

Week 6: The Mystery of God's Plan: Ephesians 3:1–13

Hook



Main Point: In Christ, Jew and Gentile are equally righteous and heirs to the kingdom.

Q: What's the most exciting invitation you've ever received?

Q: Have you ever been surprised to discover you were invited to something you never expected?

Have you ever received an invitation that made you genuinely excited? Maybe it was a wedding, a once-in-a-lifetime event, or an opportunity you never expected. There's something special about being invited because an invitation says, "*We want you there. You belong.*"

Now imagine discovering that the greatest celebration in history had been planned for centuries, and everyone assumed the guest list was already set. Then someone hands you an invitation – not because another guest canceled, not because they made an exception, but because your name had been on the guest list all along.

That's the surprise Paul reveals in Ephesians 3. The inclusion of the Gentiles in the Gospel wasn't God's *backup plan*; it was His *eternal plan* from the very beginning.

RECAP: So far, we have learned about Paul's long relationship with the church at Ephesus as their spiritual father. He wrote to the Ephesians from prison to encourage them to live into their identity in Christ, thanking God for them and praying for them to grow in wisdom and power. Then he gave the Ephesians a succinct theological description of the Gospel and emphasized how God brought the Gentiles into His kingdom through Christ.

In this lesson, Paul continues talking about the inclusion of the Gentiles into God's kingdom because it is an essential core teaching of the Gospel.

Week 6: *The Mystery of God's Plan: Ephesians 3:1–13*

Book

Main Point: In Christ, Jew and Gentile are equally righteous and heirs to the kingdom.

Ephesians 3:1, 13 and Acts 28:17–28 [Read]

Talking Point 1: The inclusion of the Gentiles is an essential core teaching of the Gospel.

Q: Paul said he was a prisoner “for this reason.” What was the reason—and how was it connected to his ministry to the Gentiles?

Q: According to Acts 28, how did Paul describe the Jewish people’s response to the Gospel? What did he say would happen as a result of their rejection?

Paul began with “for this reason,” pointing us back to the previous section, where he explained how Christ tore down the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile and brought the two together into one body in Christ. And he said this was why he was a prisoner (3:1). Not just because he had been preaching the Gospel but specifically that he had been preaching the inclusion of the Gentiles.¹

The last chapter of Acts describes Paul’s arrival in Rome, where he was on house arrest, awaiting trial before Caesar, and where he wrote Ephesians. Paul was allowed to have visitors, so he called together the local Jewish leaders in Rome. He told them that although he had done nothing against the Jewish people or their customs, he had been handed over to the Romans as a prisoner. The Romans had wanted to release him, but continued Jewish opposition led Paul to appeal to Caesar (Acts 28:17-19). Paul tried to convince these Roman Jewish leaders to believe in Jesus. They listened to his preaching; some were convinced, but others refused to believe. Paul quoted the same passage Jesus had used in response to Jewish unbelief, that they “keep on hearing but do not understand; keep on seeing but do not perceive” (Isaiah 6:9-10). Then he ended with a proclamation that, in light of their rejection, God’s salvation was being proclaimed to the Gentiles, “and they will listen” (Acts 28:28). The Roman Jewish leaders left disagreeing among themselves, while Paul remained in Roman custody and continued preaching the Gospel (Acts 28:17-31).

Paul was in prison because of Jewish opposition to his ministry—and one of the greatest points of controversy was his proclamation that God’s salvation had gone to the Gentiles (Acts 22:21-22; 28:28). Although Christ had broken down the dividing wall between Jewish and Gentile believers, that hostility remained in the hearts of many unbelieving Jews who opposed Paul’s ministry to the Gentiles (Ephesians 2:14; Acts 22:21–22). This is why Paul was in prison – “on behalf of you Gentiles” (3:1). Paul didn’t tell the Ephesian Gentiles this to make them feel guilty. At the end of this section, he told them not to be discouraged by his suffering for them. His imprisonment was not

evidence that his ministry had failed; it resulted from his faithfully carrying out the ministry God had given him to bring the Gospel to the Gentiles. In that sense, his suffering was “their glory,” not a reason for discouragement (3:13). He was showing them just how strongly he believed the Gospel was equally open to the Gentiles. He was willing to suffer for it.

For Paul, the inclusion of the Gentiles wasn’t a minor theological point Christians could agree to disagree on; it was at the core of the Gospel message. This is why his letter to the Galatians was so forceful. False teachers were leading Gentile believers to think that faith in Christ was not enough—that they also needed to keep the law to be justified before God (Galatians 1:6-9; 2:16; 5:2-4). He called them foolish (a much stronger word than in our world today) and asked who had bewitched them. This was also why he had to confront Peter when he was refusing to eat with the Gentile Christians at Antioch. Paul said he stood condemned in hypocrisy, not acting in line with the truth of the Gospel (Galatians 2:11–14).

There were theological issues about which Christians could legitimately disagree (1 Corinthians 10:23 – 33), but the equal standing of Jews and Gentiles in Christ was not one of them. Gentile believers did not need to become Jews or keep the Mosaic law to have full standing among God’s people. Through faith in Christ, Jews and Gentiles are justified in the same way and made equal members of the same body, fellow heirs, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ through the Gospel (Galatians 2:15–16; 3:28; Ephesians 3:6). To deny Gentile believers that equal standing wasn’t simply divisive; it undermined a fundamental truth of the Gospel. Recognizing the unity of Jew and Gentile is essential to understanding salvation by grace through faith in Christ (Romans 3:21–24). Being saved by grace *means* there is no advantage for the Jews (Romans 3:9–10). If you don’t understand that, you don’t understand the Gospel. You are living by “a different Gospel” (Galatians 1:6–8).

We don’t have the same conflict between Jew and Gentile in our churches today, but we do have people who live by “a different Gospel” in a similar way – those who *say* they believe in salvation by grace but *live* as if salvation is by works. Like these Jewish Christians in Paul’s day, modern “works righteousness” Christians use their works to judge others and think of themselves as better. “He doesn’t come to Bible study as regularly as I do.” “She doesn’t dress as modestly as I do.” “His kids aren’t as well-behaved as mine are.”

To those people, Jesus would say to be careful, because if you insist on judging others by those kinds of rules, you’re asking God to do the same to you (Matthew 7:1–2). And no matter how often you go to Bible study or how well behaved your kids are, you will not measure up to God’s standards of righteousness (James 2:10). In chapter 2, Paul told the Ephesians that salvation was by grace “so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:9).

For those who truly understand the Gospel, there is no place for boasting or self-righteousness. There is no basis for thinking we are better than anyone else. Those who have personally experienced God's amazing grace should extend that same grace to others.

Q: Why are we tempted to judge other people based on their works? Give an example of what it looks like to show people amazing grace without approving of sin.

Q: How would you describe God's grace to you to an unbeliever?

Q: What are other "different Gospels" that you hear preached today? How can we ensure that we are rooted in the true Gospel?

Ephesians 3:2–9 and Acts 9:1–16 [Read]

Talking Point 2: God revealed the mystery that Jewish and Gentile believers are one in Christ.

Q: How was the mystery of the Gospel made known to Paul?

Q: Why did this give Paul a unique ability to speak about God's plan for the Gentiles?

In this passage, Paul described his calling to the Gentiles, how he was uniquely fit for that calling and equipped by God alone. Paul described this ministry as a "stewardship of God's grace" entrusted to him for the Gentiles. It was a gift of grace accomplished by God's power so that he could preach the unsearchable riches of Christ and bring the mystery to light (3:2, 7–9). The "mystery of the Gospel" that Gentiles are fellow heirs to God's kingdom, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise was made known to him by revelation. He did not logically deduce it on his own; God revealed it to him (3:3). As a Pharisee of Pharisees, a deeply committed Jew, zealous for the law, Paul would have never come to this conclusion on his own. It could only have been by divine revelation. This is what gave Paul the authority to speak on this topic (1 Corinthians 2:6–16).

In Galatians, Paul described his conversion as not through any human being but through the supernatural act of God. But even after his conversion, he didn't go to learn from the disciples; he studied alone with only the Holy Spirit teaching him (Galatians 1:11–18). Then he went to meet with Peter and James for just 15 days. Fourteen years later, he returned to Jerusalem in response to a revelation from God and met privately with the recognized church leaders (Galatians 2:1–2). Those leaders confirmed the Gospel he had been preaching and agreed that Paul and his coworkers had been called to preach to the Gentiles (Galatians 2:3–10). Paul wrote all this to explain he had received the Gospel directly from God, not through any human being.

In the story of Paul's conversion, God told Ananias that Saul was His chosen instrument to carry the Gospel to the Gentiles, kings and the Jews (Acts 9:15). Ananias said he had heard how much evil Saul had committed against the believers. Acts describes him as ravaging the Church, entering house after house and dragging them off to prison (Acts 8:3). Even right before his conversion, he was "breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord." He was on the way to Damascus specifically to arrest any believers he could find there (Acts 9:1–2). After his conversion experience, when Paul started preaching the Gospel in Damascus, the believers there were shocked (Acts 9:20–21). When he went to Jerusalem and tried to join the church there, they were afraid of him and didn't believe he had really converted (Acts 9:26). It was unbelievable that the very man who had been leading the persecution against the followers of Jesus was now one of them.

In other letters, Paul shared why he was so committed to persecuting the Church – his zeal for his Jewish faith. He was "a Hebrew of Hebrews," an expert in the law, and blameless in following it (Philippians 3:4–6). He was advanced in Judaism beyond anyone his age and extremely zealous for the faith (Galatians 1:13–14). This makes it even more surprising that he would preach that Jewish heritage and keeping the law gave him no advantage in obtaining salvation over the Gentiles. If anyone could claim righteousness under the law and an advantage over the Gentiles, it was Paul. But after his conversion, Paul said any "righteousness" he had to offer was garbage compared to the surpassing value of knowing Christ, the only righteousness that can save us (Philippians 3:7–11).

This only makes the Gospel more believable coming from Paul, because he didn't benefit from the inclusion of the Gentiles; he only suffered from it (Acts 9:15–16). If Paul wanted to do what was best for himself, he would have continued in his noble position in the Jewish faith. But now that God had revealed the truth to him, he was willing to endure suffering, struggle and persecution to know Christ and make Him known. The Gospel completely changed Paul's perspective and his identity. He no longer treated his identity as a "Hebrew of Hebrews" as grounds for confidence before God; instead, he humbly called himself "the very least of all the saints" (3:8). Rather than claiming superiority based on his heritage or law-keeping, he recognized that he was a sinner saved only by grace.

Paul explained that the "mystery" of the Gospel was not understood by previous generations but had now been revealed by the Spirit to the apostles and prophets (3:5). The inclusion of Gentiles was God's plan all along, His eternal purpose (3:11). God had promised to bless all nations through Abraham and had called Israel to be a kingdom of priests (Genesis 12:3; Exodus 19:6). The Old Testament revealed that Gentiles would receive salvation, but it did not reveal that believing Gentiles and Jews would become fellow heirs and equal members of one body in Christ.² That truth remained hidden in God until He revealed it through the Spirit to His apostles and prophets (3:5–6, 9)

In Scripture, a “mystery” isn’t something that is hard to understand that only a really smart person can figure out; it is a truth that was previously hidden by God but has now been revealed by God. Paul tells us exactly what this mystery is in verse 6: the Gentiles are “fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” This had always been part of God’s plan, but now God was revealing it clearly through His apostles and prophets (Ephesians 3:5–6).

There is a broader principle here as well: spiritual truth ultimately depends on God’s revelation, not human intelligence. The Gospel is foolishness to the world (1 Corinthians 1:18–25), even to the wisest people of the world. No amount of human wisdom can discover God’s saving truth on its own. We need the Holy Spirit to open our understanding to the truth God has revealed in His Word (1 Corinthians 2:6–16). It’s not something we can figure out if we’re smart enough or convince someone else of just by a logical argument. It takes the Holy Spirit opening our understanding and working in our hearts (Ezekiel 36:26; 1 Corinthians 2:10–14).

That’s why, if we want to make disciples, we need to do more than prepare our testimony and be ready to give a logical defense for what we believe (1 Peter 3:15). We faithfully explain the Gospel, but we also pray because only God can change the heart. Just as Paul prayed that the eyes of the Ephesians’ hearts would be enlightened (Ephesians 1:18), we should pray that God would open people’s hearts to His truth. If we want people to know Jesus, we need to proclaim the Gospel faithfully and pray for God to open their hearts to receive it.

Q: How is the usage of mystery in the Bible different from how we use the word mystery today?

Q: If the Spirit is the one who reveals truth, what does that tell us about how we should pray? Read the Bible? Witness to others? Handle conflict? Make decisions?

Ephesians 3:10–12 [Read]

Talking Point 3: Through Christ, all believers may approach God with confidence.

Q: How would you describe the tone and language of this passage?

Q: What does it mean to be able to approach God’s throne with confidence?

The tone is lofty again: “unsearchable riches of Christ,” “the manifold wisdom of God,” His “plan of the mystery hidden for ages,” “the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places,” “eternal purpose” (3:8–11). Here Paul takes us beyond what we can see and tells us that God is displaying His wisdom through the Church even to the spiritual realm. The Church itself—believing Jews and Gentiles brought together as one body in Christ—is a demonstration of God’s “manifold wisdom” to the rulers and authorities in

the heavenly places (3:10; cf. 3:6). In other words, there is more happening through the Church than what we can see. God's work of reconciliation in Christ displays His wisdom even before the angelic realm.³

In Christ, all who believe—Jew and Gentile alike—can approach God with freedom and confidence (3:12). Hebrews describes this access as drawing near to God's heavenly throne of grace (Hebrews 4:14–16). Yet if our access were based on our own works, none of us could stand before Him (Romans 3:10, 23). David asked, "Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place?" His answer was, "He who has clean hands and a pure heart" (Psalm 24:3–4). By that standard, none of us qualifies.

When Isaiah saw a vision of God's heavenly throne, he cried, "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips" (Isaiah 6:5). He could remain in God's presence only because the Lord atoned for his sin (Isaiah 6:7). Under the old covenant, only the high priest could enter the Holy of Holies, and he could do so only with sacrificial blood to make atonement for sin (Leviticus 16). Our freedom to approach God is not based on our righteousness but on the atoning work of Christ.

But in Christ, our sins are atoned and we can stand before God with freedom and confidence. All who believe – Jew and Gentile. Hebrews tells us our atonement in Christ isn't one that must be done over and over each year like the priests at the temple. His was a once-for-all sacrifice (Hebrews 9:25–28). This is the "eternal purpose" God accomplished in Christ (3:11). All of us can approach God's throne, not by our works but only by His grace. There are not some who are holier and can be closer to Him. All of us are atoned for and made righteous in Christ.

This is the "manifold wisdom of God" that will be made known through the Church (3:10). In context, Paul is pointing especially to something he has emphasized throughout this section: God has taken believing Jews and Gentiles, once separated from one another, and made them one body in Christ (2:11–22; 3:6). Through the very existence of this united Church, God displays His wisdom to "the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places." The emphasis is not that Christians are intentionally preaching messages to spiritual beings; rather, God Himself is displaying His wisdom to them through the Church.⁴

That gives incredible significance to the way we live together as the Church. Our lives should bear witness to the Gospel of grace, both individually and as a body. When people who would otherwise be divided love one another, extend grace to one another, and live together as one body in Christ, our life together reflects the reconciling work of Christ.

"Manifold" describes God's wisdom as richly varied or multifaceted. It is one example of Paul's vivid, expansive language. Another feature of his writing, especially in Ephesians, is his frequent use of words built with the prefix *hyper*, which carries the idea of

“above” or “beyond” and is related to our English prefix “hyper.” Paul reaches for language that goes beyond the ordinary to describe the extraordinary greatness of God. Here are just a few examples we can’t see in English. Imagine “hyper” in front of all of these:

- The “immeasurable greatness” of God’s power (Ephesians 1:19)
- God raised Christ “far above” all rule and authority (Ephesians 1:21)
- The “immeasurable” riches of His grace (Ephesians 2:7)
- His love that “surpasses” knowledge (Ephesians 3:19)
- God is able to do “far more abundantly” than we can ask or imagine (Ephesians 3:20)
- He ascended “far above” all the heavens (Ephesians 4:10)

Over and over, Paul reaches for extraordinary language to try to describe the indescribable – God’s power, His love, His grace, His authority and here, His wisdom. What no human being could have devised, God accomplished in Christ: sinners are reconciled to God, Jews and Gentiles are reconciled to one another in one body, and together they have access to the Father through Christ. The Church itself stands as a living display of the manifold wisdom of God.

Q: What does it say about God that He has given so much for us to be in His presence?

Q: What difference could it make in our lives if we thought and spoke about God in these “hyper” terms? How might it impact the world around us?

Q: What are examples in your life where God has moved in "hyper" and abundant ways in your life?"

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Took

Main Point: In Christ, Jew and Gentile are equally righteous and heirs to the kingdom.

One great evangelism movement in the Southern Baptist Convention over the past several years has been *Who's Your One?* The idea is simple but powerful: Every believer can intentionally pray for and share the Gospel with one person God has placed in his or her life.

Ephesians 3 reminds us that we should never consider anyone beyond the reach of God's grace. Paul himself had persecuted the Church, yet Christ saved him and sent him to preach to the Gentiles. The Gentiles had once been separated from God's covenant people, but through Christ they became fellow heirs, members of the same body and partakers of the same promise.

Teacher, share briefly about *your one*—someone God has placed on your heart who needs Jesus. Explain why you are praying for that person and any opportunities God has given you to demonstrate Christ's love or share the Gospel.

Q: Who's your one? Whom has God placed in your life who needs to know Christ? Is there anyone you may have quietly considered too resistant, too sinful or too far from God to be saved? Write down that person's name or save it in your phone as a reminder to pray.

Spend the next few minutes praying specifically for *your one*. Teacher, encourage class members to pray silently or in small groups using these prompts:

- Pray that the Holy Spirit would soften his or her heart and draw that person to Christ.
- Pray that God would remove obstacles, misconceptions or fears that are keeping that person from believing.
- Pray that God would give you wisdom, courage and an opportunity to explain the Gospel clearly.
- Pray that God would be glorified by saving people from every background and bringing them together as one body in Christ.

Close by challenging the class to pray for *their one* every day this week and to look for an opportunity to share the Gospel, trusting God to open hearts to receive the truth He has revealed.

CHALLENGES

THINK: Reflect on what it really means to be saved by grace alone, not through anything you have done. What does this tell us about God? What does it tell us about ourselves? What does it tell us about other people? How might really appreciating God's grace change the way we live? The way we relate to others? The way we witness? In what ways can the Church reflect the hyper-amazingness of God's grace? What difference might it make if we showed an overabundance of grace to the world? To one another in our families and our churches?

PRAY: Thank God for the gift of His amazing grace. Thank Him for revealing the mystery of the Gospel. Pray for those who do not yet know Jesus, for the Spirit to open their hearts to understand and believe the truth He has revealed in His Word. Pray for our church to be a place that shows the amazing grace and love of Jesus to people.

ACT: Pray for the lost. Pray specifically for individuals you know who need to hear the Gospel. Pray for the Lord to move and work in their lives. Ask Him to open their hearts to His truth and draw them to Himself, and to give you an opportunity to share the hope you have found in Christ.

¹ Harold W. Hoehner, "Ephesians," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 628.

² Ibid., 629–30.

³ Ibid., 630.

⁴ Tony Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Ephesians* (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2014), 77–79.