

The following is a rough transcript, not in its final form and may be updated.

A Mystery Revealed

Ephesians 3:1-6

Intro: Paul has just spent the entire 2nd chapter presenting the glory of God's plan of salvation from the believer's perspective. He explains how we have been brought from a position of spiritual death to spiritual life and all the blessings that flow from that truth. But, while all of this is a wonderful gift to any who accept Jesus Christ as their Savior, Paul makes the particular point of what Jesus has done to benefit the Gentiles. Those people who had none of the spiritual advantages of the nation of Israel have been brought near into a close relationship with Israel's God through the work of Jesus Christ. Gentiles Christians were now equal citizens with believing Jews in God's kingdom, they were equal members of God's family and equal parts in God's dwelling place, the ever-growing temple which is the church.

Now, you would think that Paul has thoroughly exhausted all there is to say about Jewish and Gentile unity in the Body of Christ. Some 2000 years later, this unity all seems so logical and even common place to us in our modern area of diversity and inclusion; which, mind you, only began within the Christian church. It even appears, as we jump into the first verse of **ch3**; that Paul is actually trying to move on to another point. But it seems that even as he makes his initial remarks, he is drawn back into this discussion of Gentile and Jewish unity in the church. It's clearly obvious that this topic is extremely important to Paul and he believed it was extremely important for the Ephesian believers to understand it completely. It may seem like old hat to us but there are important truths here to be learned and applied.

1 – So, reading this, it sounds like Paul is about to launch into another topic. If we pop on down to **v14** we'll see that it looks like Paul was about to pray for these Ephesian Christians but he gets sidetracked – for 12 more verses! Most scholars recognize **v2-13** as a parenthetical statement that Paul deals with before he offers up his prayer. But even in his initial statement of **v1**, before he is distracted, there are some things that we should deal with.

The first thing we should notice is how Paul identifies himself to the Ephesian Christians here. He calls himself a prisoner of Jesus Christ. This may seem like an odd title because the last time I checked, Paul was

arrested by the Romans in Jerusalem, not by Jesus. His reference to being a prisoner was literal as this letter was written from prison, most likely in Rome where he was under arrest for 2 years. During this Roman imprisonment, Paul was basically under house arrest. In the day he was free to move about the house under the supervision of soldiers but at night, he would be chained to a soldier to prevent him from escaping ahead of his trial before Caesar. So it is true that Paul was a prisoner but why does he call himself a prisoner of Jesus Christ?

To help us understand his point of view, we must go back to the first word Paul used to identify himself at the very beginning of the letter. In **1:1** Paul calls himself an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God. This title was a technical term used particularly of the 12 and of Paul. These apostles were specifically chosen and personally commissioned by Jesus and they occupied a unique position as founders of the church (Paul got his on the road to Damascus). In **1:1**, Paul specifies that he is an apostle of Jesus Christ, a designation that shows that Paul is one who belongs to and serves Jesus Christ. As such, he is fully authorized as Christ's messenger to proclaim the good news of the One who sent him. Also, his apostleship is by the will of God meaning God is the One who chose and commissioned Paul to serve as an apostle and help build the church.

This brings us back to his imprisonment by Jesus. Paul called himself an apostle, not because he gave himself that title but because Jesus gave him both the title and the responsibility. By the same token, although he had been arrested and imprisoned by the Romans, he still saw himself as a prisoner of Jesus Christ. Paul knew that Jesus was the Lord of his life, not the Roman Government, so if he was a prisoner, he was a Jesus' prisoner. So fully and completely did Paul accept and trust in the sovereignty of his Lord that he was willing to accept anything that came his way as the working of God in his life. Even at the end of this letter (6:19), when Paul asks the Ephesians to pray for him, he never asks that they pray for his release or acquittal but just that he would continue to boldly speak the gospel he was commissioned to share. Here's a man who rests comfortably in the sovereignty of God.

How many of us would be beside ourselves with grief, worry and not a little accusation against everyone, including God, if we found ourselves in a similar predicament? We would certainly feel justified in our complaining,

especially if we were innocent! It's a good thing that Paul had learned to rely on God's sovereignty because in all actuality, he was completely innocent! In fact, Paul goes on to say that not only is he a prisoner of Christ Jesus but he is one for you Gentiles! The entire reason Paul was under arrest and awaiting trial in the first place was because of his missionary efforts on behalf of the Gentiles. His imprisonment was not punishment for any personal crime or sin but entirely due to his faithfulness in fulfilling his apostolic role of taking the gospel to the Gentiles.

To be more specific, Paul was a prisoner because he believed so strongly in God's new program of uniting believing Jews and Gentiles into one body, the church. In fact, it was fanatical Jewish opposition to his ministry and missionary efforts to the Gentiles that got him arrested in the first place. Paul had gone to Jerusalem to deliver a love offering from the Gentiles churches to the suffering and impoverished believers there in the church. He wanted to provide tangible evidence of this unity that not even the Jewish believers in Jerusalem were 100% willing to accept. Paul went to the temple to show that he was still a Jew and was willing to help others with their ceremonial purification. It was while he was in the temple that some Jews from Asia (maybe even Ephesus) saw him and stirred up the crowd to seize him ([Acts 21:28](#)).

Their accusation was only half true. They had seen Trophimus of Ephesus in the city with Paul, and they assumed (wrongly) that Paul had brought him into the temple. But although this part of the accusation was untrue, the first part had merit. Paul had been teaching that God had broken down the wall of Jewish tradition and was now making one new people through faith in Jesus Christ. Paul was finally able to address the mob that wanted him dead. He spoke in Aramaic, their common tongue, which quieted them down, and they listened while he gave an account of his life and of God's dealings with him. He told how he'd been born in Tarsus but was raised in Jerusalem, how he'd studied under Gamaliel and how he'd persecuted Christians, chasing them even to Damascus to arrest them and bring them back to Jerusalem for punishment. He spoke of Christ appearing to him on the road to Damascus, how he'd been blinded by the vision but was sent into the city where Ananias came to him and was used by God to restore his sight. He told of his early preaching to the Jews of Jerusalem, of their rejection and finally of the Lord's sending him away.

The crowd listened to every word of this quietly. But when Paul got to the final point and quoted the Lord as saying, “Depart; for I will send you far from here to the Gentiles” ([Acts 22:21](#)), all at once the whole mob broke into a frenzy, shouting, “Away with such a fellow from the earth for he is not fit to live!” ([22](#)). Paul’s reference to the Gentiles infuriated them. What led to his arrest was his faithful espousal of the gentile cause. In other words, he was accused and arrested for teaching precisely the topic we discussed in [ch2](#).

Paul suffered beatings, imprisonment and countless hardships for the very truths he was explaining to the Ephesians. Clearly, none of this caused Paul to back down one bit. It seems he appreciated the opportunity to put all this doctrine down in writing and have it delivered to the churches. Paul wasn’t sitting around feeling sorry for himself and the last thing he wanted was for others to feel sorry for him because he was imprisoned. He wanted his readers to realize that it was a benefit for them that he was a prisoner.

How this should speak to us today. In an age when believer’s “feelings” are so fragile; when they are so easily hurt, discouraged or “turned off” because of some imagined slight or assumed offence. Paul was imprisoned for doing exactly what God had asked him to do! If anyone had a legitimate gripe or accusation to level against God, it would be Paul. And yet, we see the flexibility of the Apostle, who is willing to serve and endure and just keep right on going in his faith and faithfulness no matter what the circumstance or situation he may find himself. I think Paul’s stability in the faith was directly a result of his faithful obedience. “I’ve done what God’s called me to do with the best of my abilities and this is where it’s brought me? Well, then there must be more to do here!”

Do we have the same trust in God’s control over our own life and affairs? I pray that we’ll learn to before we need it!

2-3 – Paul was about to offer up a prayer for the Ephesian believers but in mentioning his ministry to the Gentiles, he finds it necessary to revisit the subject of Gentiles in general and their unified standing in the church in particular. Paul’s statement of if indeed you have heard... suggests that he knew his particular calling to the Gentiles world was well known among Gentiles Christians, especially those in Ephesus as he had spent so much time there. The dispensation Paul speaks of is the implemented strategy of God’s plan in the church, of which the Gentiles believers were very much a

part. God had granted Paul the knowledge of His gracious and divine plan which He has implemented for the salvation of the Gentiles.

Paul is also quick to add that this knowledge came by revelation, meaning he wasn't making this up on his own. This wasn't his idea or his invention. God had revealed this plan to Paul and he was merely God's messenger of this truth. It cost Paul quite a lot to hold on to and help implement this plan so it wouldn't have been something he made up himself. And yet, notice how God works: He takes the most unlikely character in Israel, a Hebrew of the Hebrews, a Pharisee and a fanatical persecutor of the church to become the primary ambassador of God's plan to bring Jews and Gentiles together into one new body. We would have never picked Paul to play this part but God did just that!

4-5 – Paul introduced the idea of a mystery in **v3** and continues it here. This is 1 of the great terms in his vocabulary but it is often misunderstood. What is a mystery? In contemporary English it's something unknown. But this isn't the meaning the word had in Paul's day. In Greek the word *mysterion* refers to something *known only to the initiated*. It's not that the thing itself is unknown. It *is* known—but only to those to whom it is revealed. The word is used in this way of ancient mystery religions—the mysteries of Mithra, Isis and Osiris and Dionysius. People in general didn't know what went on in these religious cults, but the mysteries were revealed to the initiates. Paul uses the word with similar meaning. He's describing something that was unknown before the coming of Christ but is now revealed fully.

Of course, as a mystery, it would never be known if God did not make it known. That's why Paul is quick to say in **v3** that it was made known to him by revelation. But, while his statement is 100% accurate, we should also understand that it was not given only to him by revelation. This truth was also given specifically to Peter by revelation in **Acts 11:1-18**; it is consistent with OT prophecy (**Isa 49:6**) and the words of Jesus in His Great Commission to the Apostles and disciples in **Acts 1:8**. However, it seems that God used Paul to declare specifically how Jews and Gentiles would be joined together in one Body of Christ. This was something hinted at through others but only specifically detailed through Paul's revelation. Paul trusted that his readers would understand what God had revealed to him.

Paul recognizes that this revelation was given to only him and says as much

in v5. What was it that was **not made** known to the sons of men? It was nothing less than the particular aspect of the union of Jews and Gentiles into this new body. In the OT, the salvation of the Gentiles in the Messiah is prophesied in many different places but the coming together of Jews and Gentiles in the church is never spoken of. God had announced His intention of saving Gentiles as well as Jews from the beginning. But before the coming of Christ it was understood that this was to happen only as the Gentiles became Jews. A Gentile could approach the God of Israel, but only as an Israelite. The new thing revealed to Paul is that this is no longer necessary. Christ has broken down that wall, making one new people out of two previously divided people. Now both Jew and Gentile can approach God equally on that new basis.

6 – So, what's the mystery? The main thing Paul wants to say about the mystery of God's creating one new people in Christ is that Jew and Gentile, as well as all other types and conditions of individuals, hold their salvation blessings jointly in Christ's Body. This is more striking in Greek than in most English versions, because to make his point, Paul assembles (or invents) 3 parallel, compound words. In Greek these words each begin with the prefix *syn*, which means together with. It's added to the words for heirs; body; and partner, companion or one who shares in.

There's no way to capture the precise force of this in English. The KJV doesn't catch it, although it gives an accurate translation: "fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise." Other versions also translate accurately but obscure the flow. Phillips does better with, equal heirs with His chosen people, equal members and equal partners in God's promise, using the word equal as an equivalent for *syn*. The NIV may be closest because it uses together. It says heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus. These phrases are worth looking at in detail.

1. "Heirs together with Israel." Heirs were an important word for Paul and he uses it in a number of key passages. In **Rom 4** he uses it of Abraham, referring to God's promise that he should be heir of the world through Christ's righteousness (**v13**). In Galatians he extends it to all believers, saying, if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise (**Gal 3:29**). **Titus 3:7** speaks of a future inheritance: having been justified by His grace, we should become heirs according to the

hope of eternal life.

These uses of heirs (and others) embrace all that a person receives or will receive in salvation. It's the whole of God's blessing, possessed jointly by all believers in and with Christ. So there's no inner circle or outer circle of the saved. The Jews are not first-rate Christians and the Gentiles second, or vice versa. All who are in Christ inherit all God's blessing. And they inherit jointly! They hold it together in the one body of Jesus Christ.

2. "Members together of one body." At the end of ch2, Paul compared the church to a kingdom, a family, and a temple. But here he picks up on a theme introduced at the end of **ch1: (22-23)**. Paul comes back to this theme again in **ch4**. He mentions that there is one body (**4**), and then he goes on to describe how God has built us all into a single body (**11-16**). This image speaks of a mystical union possessed by God's people in the church. But it also suggests that this is something into which the people of God must grow and toward which they must strive. That is, the unity between Jew and Gentile, bond and free, male and female (and all other human groupings) must be increasingly worked for in order to be realized in this life.

How does this happen? It happens only as we grow in the love and knowledge of the One who has brought us together. As D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones says in his discussion of **Eph 2**, "We are all equally sinners. . . . We are all equally helpless. . . . We have all come to one and the same Savior. . . . We have the same salvation. . . . We have the same Holy Spirit. . . . We have the same Father. . . . We even have the same trials. . . . And finally, we are all marching and going together to the same eternal home." It is both the knowledge and the appreciation of these things that will draw us together.

3. "Sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus." The Bible has many promises for those who trust God and come to Him through faith in the work of Christ. But the word in this phrase is singular, "promise," and for that reason it must refer to "the promise of redemption, made to our first parents, repeated to Abraham, and which forms the burden of all the OT predictions (**Gal 3:14,19,22,29**)." To have that, as Paul says the people of God do, is to have a share in the greatest of all possible human blessings. To share it with others from a great variety of races, peoples, and cultures is to participate in the mystery which was revealed to Paul and declared by him.

A person might ask, “How is this new?” That’s because we don’t really understand that barriers people faced were absolute in the pre-Christian world. Though the prejudice was not all on the Jewish side. It was particularly intense among the Jews, because for them it was a religious issue and no fanaticism is greater than religious fanaticism. Jews despised Gentiles. Yet, Gentiles also despised Jews and others. The Greek thought that all but Greeks were barbarians. The Romans, who conquered the Greeks, looked on them and everyone else they conquered largely as slaves. Ethnic, national, religious, social barriers were absolute; no one questioned them, fought them or tried to change them. They were simply accepted as the norm, the status quo. So this new unity really was a great mystery. In the immortal words of Pvt. Gomer Pyle; “Surprise, surprise, surprise!”

But, as wonderful as this mystery may be, it’s still not the so-called universal brotherhood of man and universal fatherhood of God, as liberals of an earlier generation like to call it. This mystery is in Christ Jesus and is made known through the gospel. It’s Jesus who’s broken down the dividing wall of hostility. It’s His messengers who are sent to draw people together—by calling them to Christ.

Paul never got over the wonder of the great doctrine of the church, nor that he had been commissioned to make it known to the world. We are not apostles, as Paul was. We have not received fresh revelation. But the revelation is ours no less than it was his, and our responsibility to proclaim it is the same as Paul’s. 😊