

The Mystery of the Gospel



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Ephesians 3; Job 11:5–9; Ezek. 43:13–16; Amos 7:7, 8; Rev. 11:1, 2.*

Memory Text: “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen” (*Ephesians 3:20, 21, NIV*).

In Ephesians 3, Paul opens with a theme that he had already touched on earlier: “that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel” (*Eph. 3:6, NKJV*). And though that might not be much of a surprise to the church today, composed mostly of Gentiles, it was something that seemed radically new to many of his readers at that time.

Paul then continues his inspired words, as the apostle reflects on his passion to preach the gospel of Jesus to the Gentiles.

We learn, too, of his current hardships in extending that ministry, hardships that include time in a Roman prison.

And we also hear his commitment to the mystery at the heart of the gospel, the mystery that, in the church, Gentiles are on equal footing with their Jewish brothers and sisters. We experience his excitement for the church and its cosmic mission. We listen in as he prays, praising God for expressing His grace through the church.

In short, we are inspired to join Paul in his passion for the gospel.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 5.

Paul: Imprisoned Apostle to the Gentiles

Read Ephesians 3. As you do so, identify one or two main themes. What major points does Paul make?

Ephesians 3 displays an interesting structure. Paul begins the chapter with these words: “For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles” (*Eph. 3:1, NKJV*). Then, he breaks off for what turns out to be a lengthy digression focused on his work as apostle to the Gentiles (*Eph. 3:2–13*). After the aside, he signals a return to his original train of thought by repeating the phrase “For this reason” (*Eph. 3:14, NKJV*), with verses 14–21 providing his interrupted prayer report.

In Ephesians 3:1, Paul identifies himself as “the prisoner of Christ Jesus” (*NKJV*), his way of arguing that though he may reside in Roman captivity and appear to be under the authority of the Roman Empire, there is a deeper, divine purpose being worked out in his life. He is not the prisoner of Rome but “the prisoner of Christ Jesus”! (*compare Eph. 4:1*).

Paul’s mention of his “suffering” (*Eph. 3:13, ESV*), and his later mention of his chains (*Eph. 6:20, ESV*), suggest that he is not under relatively comfortable house arrest (*compare Acts 28:16*) but is in prison. Being in prison in the first century and in a Roman dungeon was especially challenging. The Roman Empire did not run well-organized prisons with sanitary facilities and regular meal service. In fact, the empire had little need for prisons since incarceration was not used as a means of punishment. People were placed in prison only while they awaited trial or execution. Prisoners were expected to provide for themselves and were dependent on relatives and friends to supply food and other needs.

Paul’s worries perhaps center on the emotional impact of his imprisonment on believers, since being a prisoner was an extreme social disgrace in the context of an honor-shame culture. He might fear that some will ask, “How can Paul be the apostle and messenger of the exalted Christ and be a despised prisoner?” So, he reframes his imprisonment, helping believers to see it as part of God’s plan. He is suffering for them (“suffering for you,” *ESV*), and what appears to be a source of shame will in fact turn out to be for their “glory” (*Eph. 3:13*).

How can we learn to trust God and His ways amid what can be very trying circumstances?

The Long-Hidden Mystery of the Gospel

What is the mystery that has been entrusted to Paul? *Eph. 3:1–6*.

As you study Ephesians 3:1–6, note the following:

First, Paul writes this part of the letter specifically to Gentile believers in the house churches of Ephesus (*Eph. 3:1*).

Second, Paul claims to be the recipient of something he labels “the stewardship of God’s grace,” given to him “for you,” for Gentile believers (*Eph. 3:2, ESV*). This stewardship, or this ministry of grace, is Paul’s way of describing the commission given to him to preach the gospel (“God’s grace”) to the Gentiles (*compare Eph. 3:7, 8, ESV*).

Third, Paul claims that a mystery has been revealed to him, a topic he has already written about in the letter (*see especially Eph. 1:9, 10; Eph. 2:11–22*), the “mystery of Christ” (*Eph. 3:3, 4*). Paul does not wish to be understood as the inventor of the gospel, but he does lay claim to a God-given ministry to proclaim it.

Fourth, Paul is not alone in having received advanced revelation about this *mystery*, as the Spirit has also revealed it to Christ’s “holy apostles and prophets” in a way that surpasses the revelation of God’s plan to earlier generations (*Eph. 3:5*). The term *prophets* here probably refers to those possessing and exercising the gift of prophecy among early Christian house churches rather than the prophets of the Old Testament. The *mystery*, which was once hidden, has now become what we might call an “open secret.”

Finally, he declares: “This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (*Eph. 3:6, ESV*).

Paul is passionate about the gospel and especially about the way it is expressed in the church, which is composed of both Jews and Gentiles. These two groups have become the building blocks of God’s new community, His new brand of humanity, the church (*see Eph. 2:14–16*). We could say they are now transformed from being enemies to being “co-heirs,” “co-bodied” (included in a single body, the body of Christ), and “co-partakers” of the gospel promise (*see Eph. 3:6*).

What, if any, attitudes, maybe even below the surface, might you hold that contradict the inclusiveness taught by the gospel? How do you rid yourself of these?

The Church: Revealer of God’s Wisdom

What does Paul say about God and the actions of God in Ephesians 3:7–13?

Paul again lays claim to being a “minister” through “the gift of God’s grace” (*Eph. 3:7, ESV; compare Eph. 3:1, 2*). This gift, like the gospel itself, is not granted because of the worth of the recipient, but through God’s grace. Paul underlines this point by describing himself as “the very least of all the saints” (*Eph. 3:8, ESV*).

There is an interesting progression in Paul’s self-understanding that is discernible as we move through Paul’s letters in the order they were written. Early on, he lays claim to his status as a divinely appointed apostle (*Gal. 1:1*). Later, though, he introduces himself as “the least of the apostles” and “not worthy to be called an apostle” (*1 Cor. 15:9, NKJV*). Here in Ephesians he sees himself as “the very least of all the saints” (*Eph. 3:8, ESV*). Finally, he describes himself as the “chief” (*NKJV*) or “worst” of sinners (*1 Tim. 1:15, NIV*).

Perhaps this line of thinking here by Paul can help explain this famous quote by Ellen G. White: “The closer you come to Jesus, the more faulty you will appear in your own eyes; for your vision will be clearer, and your imperfections will be seen in broad and distinct contrast to His perfect nature.”—*Steps to Christ*, p. 64.

Paul then continues. In Ephesians 3:10, he writes: “to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places” (*NKJV*). Who are the “rulers and authorities in the heavenly places” (*ESV*) mentioned here? How does the church announce God’s “manifold” or multifaceted wisdom to them? Though Ephesians 3:10 does not describe the nature of the powers, it seems best to take them as the evil ones described in more detail in Ephesians 6:11, 12. If so, the composition of the church, unifying Jews and Gentiles as once very divided parts of humankind, becomes a ringing announcement to these demonic “rulers and authorities in the heavenly places” of God’s plan for the future, “to unite all things in him [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth” (*Eph. 1:10, ESV*). They are put on notice that God’s plan is underway and their doom assured. The very nature of a unified church signals their ultimate defeat.

If your own congregation took seriously Paul’s “job description” of the church in Ephesians 3:10, how might it change the way you and your fellow church members relate to each other?

Christ, Dwelling in Your Heart

Compare Paul's earlier prayer request, Ephesians 1:16–19, with his plea for believers in Ephesians 3:14–19. In what ways are the two requests similar?

Behind the English translations of Ephesians 3:14, 15 is an important play on words. When Paul says that he bows before “the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named” (*ESV*), he is exploring the phonetic connection between the Greek word for *Father*, *patēr*, and the Greek term for *family*, *patria*. In Ephesians, Paul celebrates the comprehensive nature of God’s plan of salvation, which involves all things (*Eph. 1:9, 10*) for all time (*Eph. 1:21*). And here he lays claim to “every family in heaven and on earth” as belonging to “the Father.” Every family (*patria*) takes its name from the Father (*patēr*). This is very good news!

Ponder this thought: Your family, despite its imperfections and failings, belongs to God. Your family is not in the cruel grip of fate but in God’s caring hands. God loves imperfect families. They bear the divine name. They carry the mark of His ownership.

In Ephesians 3:16–19, Paul asks God to grant believers an abundant spiritual experience marked by inner strength through the Spirit’s presence (*Eph. 3:16*), intimacy with Christ, who is also portrayed as dwelling within (*Eph. 3:17*), and a settled, secure spiritual identity (“rooted and grounded in love,” *Eph. 3:17, ESV*).

As Paul seeks to offer praise to God for the expansive reach of blessings offered to believers, he includes not three dimensions but four—“breadth and length and height and depth” (*Eph. 3:18, ESV*). He does not clearly identify to what these dimensions apply, though they obviously describe the vast size of something important. This leaves an interesting puzzle for Bible students. Do these dimensions describe God’s wisdom (*compare Job 11:5–9*, which uses four dimensions), God’s power (*compare Eph. 3:16, 17*), or, perhaps, the spiritual temple of Ephesians 2:19–22 (*compare Ezek. 43:13–16*, which uses four dimensions; *Amos 7:7, 8; Rev. 11:1, 2*)? It may be best to see these four dimensions as describing the immensity of “the love of Christ” (*Eph. 3:19*), viewing the phrase “to comprehend . . . the breadth and length and height and depth” (*Eph. 3:18, ESV*) as parallel to the next phrase, “to know the love of Christ” (*Eph. 3:19, ESV; compare Rom. 8:35–39*). However we see his words, they are good news.

Glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus

Paul concludes his prayer report with a doxology, a brief, poetic statement of praise to God. For what does he praise God? *Eph. 3:20, 21.*

Paul has been recording his prayers for believers (*Eph. 3:14–19*). Now he prays directly and powerfully. Paul’s doxology raises two questions: 1. Does the passage inappropriately elevate the church, placing it on a par with Christ, in the phrase “to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus” (*Eph. 3:21, ESV*)? While Paul is highly interested in the church in Ephesians, it is clear that Christ is the Savior of the church since it is Christ who dwells in the hearts of believers (*Eph. 3:17*). In the doxology, Paul praises God for the salvation offered to the church through Christ Jesus.

2. Does the phrase “throughout all generations, forever and ever” (*Eph. 3:21, ESV*) portray an unending, earthbound future for the church, with the return of Christ put on hold? Ephesians exhibits a robust expectation for the future. For example, Ephesians 4:30 looks toward “the day of redemption” (*ESV*). Also, believers will experience Christ’s limitless, sovereign power in “the age to come” (*Eph. 1:21, NRSV*). Paul’s doxology should be read as a celebration of Christ’s unending power exercised on behalf of believers.

Looking back over Paul’s second prayer report (*Eph. 3:14–21; compare Eph. 1:15–23*), we see Paul finding strength in the cosmic scope of the Father’s care (*Eph. 3:14, 15*), the ready availability of the Holy Spirit (*Eph. 3:16*), the partnership of Christ Himself (*Eph. 3:17*), and the immeasurability of the limitless love of Christ (*Eph. 3:18, 19*). This is so true that he imagines believers being filled “with all the fullness of God” (*Eph. 3:19, ESV*) and celebrates these spiritual realities in praise, again marveling at the abundance of God’s power on offer to the saints (*Eph. 3:20, 21*).

Whenever we feel the press of problems, temptations, or doubts, we may turn to this buoyant account of Paul’s prayers. The imprisoned apostle raises our vision to the grand horizon of God’s purposes and grace, reminding us that, whatever our current circumstances, we are participants in God’s ultimate plan (*Eph. 1:9, 10*), and His power is at work in us.

What blessings from God are especially valuable to you? Practice composing a prayer of praise in order to praise God for them.

Further Thought: Ellen G. White, “Modern Revivals,” in *The Great Controversy*, pp. 461–478.

“How can we harmonize our dwarfed spiritual condition with the presentation of our text [*Eph. 3:14–19*] that describes the fullness of knowledge it is our privilege to possess? How can Heaven look upon us, who have had every spiritual and temporal advantage that we might grow in grace, when we have not improved our opportunities? The apostle did not write these words to tantalize us, to deceive us, or to raise our expectations only to have them disappointed in our experience. He wrote these words to show us what we may and must be, if we would be heirs of the kingdom of God. How can we be laborers together with God, if we have a dwarfed experience? We have a knowledge of the Christian’s privilege, and should seek for that deep, spiritual understanding in the things of God that the Lord has desired us to have.

“Do we really believe the Bible? Do we really believe that we may attain to the knowledge of God that is presented before us in this text? Do we believe every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God? Do we believe the words that have been spoken by prophets and apostles, by Jesus Christ, who is the author of all light and blessing, and in whom dwelleth all richness and fullness? Do we really believe in God, and in his Son?”—Ellen G. White, *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, October 1, 1889.

Discussion Questions:

- ① Compare Paul’s doxology in Ephesians 3:20, 21 to other doxologies in the New Testament—*Rom. 11:33–36; Rom. 16:25–27; Phil. 4:20; 2 Pet. 3:18; Jude 24, 25*. What themes or ideas move through these passages? How might we adopt the attitude of praise and worship they illustrate?
- ② Compare Paul’s four uses of the Greek word *plēroma* (“fullness”) in Ephesians (*Eph. 1:10, 23; Eph. 3:19; Eph. 4:13*). Why do you think this idea is important to Paul?
- ③ Of all the actions of God that Paul praises in Ephesians 3, which is most inspiring to you? Why?
- ④ Paul concludes the first half of Ephesians just as he began it (*Eph. 1:3–21*), employing the language of prayer and praise. He exults in God’s power, present in the lives of believers through Christ and the Spirit (*Eph. 3:16–21*). How can we, as Ellen G. White wrote above, better experience this power in our lives?

Fighting With Scripture: Part 3

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

That night, Almira woke up after having another nightmare, and she resolved to go to the Seventh-day Adventist Church the next Sabbath. But in the morning, she thought, *I'm not a Christian. I can't go there.* The following night, she had another nightmare, and she struggled again over what to do. On Sabbath, she went to the Adventist Church.

After several weeks, Almira's parents found out that she was attending the church every Sabbath, and they forbade her from going. Other relatives heard and implored her not to go. Neighbors saw her walking to the church on Sabbaths and purposely came out of their apartment buildings to scold her. Going to church became a deeply unpleasant battle every Sabbath. But Almira enjoyed worshiping at the church, and she kept on going. She was learning about Jesus and finding peace in Him.

But at home the evil presence persisted. The spirit kept coming at night. Almira began to pray out loud, "In the name of the blood of Jesus Christ, protect me from Satan so I can sleep." She prayed the prayer every night for three months. The prayers dispelled the spirit, but she remained scared.

She told the Adventist pastor about her fears, and he suggested that she also read the Bible out loud. Whenever she sensed the spirit, she opened her Bible to Isaiah 43. She especially liked the promise, "But now, thus says the LORD, who created you, O Jacob, and He who formed you, O Israel: 'Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name; You are Mine.' . . . Since you were precious in My sight, you have been honored, and I have loved you; therefore I will give men for you, and people for your life" (*Isaiah 43:1-4, NKJV*).

She also found comfort in Isaiah 49:24, 25, which says, "Shall the prey be taken from the mighty, or the captives of the righteous be delivered? But thus says the LORD: 'Even the captives of the mighty shall be taken away, and the prey of the terrible be delivered; for I will contend with him who contends with you, and I will save your children' " (*NKJV*).

One night, she confessed all her sins out loud to Jesus. After that, she slept better than she had in a long time.



Finally, Almira stopped being afraid. When she read the Bible and prayed, the spirit always left. She realized that even though the spirit was stronger than her, Jesus was stronger than them both.

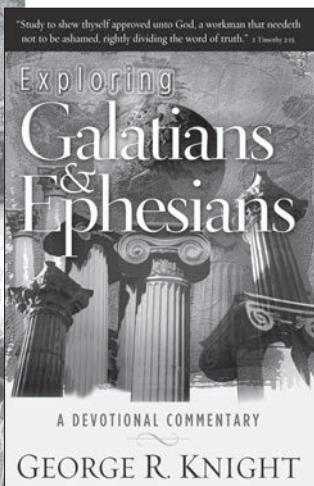
Read more about Almira next week. Thank you for your mission offerings that help spread the gospel in Russia and around the world.

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