Revealed

God invites believers to proclaim the revealed mystery of the church.

EPHESIANS 3:1-13

MEMORY VERSE: EPHESIANS 3:6

READ Ephesians 3:1-13, First Thoughts (p. 54), and Understand the Context (pp. 54–55). As you read, highlight the various times Paul used the word “mystery.” Go back and reread Ephesians 1:9 for Paul’s first use of the term “mystery,” which he referenced in Ephesians 3:3-4.

STUDY Ephesians 3:1-13, using Explore the Text on pages 55–59. Consider the impact of being named a coheir. For more study helps, consult the Explore the Bible Commentary, found in both print and digital format at LifeWay.com.

PLAN group time using ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 60–61), More Ideas (p. 62), and Weekly Adult Extras under the Resources tab at Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible. Add variety to your plans for your group in this session by using at least one idea from More Ideas. Consider how to implement the Suggested Music Idea (p. 62).

GAIN insights from the weekly podcast on Ministry Grid (MinistryGrid.com/ExploreTheBible).

GATHER the following items: □ Personal Study Guides; □ Volunteers to share about evangelism or missions experiences they’ve had; and for More Ideas (p. 62): □ A volunteer to research preaching and proclamation in a Bible dictionary. Prepare to display the following Pack Items: □ PACK ITEM 2 (Outline of Ephesians); and □ PACK ITEM 4 (Poster: Ephesians 2: Old and New). Make copies of: □ PACK ITEM 8 (Handout: Memory Verses Bookmark); and □ PACK ITEM 9 (Handout: Mystery in the New Testament).
FIRST THOUGHTS

Many of us love a good mystery. Some stories touted as a mystery are not really mysteries but rather entertaining stories with hints along the way. The story is interesting, but the mystery was never shrouded in doubt. Yet other stories designated as mysteries take us on twists and turns that we are unable to solve until it is revealed in the end. What keeps us engaged is the lack of any hints. In Ephesians 3, Paul revealed a mystery hidden but made known.

(In PSG, p. 46) What are some of your favorite mystery stories or shows? What makes that story or show interesting to you?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

EPHESIANS 3:1-13

Paul knew how to connect with his audience. Rather than avoiding the culture in which he lived, he used it to explain the gospel without compromising the message. With that in mind, it is not surprising that Paul used the word mystery to describe the content of the gospel.

The term mystery was used to describe religions prevalent among the Gentiles in Paul’s day. These mystery religions conducted secret ceremonies of initiation that incorporated worshipers into their sect. Even the cult of the Ephesian god Artemis (Diana) that flourished in Ephesus included these rituals of initiation. Those in the mystery religion would hide their rituals from those outside of the religion. As a person pledged to join, he would participate in secret rituals revealed to the initiate. Many of the Gentiles longed to join the Ephesian sect of Artemis because of its popularity in the region, so using language they would understand, Paul explained that the great mystery has already been revealed by God.

Those who gave their allegiance to Artemis and learned the mysteries that she held believed they would become beneficiaries of her benevolence. She was the daughter of Zeus and as a fertility goddess was thought to hold power over nature. Her worshipers called her queen of heaven, lord, and savior. As the daughter of Zeus, she had authority over heaven, earth, and the underworld. This gave her power over the spirits that many Gentiles feared. If people knew the mysteries, then they believed they could break the chains of fate and defeat. They would have victory over all kinds of spirits attempting to bring injury, sickness, and plague.

In this week’s Scripture passage, Paul declared that he had not received the mystery by joining the cult of Artemis but by revelation from God. He further stated that this mystery had been known all along but was kept...
until the appropriate time to reveal that the Gentiles could be joint heirs with the Jews. This all occurred not because Paul was some important person but because God was a God of grace. Apparently, many of the Gentiles listened to Paul’s teaching because many of them came to faith in Christ through his preaching ministry in Ephesus.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

THE MYSTERY (EPH. 3:1-6)

VERSES 1-2
In verse 1 Paul began a prayer that he did not return to finish until Ephesians 3:14-21. The occasion of that prayer was what had preceded this verse in Ephesians 2:11-22. For this reason would have included his thoughts that Jews and Gentiles had been brought near through the blood of Jesus Christ. God had abolished the dividing wall between them, and they both had access to God. This resulted in a prayerful spirit in the apostle. But before he returned to the prayer, he remembered his condition. He was a prisoner of Christ Jesus. Paul wrote Ephesians from confinement in prison, and he was there on behalf of you Gentiles. His preaching to the Gentiles had landed him in prison. In spite of his circumstance, he thanked God for using him to reach the Gentiles. He did not see himself as the prisoner of Rome but the prisoner of Christ.

Paul mentioned his mission to the Gentiles in verse 1 then reminded his readers of his calling in the verses that follow. He asked them if they had heard of the administration of God’s grace. The word for administration is equivalent to a stewardship entrusted or a task assigned to someone. In this case it included both for Paul. God had given him the responsibility to take the gospel to the Gentiles, and fulfilling that responsibility was the reason he was in prison. Paul believed God gave this task to him for the Gentiles’ good. He was called by grace to share the message of grace. He did not travel to Ephesus of his own decision or his own desire but for the will of God to take the gospel to the Gentiles there.

VERSES 3-6
Paul used the word •mystery to describe the message of the gospel. Many in Ephesus longed to know the mysteries of Artemis which they thought would provide significant benefits to their lives. Paul used their own terminology to let them know that the true mystery of God was made known to him by revelation. Previously, Paul had been a Pharisee who held to the strictest of Jewish separation from the world. When he met Jesus on the Damascus road everything changed. God changed this separatist to a preacher who invited the Gentiles to come to Christ by faith. Paul had briefly written about the mystery (Eph. 1:9; 2:11-22), but before he returned to his prayer in verse 14 he would expound upon it once again in the verses that follow.
Paul believed **by reading this** the Ephesians would understand his **insight into the mystery of Christ**. This expression was not a declaration that Christ was some mysterious figure who held the secrets of the mystery. Christ Himself was the mystery. Jesus alone could save the Jews and the Gentiles and bring them together into one new humanity (Eph. 2:11-22). As the Ephesians read the earlier portions of Paul’s letter, he knew they would gain insight into the fact that Christ brought the two groups together.

Previous **generations** did not know the mystery of Christ’s inclusion of the Gentiles into the people of God. That is not to say the Old Testament was calloused toward the Gentiles. In Genesis 12:3, God had promised to bless all the nations through Abram’s descendants. In Isaiah 49:6, God promised to make the Jews a “light for the nations.” God’s plan never excluded the Gentiles; He revealed to Paul how He would make the Jews a light to bless other nations. Through the Jews God sent His Son to bring both Jews and Gentiles together in one new humanity. Through the blood of Christ, God would offer forgiveness and hope to all who called upon Jesus. This revelation was made known to the present generation through the **holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit**. They were **holy** because they were set apart for this proclamation. Paul had referenced these two groups earlier (Eph. 2:20) as those at work announcing the message of Christ.

Paul described the Gentile Christians in three ways. First, they were **coheirs**. The Jews and Gentiles are both coheirs. One group does not have privilege over the other in the inheritance given to them by God. Second, Paul stated that the Jews and Gentiles were **members of the same body**. God took two groups who often opposed one another and brought them together into the church, a new body made up of Jews and Gentiles. Finally, Paul referred to the Gentiles as **partners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel**. What promise did Paul have in mind? Earlier he had spoken of the Holy Spirit of promise (1:13). Certainly it was amazing that both Jews and Gentiles shared in the gift of the Holy Spirit as equals. This had amazed Peter when Cornelius and other Gentiles received the Holy Spirit the same way the apostles had (Acts 10:47-48). Through the preaching of the gospel, this great mystery was now revealed.

**THE PROCLAMATION (EPH. 3:7-9)**

**VERSE 7**

7 I was made a servant of this gospel by the gift of God’s grace that was given to me by the working of his power.
Paul described the grace of God in his life as the working of his power. The Greek word for working is where we get our English word energy. It refers to the release of power. The second word, power, is where we get our English word dynamite. It emphasizes strength and power. Therefore, Paul saw his calling before God as the release of divine power that changed the direction of his life. He went from persecuting the church to building it through the preaching of the gospel. This was not by his choosing but by God’s.

VERSE 8
The grace that Paul spoke of in the previous verse was given to him for a reason—to proclaim to the Gentiles. He described the content of his proclamation as the incalculable riches of Christ. The word incalculable was used in Job to describe the works of God that were unexplainable (Job 5:9; 9:10). Just as Job failed to find words to describe God’s ways, neither could Paul find the words to describe the riches he had in Christ.

What amazed Paul was that he saw himself as the least of all the saints. This could be a play on his name, which meant “little.” However, more than likely it was a reference to his testimony. Who was he to deserve this salvation, much less the calling to spread the message of salvation? Paul had persecuted Christians and tried to remove them from society, but Christ intervened. Paul would never forget who he was when Christ saved him. Because of that he saw himself as less deserving than others. Thankfully grace is not about what one deserves!

VERSE 9
By proclaiming the message of grace to the Gentiles, Paul intended to shed light on the mystery of God’s grace offered to the Gentiles. The Greek word translated shed light usually means to bring light to something that is dark; here it is used in a spiritual sense. As Paul proclaimed the riches of Christ, a light came on in the darkened mind of the Gentiles. They understood that God loved them and could save them from their sin. Paul wanted to shed light for all. He wasn’t preaching exclusively to the Gentiles but to all who would listen. It just happened that the Gentiles were usually more receptive to his message.

As stewards of the mystery of grace, Christians can wrongly hold on to the message or rightly invest it by sharing it with others.

The subject that needed enlightenment was the administration of the mystery. The use of administration again (see v. 2) reminded the Ephesians that the gospel was a stewardship. The mystery of how Jews and Gentiles are both gathered into one new body is a message of which all Christians are stewards. As stewards of money, people can hold on to that money or invest it in the lives of others. As stewards of the mystery of grace, Christians can wrongly hold on to the message or rightly invest it by sharing it with others.
This mystery was not something new. It was hidden for ages in God who created all things. The Creator God never intended to provide salvation for the Jews to the exclusion of everyone else. His intention was to build for Himself one new body made up of Jews and Gentiles who would worship the One who created them. Paul lamented to the Romans about those who refused to look at creation and worship the Creator. Instead they chose to worship idols made by their own hands (Rom. 1:18-23). The mystery of God’s love for His creation was hidden for a time, but it was manifested when Christ came to bring that message to light.

(PSG, p. 51) Is sharing the gospel more of a responsibility or a privilege? What is the difference?

---

**VERSE 10**

This is so that God’s multi-faceted wisdom may now be made known through the church to the rulers and authorities in the heavens.

**VERSE 11**

This is according to his eternal purpose accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.

---

**THE PURPOSE** (EPH. 3:10-13)

**VERSE 10**

God called Paul to preach the great gospel of God’s mercy to the Gentiles so that His multi-faceted wisdom may now be made known. The word for multi-faceted was used of multi-colored flowers and cloth that was rich in colors. This is the compound form of the word used of Joseph’s multicolored coat in Genesis 37:3. Thus, Paul used a word that would describe the incredible riches and complexity of God’s wisdom. Where did He make that wisdom known? He made it known through the church. The church, comprised of both Jews and Gentiles who have believed in Jesus, revealed the great, multi-faceted wisdom of God.

To whom was this great wisdom revealed? Paul said the church displayed God’s great wisdom to the rulers and authorities in the heavens. Peter, when speaking of God’s great salvation, said “angels long to catch a glimpse of these things” (1 Pet. 1:12). Paul also described wisdom as being withheld from demonic forces for a time leading to the crucifixion of Jesus (1 Cor. 2:6-8). Certainly, if demons understood the power that the resurrection would have to defeat them, they would have not crucified the Lord of glory.

Those who speak about the church’s demise and downfall do not comprehend fully the purpose of God.

**VERSE 11**

The subject of this in verse 11 is not merely the display of God’s glory to the authorities in heaven but the greater topic of making His wisdom known through the church. God’s choosing to make a church out of Jew and Gentile was his eternal purpose. The church is central to the plan
of God throughout history, and it will be that way until the ages. Those who speak about the church’s demise and downfall do not comprehend fully the purpose of God. Jesus had said that He would build His church (Matt. 16:18). He said that the gates of Hades would not prevail against it.

How can we have such confidence in the church? God accomplished His purposes through the church in Christ Jesus our Lord. Ultimately, our confidence is not in church leaders or its members. Our confidence is in the One who built the church through His own sacrificial death on the cross. The church may face trying times and at times it may look like it will fail, but the truth is that it is part of God’s divine will and His church will endure.

VERSES 12-13
Returning to the subject of access (Eph. 2:18), Paul reminded his readers that they had boldness and confident access to God. They did not have that based on who they were but through faith in Jesus Christ. The word boldness implies freedom of speech before God. As Paul was preparing to return to the prayer he had started in Ephesians 3:1, he reminded the Ephesians that through Jesus the church could come confidently to God in prayer. Christians can pray anytime and anywhere. Faith in Christ makes it possible for people to approach their Father with great confidence.

What are some things that inspire confidence in your prayer life?

God’s purposes in building His church were administered in many ways. One of those ways was through the afflictions that Paul endured. Indeed, the apostle was writing to the Ephesians from prison. He endured much hardship for the gospel, and he was doing this on their behalf. Therefore, he encouraged the Ephesians not to be discouraged over his afflictions. Certainly Paul’s trials were great, but he recognized that God was working through him even in the trials. He wanted the Ephesians to embrace this mentality. The more Paul suffered, the more glory came to the Ephesians. God’s purposes could not be thwarted no matter how much it cost Paul. The Ephesians were led to know Christ more intimately and experience salvation more fully as God used Paul in his chains.
LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

INTRODUCE: As the group arrives, instruct them to add a name to the board to create a list of famous detectives, real or fictional (examples: Sherlock Holmes, Nancy Drew, Allan Pinkerton, the Scooby Doo gang). Review the list once most have arrived. Ask: What appeals to you (or doesn’t) about mystery stories?

EXPLAIN: Point to Pack Item 2 (Outline of Ephesians) to highlight that today's study is on Ephesians 3:1-13 “Mystery Revealed.” Say: However, Paul didn’t use the word in the same way we think of the word “mystery” today—as a problem or puzzle to be solved. Let’s focus on God’s Word and see what Paul meant by “the mystery of Christ.”

EXPLORE THE TEXT

READ: While a volunteer reads aloud Ephesians 3:1-6, direct the group to listen for what Paul wrote about the Gentiles.

ASK: How did Paul seem to feel about the Gentiles? What was his obligation to them? What words did he use to describe them?

HIGHLIGHT: Distribute copies of Pack Item 8 (Handout: Memory Verses Bookmark) to anyone who does not yet have one, and point out that verse 6 is this session’s memory verse. Read the verse aloud in unison.

ASK: Why do we have to be reminded so often that people who are not like us can still be part of our Christian family? From the PSG (p. 50): How does the gospel demonstrate that all people can find a place in Christ’s church?

GUIDE: Based on verse 6, what is the mystery? Direct attention to Pack Item 9 (Handout: Mystery in the New Testament). Direct a volunteer to read aloud the handout to further explain the meaning of “the mystery of Christ” (v. 4). Call for responses to what was read.

TRANSITION: When we figure out a mystery, we can’t wait to share the answer with other people. If someone hasn’t seen a movie or finished a book that we have, it’s a real temptation to give away the ending. Think about that excitement as we read the next section of Scripture.

READ: Invite a volunteer to read aloud Ephesians 3:7-9. Direct the group to listen for what, specifically, Paul was proclaiming to the Gentiles.

ASK: How did Paul see his role in the gospel? Do you think he was reluctant or unwilling to take that role? Why or why not? Call for group members to share their first responses to the question in the PSG on page 51: Is sharing the gospel more of a responsibility or a privilege?

MINI-LECTURE: It may be startling to read Paul’s description of himself in verse 8. Many consider Paul as the most important figure in the New Testament other than Jesus. But this wasn’t false modesty on Paul’s part. It wasn’t simply because of his past as a persecutor of the church (Acts 8:1-3), but also because of his perspective on the greatness of knowing Christ (Phil. 3:7-9). Paul saw himself as “not worthy to be called an apostle” (1 Cor. 15:9) and “the worst” of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15). He understood that everything he was happened by God’s grace (1 Cor. 15:10).
**HIGHLIGHT:** Point to Pack Item 4 (Poster: Ephesians 2: Old and New) displayed in the room. Stress that like Paul, every person who comes to faith in Christ is transformed to a new person.

**CLARIFY:** Use the information under Verses 7-9 in the PSG (p. 50) to clarify the difference between preaching and proclamation. Emphasize that God doesn't call everyone to be a preacher, but He does call everyone to be a witness.

**DISCUSS:** What’s the difference between proclaiming the gospel and shedding light on the gospel? Suggest that the first is a verbal witness, while the second is a living witness.

**SAY:** When we shed light on something, we’re revealing what’s already there. We do that with the gospel when we live with integrity and compassion. Sometimes this gives credibility to the message we’ve already proclaimed, and sometimes it opens the door for us to proclaim the message. Both are necessary.

**TRANSITION:** While the fact that we’re commanded to proclaim the gospel ought to be enough, it’s helpful that Paul clarified the purpose for the proclamation as well.

**READ:** Invite a volunteer to read aloud Ephesians 3:10-13, and instruct the group to listen for who receives the proclamation, the purpose of the proclamation, and the result of the proclamation. Lead the group to circle each of these in their Personal Study Guides.

**ASK:** Can you have boldness even when you don’t feel bold? Explain. Why do you think Paul reminded his readers about his afflictions at this point? Since God’s purposes include using believers to share the gospel with all people, what roadblocks get in the way of believers fulfilling that purpose? How does Paul’s words address any of those potential roadblocks? (PSG, p. 52)

**SHARE:** Emphasize the Key Doctrine for this study (Evangelism and Missions) (p. 53, PSG). Call for volunteers to share an experience with roadblocks to evangelism or about a time on mission when God worked miraculously.

**DISCUSS:** What is the relationship between circumstances and a willingness to share the gospel? How can difficulties open the door for sharing the gospel? (PSG, p. 53)

---

**SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE** (IN MY CONTEXT)

**DISCUSS:** Guide a discussion of the bulleted statements under In My Context (PSG, p. 54). Encourage the group to modify or add to the statements.

**CHALLENGE:** Call attention to the third question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 54): What natural gifts and abilities do you possess that God could use to share a gospel witness through you? How can you use these gifts or abilities to share Jesus with one person this week?

**PRAY:** Lead in prayer, asking God to help the group boldly proclaim the mystery of the gospel to people this week.
PRACTICE

• Immediately after the session, text or email the group, thanking them for their participation during the Bible study group time.

• Contact group members who weren’t present. Remind them they can keep up with the group by using their Personal Study Guides. Invite them to share prayer requests, asking for permission to share the requests with others in the group.

MORE IDEAS

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)
Prior to the group time, search the Internet for “mystery riddles.” To replace the Focus Attention activity, read a couple of mystery riddles for the group to solve. Continue with the discussion as written.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

• To supplement the discussion of Ephesians 3:1-6, summarize the information in Understand the Context (PSG, p. 47). Paul seemed like he was about to say something in verse 1, but then he interrupted himself and didn’t get back to the thought until verse 14. He ended chapter 2 with an analogy of the church as members of God’s household (2:19-21), and emphasized in 3:1-6 that Gentiles are part of that household as well. Help group members see the connection between the end of Ephesians 2 and the point of this section, especially verse 6.

• To enhance study of Ephesians 3:7-8, pre-enlist a volunteer to research preaching and proclamation in a Bible dictionary. Allow time for them to present their findings.

• To enhance your understanding of Ephesians 3:10, print a picture of a multi-faceted gemstone. Discuss how the facets help capture and focus the light. Compare the mystery that’s revealed in verse 9 to the gemstone.

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)
Discuss the statements under In My Context (PSG, p. 54) to present a summary of the study. Then lead the group through the first question: As a group, list potential events or activities your small group could host that might offer opportunities for gospel conversations with lost people. What steps does the group need to take to plan one such event or activity?

SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA
Before closing in prayer, play the song “We’ve a Story to Tell to the Nations,” by H. Ernest Nichol, or “The Perfect Wisdom of Our God,” by Keith and Kristyn Getty.