

p 41 WEEK 6: AN INTERLUDE ON THE MYSTERY OF GENTILE INCLUSION

Ephesians 3:1–13

The Place of the Passage

Ephesians 1–2 paints a grand picture of the Lord pouring his fullness into one new man to make a glorious temple. Now Paul intends to draw out practical implications of the church’s identity in Christ for daily Christian life. However, he interrupts his direction to explain the relationship of the gospel to his imprisonment.

The Big Picture

In an excursus, Paul’s revelation of the mystery of the Gentiles’ equal inheritance in Christ is used to exhort the Ephesians to maintain strength of heart in spite of Paul’s imprisonment for the gospel.

p 42 Reflection and Discussion

Read through Ephesians 3:1–13, the focus of this week’s study. Following this, review the questions below and write your responses concerning this section of the book of Ephesians. (For further background, see the *ESV Study Bible*, pages 2266–2267; available online at www.esvbible.org.)

1. Revealing the Mystery (Eph. 3:1–6)

Ephesians 3:1 has wording very similar to 3:14 and 4:1 (“for this reason ... for this reason ... therefore”). Paul will resume his earlier line of thought in verse 14 after a significant digression concerning his calling as the apostle to the Gentiles. As a steward of God’s grace, what responsibility does he have toward God and the Gentiles?

“As I have written briefly” looks back to knowing the “mystery of his will” (1:9–10). In 3:3 Paul speaks of the “mystery made known ... by revelation.” How might speaking of the mystery in these terms encourage the Gentile believers in the congregation?

Paul relates the mystery to the gospel by calling it the “mystery of Christ.” In 3:5, what unique insights does Paul give concerning this mystery? Why would p 43 this have been important in helping the church understand the nature of Paul’s imprisonment?

After providing the background of his personal relationship to the mystery in 3:1–5, Paul finally reveals the content of the mystery in verse 6. How does the content of the mystery add knowledge about God’s plan not previously revealed in the Old Testament or the Gospels? How does the mystery relate to the gospel?

Based on the content of the mystery, why did Paul first provide several verses of background information?

2. Encouraging the Church (3:7–13)

Paul views his stewardship as being a “minister according to the gift of God’s grace” (v. 7). Yet Paul also views himself as the “very least of all the saints” (v. 8). Of what life event does Paul speak when he mentions the working of God’s [p 44](#) power? What does Paul’s understanding of God’s powerful grace say about his view of his imprisonment?

Why would Paul use “the unsearchable riches of Christ” to describe his preaching to the Gentiles? When the church reads the phrase “hidden for ages in God who created all things,” what does this add to their understanding about God’s plan for Israel and the Gentiles?

God’s intent in Paul’s preaching of the gospel is that the “manifold wisdom of God” would be made known through the church to the powers “in the heavenly places” (v. 10). Based on all that Paul has said so far in Ephesians, what is this “wisdom”? Why would the Lord intend the powers to see this wisdom?

In Christ, Paul and the church have “boldness and access with confidence” (v. 12). To what activity do these terms refer? How does this activity contribute to the church’s encouragement as they hear of Paul’s suffering on their behalf?

[p 45](#) **Read through the following three sections on *Gospel Glimpses*, *Whole-Bible Connections*, and *Theological Soundings*. Then take time to consider the *Personal Implications* these sections may have for you.**

Gospel Glimpses

BOLDNESS AND ACCESS. Believers do not live in a belief system governed by fate or by an inexorable cycle of history, for we have the ability to approach God and ask him to change us, those around us, and entire institutions. Through the cross, Jesus provides for his church the ability to approach God with confidence that he will hear our prayers and act with goodness according to his purposes and glory (Eph. 3:12; see Matt. 27:51; Heb. 4:14–16). The gospel gives us access to the one who controls history. Even in imprisonment, Paul took advantage of the privilege we have through Christ to approach the Creator as our loving Father.

SUFFERING FOR CHRIST. When believers live out their faith, they are certain to suffer persecution. Persecution for one may be living with a spouse hostile to the gospel; for another it might mean facing a mob intent on killing anyone who names the name of Christ. Just as our Lord suffered in his earthly ministry as he did the will of God, so too will believers be hated; the seed of the Serpent will remain in conflict with the seed of the woman (Gen. 3:15; Matt. 13:38; John 8:44; 15:18). The promise of suffering for the gospel, however, is not a reason to turn away from courageously and zealously proclaiming the gospel and serving in the most hostile regions of the world. Instead, like Paul, we should embrace the call to suffer with a view toward preaching the message of salvation to those who are lost, for the glory of Christ (1 Cor. 7:16; Eph. 3:7–11; Phil. 1:27–30). Such suffering is only temporary for those who have the promise of beholding the glory of God.

Whole-Bible Connections

PLAN FOR THE GENTILES. In the Old Testament, God uniquely calls Israel among all peoples so that the nations might come to them to gain revelation about the true God (Deut. 7:6–8; Ps. 96:10; Isa. 49:6; 60:3). In contrast, Gentile nations appear as enemies of God and his people and as objects of divine judgment (Amos 1:2–15; Isaiah 17–21). It therefore might seem that the equal inclusion of the Gentiles in the inheritance of Christ comes only with the failure of Israel to reveal Christ to the nations. Yet Paul reveals that since eternity past, the plan of God always included Jews and Gentiles sharing in [p 46](#) membership “of the same body” (Eph. 3:6). Neither Gentile inclusion in the church nor the church itself is an afterthought of God. Yet only in Christ have God’s purposes been made known.

FULFILLMENT OF THE OLD TESTAMENT IN THE NEW. Augustine’s dictum, “In the Old Testament the New Testament is concealed; in the New Testament the Old Testament is revealed,” seeks to explain the relationship of the two Testaments to each other. The things the Lord intends to reveal or accomplish in the New Testament lie as seeds hidden in the Old Testament. The Old Testament reveals merely that the Lord will show mercy to the Gentiles through Israel (Gen. 18:18; 22:18; 26:14; 28:4; Isa. 11:10–12). The Old Testament revelation remains unfulfilled at the close of Malachi, anticipating new revelation. In the New Testament, the seeds of the Old Testament blossom into the flowers that become visible as one reads the Old Testament in light of Christ’s redemption of his own. The plan of God for the Gentiles takes shape in the calling and establishment of the church (Acts 3:25; Rom. 9:25–26; Gal. 3:8).

Theological Soundings

MYSTERIES. The New Testament speaks of several mysteries—truths partially or completely concealed in the Old Testament that are unveiled in the New (Matt. 13:11; 1 Cor. 4:1). Paul reveals that the promise of God to dwell among his people finds fulfillment in Christ’s residing in us through the indwelling Spirit (Col. 1:26–27). Through the resurrection of Christ, the hope of life beyond the grave is completed in the transformation of the believer’s physical body (1 Cor. 15:51–53). Like the revelation of the mystery of the Gentiles’ inheritance, each of these mysteries

reveals a sovereign God working to accomplish his perfect will for the glory of Christ and the joy of God's people.

UNIVERSAL CALL. Paul's call to "bring [the gospel] to light for everyone" is also our calling. All are under the curse of sin and need the power of the death of Christ to break the curse (Rom. 3:23; 6:23; Gal. 3:10–14). The goal of the Great Commission is that people everywhere would hear the message of Christ. Yet it remains true that, in Christ, God elected before the world was created those who will be saved (Rom. 11:2–7; Eph. 1:4; 1 Pet. 1:1). The preaching of the gospel is a universal calling that brings about the salvation of the elect among Israel and the nations. This is the intent of Christ's words: "Many are called, but few are chosen" (Matt. 22:14).

p 47 Personal Implications

Take time to reflect on the implications of Ephesians 3:1–13 for your own life today. Consider what you have learned that might lead you to praise God, repent of sin, and trust in his gracious promises. Make notes below on the personal implications for your walk with the Lord of the (1) *Gospel Glimpses*, (2) *Whole-Bible Connections*, (3) *Theological Soundings*, and (4) this passage as a whole.

1. Gospel Glimpses

2. Whole-Bible Connections

3. Theological Soundings

4. Ephesians 3:1–13

p 48 As You Finish This Unit ...

Take a moment now to ask for the Lord's blessing and help as you continue in this study of Ephesians. Also take a moment to reflect on the Key Verse (2:10), and to look back through this unit of study in order to reflect on some key things that the Lord may be teaching you—and perhaps to highlight and underline these things to review again in the future.