

06. Ephesians 3



Paul's commission is to make God's plan known - Ephesians 3:1-13

Ephesians 3:1-7

This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for the Messiah Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles — for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you, and how the mystery was **made known to** me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of the Messiah which in former generations was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the **Spirit**: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow **heirs**, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in the Messiah Jesus through the **gospel** of which I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power.

Paul picks up words from the opening hymn: 'made known to' (see 1:9). God's 'Spirit' (see 1:13), our being 'heirs' (see 1:11,14), and the 'gospel' (see 1:13).

Ephesians 3:8-13

Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of the Messiah, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in the Messiah, Jesus our Lord, in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him [or ‘through his faith’]. I pray therefore that you may not lose heart over my sufferings for you; they are your glory.

Paul continues to pick up words from the opening hymn: the ‘riches’ of the Messiah (see 1:7), God’s ‘plan’ (see 1:10), ‘mystery’ (see 1:9); ‘wisdom’ (see 1:8), ‘the heavenly places’ (see 1:3), God’s ‘purpose’ (see 1:11), and ‘glory’ (see 1:12 and 14).

We should note the close relationship between Paul's words here (especially 3:1-6) and what he wrote to the Colossians (1:23-29).

The similarities between Ephesians and Colossians is one of the reasons for the suggestion that someone other than Paul drew heavily on Colossians to compose Ephesians. The similarities here are especially close. At the same time we should not fail to notice the differences. The passage in Colossians states that the mystery has been 'shown to his saints'; Ephesians adds that it is revealed to the apostles and prophets. Also the Ephesian passage gives greater emphasis to the church when speaking of the content of the mystery (see 3:6), and also of its proclamation (see 3:10). If, as we suggest, Paul is writing a general letter to the Gentile churches in the East, we should not be surprised that he would repeat significant ideas that he has already expressed in earlier letters.

Ephesians 3:1

¹This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for the Messiah Jesus,
for the sake of you Gentiles

Paul is a prisoner because he is carrying out the commission given him by the Risen Jesus. He is a prisoner ‘for the sake of you Gentiles’: the commission given him by the Risen Jesus concerns them, and he is in prison because of the stand which he takes in their regard. What the commission consists in, and what he refuses to compromise on, is precisely what he goes on to explain in the sentence which runs from verse two to verse seven. It concerns something which he calls ‘the **mystery**’, a term which we met earlier in the introductory hymn: ‘God has made known to us the **mystery** of God’s will, according to his good pleasure set forth in the Messiah, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him’ (Ephesians 1:9-10).

Ephesians 3:2-4

Surely you have already heard of the commission (οἰκονομία) of God's grace [1:17, 22] that was given me for you, ³and how the mystery [μυστήριον] was made known to me [1:9] by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of the Messiah

Paul directs us back to what he has already said, assuring us that we will find expressed there his '**understanding of the mystery**'. At the same time, he further clarifies its essential elements. He insists first on the divine origin of his knowledge: it is something that he has received from God in a '**revelation**' (ἀποκάλυψις). Secondly, he defines it as '**the mystery of the Messiah**'. The simple genitive construction leaves the connection open between the 'mystery' and 'the Messiah'. For the moment Paul is giving us the key focus: we cannot grasp the mystery except by contemplating Jesus the Messiah.

Ephesians 3:5-7

In former generations the mystery of the Messiah was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets [2:20] by (or 'in') the Spirit [1:13]: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in the Messiah Jesus through the gospel [1:13] of which I have become a servant [διάκονος] according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power [1:19, 20].

Thirdly, he explains why he speaks of it as a 'mystery': it is something which has been hidden till now. We know about it only because God has now chosen to reveal it 'by (or 'in') the Spirit' to his 'apostles' – which includes Paul (see 1:1) – and 'prophets' (see 2:20).

The mystery made known to Paul is that ‘the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in the Messiah Jesus through the gospel’ (3:6).

Jews and Gentiles (so all peoples) inherit together the same Holy Spirit: the same intimate communion of love that is the life of the risen Messiah with God. Paul has already explained in 2:16 how Jesus ‘through the cross’, put to death the ‘hostility’ that separated Jews and Gentiles, and ‘reconciled both groups to God’. He did this by bringing them together into ‘one body’, the body which is the Christian community: ‘the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all’ (1:22-23).

Ephesians 3:5-7

In former generations the mystery of the Messiah was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets [2:20] by the Spirit [1:13]: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in the Messiah Jesus through the gospel [1:13] of which I have become a servant [διάκονος] according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power [1:19, 20].

The words 'fellow heirs' (συγκληρονόμα) ['heirs' - 1:11,14], 'of the same body' (σύσσωμα) [body' - 1:23, 2:16], and 'sharers' (συμμέτοχα) add to the 'sun' words which Paul has already used to express the sharing between Jews and Gentiles that is central to God's will. We have already met 'made alive together' (συνζωοποιέω, 2:5); 'raised up together' (συνεγείρω, 2:6); 'made to sit together' (συγκαθίζω, 2:6); 'citizens together' (συμπολίτης, 2:19); 'joined together' (συναρμολογέω, 2:21) and 'built together' (συνοικοδομέω, 2:22).

Let us go to the concluding words of the hymn, where Paul speaks of the promise and the inheritance. The 'promised Holy Spirit' whom Jews and Gentiles have received is 'the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as those who are God's possession, to the praise of God's glory' (1:13-14). Paul went on to pray that 'with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which God has called you, what are the riches of God's glorious inheritance among the saints' (1:18). Those with whom the Gentiles share are the Jews, and both Jews and Gentiles inherit together the same Holy Spirit: the same intimate communion of love that is the life of the risen Jesus with God. Paul has already explained how Jesus 'through the cross', put to death the 'hostility' that separated Jews and Gentiles, and 'reconciled both groups to God'. Jesus did this by bringing them together into 'one body' (2:16), the body which is the Christian community: 'the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all' (1:22-23).

The mystery revealed to Paul and proclaimed in the gospel – and it is because he does proclaim it that he is now in prison – is that it is God's eternal plan, only now made known 'in the Messiah', that Jews and Gentiles – in other words, all peoples of the earth – are to be united in the church where together they will share in the life of the risen Jesus. Indeed, it is the 'mystery of the Messiah'.

Ephesians 3:8-12

Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring the news [εὐαγγελίζω] to the Gentiles of the boundless riches of the Messiah [1:7] , and to make everyone see what is the plan [1:10] of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created [2:10, 15] all things; so that through the church [1:22] the wisdom [1:8] of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places [1:3] in accordance with the eternal purpose [1:11] that he has carried out in the Messiah, Jesus our Lord, in whom we have access to God [2:18] in boldness and confidence through his faith.

As the body of Christ, witnessing by the communion in love to which all are invited, the Christian community demonstrates to the world God's love, God's design in creating, and God's plan for the salvation of humankind. Whatever powers there are that exercise influence over human beings – and Paul does not define them – the gospel proclaims that God's love has prevailed.

Ephesians 3:13

¹³I pray therefore that you may not lose heart over my sufferings for you; they are your glory [1:6, 12, 14].

Ephesians 3:14-16

I go down on my knees before the Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name that, according to the riches of God's glory, God may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through God's Spirit.

‘God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us’ (Romans 5:5). It is this Spirit alone who can transform our hearts into the heart of Jesus as we ‘are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit’ (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Ephesians 3:17

I pray that the Messiah may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love

‘It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, loving me and giving himself for me’ (Galatians 2:20).

Through faith we open our hearts to welcome God’s gift of the Spirit. It is through the Spirit that the roots of our being go down to love and draw sustenance from it. It is through the Spirit that the communion of love which binds the risen Jesus to his Father becomes the foundation of our life, for ‘in him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord’ (Ephesians 2:21).

Ephesians 3:18-19

I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth – to know the love of the Messiah that surpasses knowledge

It is not the first time in this letter that Paul has spoken of his prayer that his readers will grow in knowledge (see 1:15-23). The knowledge which he prays for here can come only as a gift from God and so as the fruit of the indwelling of Jesus that is brought about through the gift of God's Spirit (3:16-17). As Jesus, dwelling in our hearts, increasingly becomes the source of our love and the foundation of all we do, we will come to an ever deepening knowledge of the mystery which Paul has been expounding: that we are 'with all the saints'. It is in this communion of saints that we will come to 'know the love of the Messiah'. Paul does not say that we will come to know about his love. Rather, he is referring to our knowing Jesus' love – a knowing that is possible only in love-communion.

Ephesians 3:18-19

I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth – to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge

‘With all the saints’, that is to say, as members of ‘the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all’ (1:22-23), there is no limit to the ‘riches of grace that God lavishes upon us’ (1:8), or to ‘the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe’ (1:19). There is no limit to ‘the great love with which God loves us’ (2:4), or to ‘the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus’ (2:7).

– so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

– another way of praying that our whole life will be filled with Jesus, ‘for in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily’ (Colossians 2:9).

Ephesians 3:20-21

Now to God who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in the Messiah Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

The first three chapters of the Ephesians have been a sustained symphony of prayer in which the heart of the apostle penetrates the most profound mysteries of God and reaches out in love to the whole of creation. He prays that the immense love of God may indeed transform everyone by drawing everyone into the body of the Risen Jesus, the Church, where we can all experience his life and radiate his glory to others: 'to God be glory in the church and in the Messiah Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen'.