ is not natural and, to many, unpalatable.
- C. Ethnic/national chauvinism was quite open and rampant in Paul’s time, and it cannot be said that it has disappeared in the present age.

III. Christ in Our Hearts (*Eph. 3:17*)

- A. The church, while a collective, is composed of individuals who have been remolded in God’s image.
- B. The church, in its unity, is a demonstration/manifestation of God’s power.
- C. God’s love dwelling in us and His church also gives us the wisdom to accomplish/understand things that are otherwise impossible to accomplish or incomprehensible.

Summary: Strife between people is a result of sin. God’s message is intended to bring about unity and reconciliation. This should be evident in the church and can be accomplished only by God and people who have yielded to Him.

COMMENTARY

Scholars before and after Paul have written about unity, but usually it is about unity among a single group. No Greek philosopher, no Roman poet, no Jewish rabbi, no Hindu pandit has written about unity of differing people groups: free and slave, Greek and barbarian, Jew and Gentile, Brahman and the untouchable. But Paul’s

Evidences for the Mystery

Though Paul talks about the gospel going to the Gentiles as a “mystery,” evidences of this promise were scattered in the Old Testament. Look up the following texts. How do they express the idea of the truth about God going to all nations?

Gen. 18:18

Isa. 42:6

Isa. 49:6

Isa. 56:3-8

Isa. 60:3

Jer. 16:19

Zech. 8:23

It’s a sad but powerful testimony to realize the hold that ethnic, cultural, or religious prejudice can have on our minds that even with the above texts, and more, Paul thought it a great “mystery” that the Gentiles should also be brought into the truth about God. Again, it’s a thought that most Christians today, the vast majority being Gentiles, take for granted; it’s hard, from this perspective, to realize how radical an idea this was for someone of the background and education of Paul.

But then, again, we shouldn’t be surprised, should we? The gospel teaches us to love our enemies (*Matt. 5:44*), to bless those who curse us (*vs. 44*), to turn the other cheek (*vs. 39*), to not render evil for evil (*1 Pet. 3:9*), and so forth. In other words, many of the claims of the gospel are radical, going against our basic nature, cutting across some of the most ingrained and accepted cultural, ethnic, and political prejudices we have. If our toes haven’t been stepped on, in one way or another, by Jesus, then we probably haven’t met Him as we should.

When was the last time Jesus stepped on your toes; that is, when was the last time you felt the claims of the gospel cut deep into some of your prejudices or passions? How did you respond?

concept of unity of people groups of all kinds is inconceivable to the human mind. It required the divine act of the Cross breaking down the wall of partition and providing forgiveness and reconciliation to Jew and Gentile alike.

Such a unity is nothing short of a divine miracle: a mystery, as Paul calls it several times (*Eph. 1:9; 3:3, 4, 9*). In this lesson we study that mystery: its contents, its stewardship, and its results.

I. The Mystery: Its Contents (*Eph. 3:1-6*)

The New Testament uses the word *mystery* to indicate not something secretive but rather a great truth that was hidden in the past (*Eph. 3:9*). But now God has chosen to reveal the mystery through Christ and the Spirit, and through them to Paul and the apostles and the prophets (*see Eph. 3:5-7*). The revelation of the mystery has turned the Gentiles to be (1) fellow heirs, (2) members of the same body, and (3) partakers of the promise (*vs. 6*). All are in Christ Jesus.

That the Gentiles should be heirs together with the Jews in a new fellowship in Jesus was God's purpose from the days of Creation (*Eph. 3:9*). Here, Paul, by revelation, is presenting a principle—all humankind is one in Christ. God's revelation answers life's great questions, one such being splintered humanity. No history or philosophy or religion outside of this revelation can grasp the deep and abiding meaning of the mystery of oneness. As a solution to human disunity, Greeks may have conceived eternal recurrence, Rome may have built law and civilization, Marx may have projected classless economics, Nietzsche may have built his superman, Hinduism may have its cyclic karma—but none could do away with sin, the root of human disharmony. Biblical revelation alone has the solution to shatter the wall of division and create a fellowship in which all are heirs together.

Heirs of what? “Of the same body” and “partakers of his promise” (*Eph. 3:6*). Common membership in the church, coming together to participate in the same “broken” body of Christ and the shed blood of the Redeemer, transcends all hatred and disharmony and makes us partakers of the same promise of eternal life and heavenly citizenship—despite one's sociology or genealogy or nationality.

II. The Mystery: Its Stewardship (*Eph. 3:7-13*)

Paul equates this mystery with the gospel (*Eph. 3:6*). Of this gospel he was called to be a servant filled with gratitude and humility. Ministry requires both. Humility leads Paul to position himself as “less than the least of all saints” (*vs. 8; see also 1 Cor. 15:9*). Gratitude to the gospel becomes the core of his ministry. Indeed, Paul considers his own ministry a wonder: Why would God choose a legalist to proclaim free grace, an anti-Christian gestapo leader against the early church to be its greatest defender, and a Pharisee

Through the Church *(Eph. 3:9-13)*

“To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God” *(Eph. 3:10)*.

Read the text for today. What incredible message is Paul giving us in this one verse?

Read Ephesians 3:9-13. Notice what theme Paul links in with the plan of salvation in verse 9. Why is this theme so important?

We’re new creations in Christ (*see also 2 Cor. 5:17, Gal. 6:15, Eph. 4:24*), and we are also part of the church that God Himself has created. He made us, He remakes us, and He made the church of which we, as new creatures, are a part. And it’s through this church, composed of beings remade in His image, that His wisdom is revealed to the universe *(Eph. 3:10)*.

Indeed, this new community, the church God has created, becomes a cosmic exhibit of His power, His grace, and His “wisdom,” which defeated the divisive forces of Satan, “according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus” (*vs. 11, NKJV*). If it is through creation that God reveals His power to us, it is through new creation that God reveals His wisdom and justice to “principalities and powers” (*vs. 10*), including fallen and unfallen angels.

“Not to this world only but to the universe are we to make manifest the principles of His kingdom.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 6, p. 13.

In this one text, Ephesians 3:10, we are given another look at the whole issue of the great controversy; we are shown the interest of other cosmic intelligences in the fate of our world here. What’s even more astounding is that according to this text, it’s God’s purpose that through the church His “wisdom” will be made manifest to these other intelligences.

Imagine you were part of these “principalities and powers” from somewhere in the cosmos who were watching the church. Write a diary entry about what you saw there. Compare notes in class this Sabbath.

to be an apostle to the Gentiles? The call to ministry is ever a wonder. Its effectiveness depends on never forgetting the Source of its calling and the purpose of its mission.

As this mystery's steward, the apostle was ever mindful of his audience and message: first, an earthly audience that they might know "the unsearchable riches of Christ" (*Eph. 3:8*) and the magnificent "fellowship of the mystery" (*vs. 9*), which is God's church on earth; second, audiences in the heavenly places that all the cosmic powers might know that through the church "the manifold wisdom of God" is manifest (*vs. 10*) and that the cosmic conflict has come to its final stage.

Why does Paul emphasize so much the preaching of this mystery? There are two reasons. First, this was "the eternal purpose which he [God] purposed in Christ" (*vs. 11*); second, because of this mystery, both Gentiles and Jews have boldness and access to approach the very presence of God.

III. The Mystery: Its Results

In addition to human unity and cosmic glorification of God's

Inductive Bible Study

Texts for Discovery: *John 13:1-5, Acts 10:26-28, Galatians 3:26-29, Ephesians 3*

❶ What "treasured possession" (*Deut. 14:2, NIV*) would someone find in your house? God used this phrase to define Israel. Empowered by the realization of their own unworthiness and His indwelling Spirit, God desired that they would bless others (*see Gen. 18:18*). What causes us to become spoiled children instead of God's emissaries of truth? How can He help us learn to value others as He values us and them?

❷ Jesus left heaven to rescue lost humanity. How would you paint a picture, write a song, or create a sculpture to portray the amazing depth of what that sacrifice describes? How have the radical claims of the gospel transformed your thoughts, words, and behavior to become evident in your life? In what ways can your neighbors see Jesus' salvation displayed in your life?

❸ Look up the definitions of the words *community* and *church*. How are the definitions the same? How are they different? Paul describes the church as a change agent (*Eph. 3:9-12*). How has your community of faith impacted your neighborhood, town, or city to God's glory? If you believe more could be done, what practical things could you do as a class to become a more effective witness to God's grace?

“Wherefore”

Notice the wonderful promise in Ephesians 3:12; according to Paul, through Jesus we have “access”; that is, access to God Himself. This is what Jesus was talking about in John 10:9 when He said that “I am the door.” Adam had free access to God at first but, having lost it, he hid himself among the trees of the Garden because he could no longer face God with frankness and a clear conscience. The effect of redemption is to restore to humanity a new and bold access to God without fear or restriction and without the need of any intermediaries such as priests or saints or ritual. God is immediately accessible to the trusting soul, through the merits of Christ.

Paul then starts verse 13 with the word *wherefore*, which, in the Greek, also means “on account of.” In other words, he is saying that “on account of” something, he doesn’t want the Ephesians to worry about him. What is that *wherefore* referring to?

Because the Gentiles now belong to the body of Christ, because the eternal purpose is being fulfilled through Jesus, because God’s wisdom is being revealed to the universe, and because we have free access to God, Paul asks his readers not to be too distressed over his sufferings, which have come to him on account of his bringing them the gospel.

In other words, Paul is saying “Don’t focus on me or my trials; focus on the great news of what God has done for the world through Jesus Christ. The good news far overshadows anything I might be going through.”

Struggling? Worried? Fearful about the future? Write out a prayer of thanksgiving to God for the things as revealed to us in this Epistle so far, things Christ has done. Let the reality of the promises we have been reading about overshadow all else in your life. Claim these promises as your own.

wisdom and victory, the apostle mentions three practical results of the mystery's revelation.

1. The strengthening of the inner person through the indwelling Christ and *Spirit* (*Eph. 3:16, 17*). It is through Paul that the Ephesians learned of the Holy Spirit (*Acts 19:6*). Jesus promised the believers that the Holy Spirit—the “Comforter” (*John 14:26*) or the “Strengthener”—would come. Christ’s indwelling through the Spirit enables the believers to know the truth, to experience righteousness, to fight the foe, to realize the presence of God, and to taste the power of salvation (*John 14:6-26*).

2. Being rooted and grounded in love is another of the practical blessings. Paul stresses the significance of love in the Christian life

Witnessing

Human suffering has been present on this planet ever since the gates of Eden permanently closed behind our first earthly parents. As a result of Adam and Eve’s fall from grace, pain, misery, and misfortune have dogged the inhabitants of our little world through the centuries.

None has escaped the heartache that accompanies living in a sinful world. For many, it is the normal course of their daily lives. Growing up alone, without parents or caregivers; scrambling for food; sleeping wherever and whenever possible is the expected childhood for millions of children around the globe.

Natural disasters (earthquakes, floods, droughts, etc.) serve only to intensify human suffering through loss of life, shelter, and food. While some areas of the world have sufficient resources to recover from such horrific events, many do not. And the shock-wave of sin continues.

Our study this week points out that no matter how difficult things appear to be for us at any given time, we have only to focus on Calvary to better understand the meaning of true suffering. It is beyond comprehension that He allowed His life to be taken in such a manner.

As Christians, we comprehend that the *only* way for each and every one of us to receive the precious gift of eternal life was for the cherished Son of God to come to this earth in human form, bear our sins, and die an unspeakable death in order for our death sentence to be lifted and Heaven’s promise to be opened to us.

This week, pay careful attention to those around you who appear to be suffering, whether physically, emotionally, or spiritually. Ask if they will let you pray with them. Let them know that if they will take time to listen, you have a story to tell them that will permanently lift their burden and place it on Another’s shoulders. Then they will never again have to carry that burden alone.

The Knowledge of His Love (*Eph. 3:14-21*)

Read Paul's prayer (*Eph. 3:14-21*) over and over. Then paraphrase the essence of His petition. What is he praying for, and why do you think he would offer such a prayer?

Paul prays that Christ would dwell in their hearts. The Greek word used for "dwell" is *katoikem*, which indicates permanent residence. Christ is not a guest but a perpetual part of our lives.

Paul prays for the indwelling Christ so the strengthened inner being "may be able to comprehend" (that is, empowered and enlightened to grasp) the width, length, depth, and height of Christ's love (*vss. 18, 19*). Paul is praying to comprehend the incomprehensible, but he knows that the assurance of the believer rests only in such uninterrupted meditation of God's love. The believers must know with what great love they have been blessed. While Christ's love cannot be fitted into any geometrical measure, it is wide enough to circle the globe and reach every sinner. It is high enough to reach the very throne room of God. It is deep enough to plumb Satan's deepest gutter and pull out from that mess any sinner who calls upon Christ for help and bring him or her to stand under God's sunshine. It is long enough to stretch from "before the foundation of the world" (*Eph. 1:4*) to endless ages of eternity, where that love will be the subject of saints' study. It is a love that "passes all knowledge" and fills all the believers "with all the fullness of God" (*Eph. 3:19, NKJV*).

"Fullness of God" is an expression lavish in assurance and is common to the books of Ephesians and Colossians. It signifies that God is beyond limitation. He "is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think" (*vs. 20, NKJV*). Rich in mercy, unfathomable in love, limitless in grace, and abundant in power, God has committed the entire resources of heaven to grant "above all that we ask or think" in order that His glory may be manifest "in the church . . . to all generations" (*vss. 20, 21, NKJV*).

How certain are you of the reality of God's love? If someone were to ask "Why do you believe that your God is so loving?" what would you answer? How convincing a case could you make?

by using two metaphors: botanical and architectural (*Eph. 3:17*). To a Christian, God's love is as essential as a root is to the tree and as a strong foundation is to a house. Loving the unlovable, the undeserving, loving to the point of dying for another (as exemplified and made possible in Christ [*Rom. 5:8*]) should become the rooting and grounding of the Christian life.

3. Another practical blessing of the mystery is the comprehension of the breadth, length, depth, and height of Christ's love and an understanding of the fullness of God (*Eph. 3:18, 19*) *with all His saints*. Note the last phrase. An isolated Christian is incomplete in the knowledge of the things of God. In fellowship and unity, the believer finds strength to live and appreciate the fullness of God's love, although its full comprehension may be the work of eternity.

Life-Application Approach

Icebreaker: Education is about helping students discover mysteries: concepts and ideas they have never before experienced or understood. Share a time in first grade when you discovered something new. Through Christ, God has revealed the mystery that all people can have fellowship in the church and, ultimately, in the heaven to come. Why was it so hard for ancient Israel to accept this new knowledge? How do we get caught “wearing blinders” even as God seeks to draw us out of our comfort zones?

Thought Question:

The concept of power usually is about the ability to rule over or to direct someone else. Do a word study of the word *power* in the Bible. How does God use His power? Why is it so critical for us to allow God's power to work in us (*Eph. 3:7, 20*)? Share some of the results of God's power in your life.

Application Question:

In Ephesians 3, Paul shares the profound mystery of complete acceptance in Christ. “In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence” (*Eph. 3:12, NIV*). This access is based on grasping the wonder and magnitude of God's love; its width, breadth, height, and depth (*vs. 18*). How have you personally experienced God's love? What does it mean to be completely unworthy of salvation yet to be invited into His fellowship? How would our local churches change if we allowed God to change our current ways of thinking and doing regarding the unlovely, challenging people of this world? How does God help us to forgive and to fellowship with those who have hurt or slandered us?

Further Study: *Access to God.* “We have access to God through the merits of the name of Christ, and God invites us to bring to Him our trials and temptations; for He understands them all. He would not have us pour out our woes to human ears. Through the blood of Christ we may come to the throne of grace, and find grace to help in time of need. . . . As an earthly parent encourages his child to come to him at all times, so the Lord encourages us to lay before Him our wants and perplexities, our gratitude and love. Every promise is sure. Jesus is our Surety and Mediator, and has placed at our command every resource, that we may have a perfect character. The blood of Christ in ever-abiding efficacy is our only hope; for through His merits alone we have pardon and peace.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 1116.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ “We have not merely been saved that we might escape hell; we have been saved in order that God may present a people which will astonish the whole world,” said a great preacher. How well do you think the church has succeeded in doing what this preacher has said?
- ❷ Compare your “alien diaries” (see Tuesday’s study).
- ❸ Dwell on Ephesians 3:10 as a class. Discuss the implications of that text in light of the great controversy. How do the opening two chapters of Job parallel with what that verse is saying?
- ❹ Let individual members of the class give a personal testimony regarding their own experience on knowing God’s love. What can you learn from the different testimonies?
- ❺ If someone who had been attending your class is no longer coming to church, what can you do, as a class, to reveal to that person some of the love Paul so eloquently talks about in this chapter?