

## 06–10–2020 Ephesians 3.1–13 Bible Study

Read Ephesians 3:1–13 in your favorite translation. I will print the NET–2 translation.

3:1 For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles 2 if indeed you have heard of the stewardship of God’s grace that was given to me for you, 3 that by revelation the mystery was made known to me, as I wrote before briefly. 4 When reading this, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ 5 (which was not disclosed to people in former generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit), 6 namely, that through the gospel the Gentiles are fellow heirs, fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus. 7 I became a servant of this gospel according to the gift of God’s grace that was given to me by the exercise of his power. 8 To me—less than the least of all the saints—this grace was given, to proclaim to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ 9 and to enlighten everyone about God’s secret plan—the mystery that has been hidden for ages in God who has created all things. 10 The purpose of this enlightenment is that through the church the multifaceted wisdom of God should now be disclosed to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly realms. 11 This was according to the eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord, 12 in whom we have boldness and confident access to God by way of Christ’s faithfulness. 13 For this reason I ask you not to lose heart because of what I am suffering for you, which is your glory.

### COMMENTS:

The phrase “For this reason” points back to the theological ideas that have been developed in the preceding section and that lead the apostle to prayer. “I, Paul,” is an emphatic expression designed to draw attention to the apostle and what he has to say.

What is emphasized is that Paul is the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of the Gentiles. The NIV rightly translates the article before prisoner as “the” rather than “a” prisoner (ESV & RSV). Thus Paul is represented, not as one prisoner among many, but as the prisoner of Christ Jesus, because of the significance of his ministry to the Gentiles (Acts 21:17–34; 22:21–24; 26:12–23).

Gentiles is an inclusive term and, as in 2:11, refers not to any one specific congregation but to all Gentiles (Gentiles also is preceded by an article and should read you the Gentiles). Other references to Paul’s imprisonment are found in 6:20, Philippians 1:7, Colossians 4:10, and Philemon 1 and 9.

Paul appears to begin an intercessory prayer for the church in Ephesians 3:1, but then he goes on a holy rabbit trail and does not pick up the actual prayer until 3:14. Perhaps his digression is prompted as he reflects on his position as “the prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles” (3:1).

Realize though that Ephesians 3:1-13 is more than a digression. The passage is part of God’s inspired Word and contains central themes in the book of Ephesians. Paul speaks of his sufferings, the incorporation of the Gentiles into the people of God, the cosmic nature of the church, the proclamation of the riches of Christ, believers’ access to God, and more.

In addition to these key themes, we also find powerful personal application for our own lives. Paul’s life serves as an example to believers. Like the Ephesian church, we are also called to love the church and fulfill her mission of making Christ known to everyone.

We should acknowledge and appreciate Paul’s unique role in redemptive history, but we should not distance ourselves from his mission. God gave Paul the ministry of proclaiming Christ and explaining the unfolding plan of God to people; we as believers have that same purpose.

If we accept that this passage has such application for our lives, then it is appropriate to see this passage as a "missions text." Like the parallel text in Colossians 1:24-29, this passage contains missional language.

We read of the Gentiles or "nations" (Eph 3:1, 6,8; see Col 1:27-28), suffering for the sake of the mission (Eph 3:1; see Col 1:24), the administration of grace given (Eph 3:2; see Col 1:25), the revelation of the mystery or the plan of God (Eph 3:4-6; see Col 1:26-27), and the proclamation of Christ who is at the center of the plan (Eph 3:8; Col 1:28).

This passage is saturated with Paul's passion for the nations to worship the reigning Christ. Spurgeon said in a sermon, "Every Christian here is either a missionary or an impostor ... You either try to spread abroad the kingdom of Christ, or else you do not love him at all. It cannot be that there is a high appreciation of Jesus and a totally silent tongue about him."

Strikingly, in verse 1 Paul does not refer to himself as a prisoner of Caesar, but "of Christ Jesus." The will of Christ took Paul to prison. But Paul did not see this imprisonment as thwarting the mission of Christ. They could chain Paul but not the message (Eph 6:20; 2 Tim 2:9).

Paul has a unique role in redemptive history. He is given "insight about the mystery of the Messiah" (v. 4). As God's steward (cf. 1 Cor 4:1; 9:17; Col 1:25), Paul's responsibility involves explaining God's intent to create a special people, or a "household" of both Jews and Gentiles, through Christ (Eph 2:19; 3:5-6).

This "mystery" was not like Ephesian mystery cults. It was not a mystery of esoteric knowledge, reserved for a secret few. This mystery, this message about Christ, is for all nations. Paul urges the Ephesians to forsake any other pseudo-mysteries and focus their attention on Christ alone.

When Christ appeared, the lights came on, clarifying the nature of the Messiah's death, the fact that Gentiles do not have to become Jews, that Gentiles and Jews have equal access to God. Now these things have been made known. And people should know them and celebrate them!

Paul's love for grace teaches us at least two lessons about grace. First, God's grace should humble us. Because Paul understood grace, he lived with a profound sense of humble gratitude to God. So he says, "Grace was given to me" twice (vv. 7, 8). He deflects attention away from himself, toward the proper place of praise: the God of all grace.

God empowered Paul to proclaim the "unfathomable," or unsearchable riches of Christ. This particular word appears nowhere outside of biblical Greek. When Paul thought about the glory of Christ, he made up a word! This word is built on the word for "footprint."

That word was used literally in Greek literature for a tracker, someone who pursues another by following footprints. It has the sense of "tracing out" or "searching." Other biblical writers convey the incalculable nature of God's attributes as well. Job speaks of the "unsearchable" ways of God (Job 5:9). Paul elsewhere describes the "unsearchable" wisdom of God (Rom 11:33).

Consider how Paul, this former persecutor of Christ, is now consumed with proclaiming the crucified Messiah (cf. 1 Cor 2:1-5). Jesus transformed Paul's life, and Christ and His redemption became Paul's resounding theme. To the Colossians Paul says, "We proclaim Him" (Col 1:28).

The goal of our proclamation—either in informal evangelism or in public preaching—is not to attract personal praise but rather praise for the Savior. We should desire for people to say, "What a great Savior!" not "What a good testimony or sermon."

Paul was sent to "shed light for all about the administration of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things." Paul has the responsibility of helping those who receive the

message of salvation to understand God's truth. Earlier he prayed for illumination (1:18), and now he uses the same word to describe his role in illuminating God's plan to converts.

We have a global God, and we proclaim the only King of the nations. Let us remember that every tribe and tongue needs to hear of the incalculable riches of Christ. If you are preaching in New York or in a leper colony in Nigeria, remember that everyone needs Jesus. Proclaim Him to everyone. Share the wonderful plan of God revealed in the Bible for everyone.

There is more going on with the church than meets the eye. If you are part of the church, then you are part of a cosmic sermon that is being preached to spiritual rulers and authorities. To be clear, the emphasis here is not on us preaching to unseen powers and principalities. The point is that God is revealing His plan to the powers through the existence of the church.

According to verse 11, Jesus came and "accomplished," or fulfilled, or achieved, God's plan. Christ is the central character in this plan, and all things will be summed up in Him (Eph 1:10). The crucified and risen Christ is at the Father's right hand, and He will soon come to put all of the hostile principalities and powers under His feet.

Part of the mystery is that believers can experience a nearness to God that far exceeds that of the old covenant. Christians can boldly approach God because of Christ. In the previous passage Paul said, "For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father" (2:18).

We do not come to God with a type of arrogant boldness but rather acknowledging that we have "freedom of access." We take advantage of the marvelous privilege of prayer. We live by prayer. We love by prayer. We make the gospel known by prayer.

A Christian can pray anytime, anywhere. We can draw near to the throne of grace and find help in our time of need (Heb 4:14-16). We seek God in prayer, through Christ, by the Spirit. We can know that He hears us. He is for us. He is with us. We are never alone.

**REFLECTION QUESTION:** Beware of those who tell you they alone can explain the mysteries of God. Paul has made it clear that the mystery has been revealed. In our divided world today, Christ has come to unite all of us, regardless of national background, language spoken, or the color of our skin. We are all the creation of God and God offers his forgiveness and grace to all of us. When the eternal Son of God took on human form and was born as our brother, he became the brother of all of us, not just to some.