

## Ephesians 3B

- Last week we dissected Chapter 3 of Ephesians
  - We noted how the chapter was a prayer interrupted by a mystery
    - In the prayer, Paul asked the Lord to grant the church spiritual power
    - So they might comprehend the love of Christ
    - That they might be rooted and grounded in that love
    - So they may be content and filled with the fullness of God
  - But almost from the start, Paul suspended his prayer to explain an important mystery of the church
    - The mystery and the prayer were connected as we'll see today
    - Essentially, Paul was praying for unity in the body, a bond of love between Jew and Gentile
    - And the mystery he explained relates to that union
- Let's start back again at the beginning of the chapter in v.1

[Eph. 3:1](#) For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles –  
[Eph. 3:2](#) if indeed you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace which was given to me for you;

[Eph. 3:3](#) that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief.

[Eph. 3:4](#) By referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ,

[Eph. 3:5](#) which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit;

- As we did last week, we'll start with the "reason" Paul was speaking of in v.1
  - In Chapters 1 & 2 Paul carefully explained all the blessings that every believer possesses even now while we await the Kingdom
    - We possess them by faith in Jesus Christ
    - This was a plan before the foundations of the earth

- So even though we don't see all of them yet, they are no less ours and we will have them one day soon
- And therefore, Paul argued every believer should be living in light of that truth
  - We shouldn't complain about what we lack or waste time chasing after poor substitutes on earth
  - Neither should we perpetuate divisions that marked our unbelieving life
  - By faith we've been united in a new family with a new future, so let's live in light of that reality now
- This concept of unity is very important, and though the things that divide us may have changed since Paul's day, the need for unity hasn't
  - In Paul's day, the most common wedge between believers was Jew vs. Gentile
  - That division was the result of the Law of God which required Israel to stand apart from other nations
  - And the Law was so effective in that regard that even after the Law was fulfilled by Christ, that division persisted inside the church
- So Paul wanted to address the problem of division in the church, which he does in four parts
  - The first part we studied earlier in Chapter 2, while the second and third parts we're studying now are in Chapter 3, and the final part comes in Chapter 4
    - In Chapter 2, Paul acknowledged that the Gentiles were once far off
    - Yes, God did intend division between Jew and Gentile for a time
    - But that time has passed
    - Today in Christ God has brought the two together into one body, Paul explained
  - The second part is found here in Chapter 3, as Paul prayed for the church to comprehend the all-encompassing power of God's love

- In particular, the Jews in the church had to understand that God's love was capable of embracing the Gentiles...
- ...a group of people the Jews had written off as "unlovable"
- Similarly, the Gentiles who now enjoy the love of God couldn't turn their backs on disobedient Israel
- The Lord hadn't forsaken His people, so Gentiles must not become arrogant against the nation of Israel
- The fourth part of Paul's antidote to division is found in the next chapter
  - In Chapter 4 we'll study the life of a unified body
  - And so today, we're studying the third part of Paul's argument... explaining the mystery of a united church
- At the end of v.1 Paul says he was a prisoner of Christ for the sake of the Gentiles
  - And from that point, he takes his detour to explain why he was given responsibility to preach to Gentiles
    - And in typical form, Paul's detour is one long sentence running to v.13
    - And like Paul's earlier lengthy sentence from Chapter 1, we need to take this thought apart to follow it carefully
  - The detour begins in v.2 with Paul asking rhetorically if his audience had heard how Paul came to be a steward of God's plan of grace
    - Paul's referring back to his conversion account while on the road to Damascus to arrest Christians
    - Paul's story is told a total of three times in the book of Acts, including the first account in Acts 9

**Acts 9:3** As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him;

**Acts 9:4** and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"

**Acts 9:5** And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" And He said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting,

**Acts 9:6** but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do."

[Acts 9:7](#) The men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one.

[Acts 9:8](#) Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; and leading him by the hand, they brought him into Damascus.

[Acts 9:9](#) And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

[Acts 9:10](#) Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and the Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord."

[Acts 9:11](#) And the Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying,

[Acts 9:12](#) and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him, so that he might regain his sight."

[Acts 9:13](#) But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Your saints at Jerusalem;

[Acts 9:14](#) and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name."

[Acts 9:15](#) But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel;

[Acts 9:16](#) for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake."

- I know this account is familiar to most of us, but take note of the key details once again
  - Paul was an enemy of the church, but he didn't view himself at odds with God
    - On the contrary, Paul viewed himself to be aligned with God against a people intent on perverting Judaism
    - Paul saw himself doing the work of God by putting to death those who declared Jesus as the Messiah
    - A zealous, upright Jew like Saul couldn't imagine that the true Jewish Messiah could be killed by Gentile Romans
    - Therefore he persecuted the Christians in full conviction that he was on God's side
  - But when Jesus appeared to Saul, he came to understand that everything he thought he knew was wrong
    - Ironically, the Lord used blindness to grant Paul this new insight
    - And most shocking of all for Paul, the Lord assigned him the mission of reaching Gentiles as well as the sons of Israel

- It's this mission Paul is talking about when he says in v.2 he was given the stewardship of God's grace
  - The Greek word for stewardship means to manage on behalf of another
  - Paul was assigned responsibility to manage the delivery of God's grace to the Gentile people on Christ's behalf
  - What an awesome responsibility
- Paul says he received this mission because the Lord desired that Gentiles receive mercy too
  - And as reasonable and inevitable as this plan sounds to us today, it was not always seen in that way
  - In fact, I think it required that a prominent Jew reach out to Gentiles as Paul did before many in the early church could accept this possibility
  - It's probably why the story of Paul's conversion was repeated so often in scripture
  - It's God's way of demonstrating His determination to bring the Gospel to all people
- In v.3 Paul describes this reality as a mystery, one made known to him by revelation
  - Paul defines what a mystery is in v.5
    - It's a truth not made known to the sons of men
    - But it has now been revealed through the apostles and prophets
  - This is the definition of a Biblical mystery
    - God held back important information about His plans from mankind (sons of men)
    - He was waiting for His Son's appearing
    - After His Son was revealed, then the Father revealed hidden truths through the apostles
    - And they came to know these things only because the Spirit of God revealed it to them so they could share it

- There are 8 mysteries revealed in the New Testament writings of the apostles
  - Five of those mysteries related to the Church, of which Paul reveals four of them
    - Two of those Church mysteries are revealed in this letter
    - And the first of those mysteries is the one Paul is discussing here
    - Which is the mystery that God intended to unite Jew and Gentile in the church
  - It didn't have to be this way...God had other options
    - He could have chosen to make the Church only Jewish
    - He could have saved Gentiles in the New Testament days in the same way He did before Jesus came
    - He could have left Gentiles outside the assembly, watching the Jews enjoying the fellowship of the saints
    - Much like God-fearing Gentiles were kept outside the wall of the temple
  - Had God decided to operate this way, He would have been no less faithful to His promises
    - He would still have been blessing all nations through Abraham's Seed
    - After all, no one even knew that the possibility existed for God to do otherwise
    - But God preferred to bring Jew and Gentile together into one body in the Church, and so He did
    - Why? Paul is working toward that answer
- Knowing that God desired to unite these two groups was critical for building unity in the church
  - Both Jew and Gentile entered the church with prejudices concerning the other
    - Those prejudices were the result of sinful flesh reacting absent spiritual understanding

- If they didn't know God's heart and His purposes, they would operate in spiritual ignorance
- And spiritual ignorance gives opportunity for the flesh to take charge
- Notice Paul emphasizes that he had already explained this to them briefly earlier
  - Paul could be referring to his earlier comments in this letter about the mystery of the church
  - Though it's also possible Paul is referring to an earlier letter
- In either case, Paul says he only briefly mentioned the mystery in passing previously
  - Therefore, now he explains it in detail so they may understand this mystery of Christ
  - Obviously, it was important for the church to know and appreciate this truth
  - Because understanding this mystery and obeying it requires both groups change their thinking and behavior
  - Paul will explain this later in Chapter 4
- And now Paul begins his explanation of this mystery...

[Eph. 3:6](#) to be specific, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel,

[Eph. 3:7](#) of which I was made a minister, according to the gift of God's grace which was given to me according to the working of His power.

[Eph. 3:8](#) To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ,

[Eph. 3:9](#) and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things;

- Specifically, the Lord revealed to Paul that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body of God's people
  - Jews had long held this position of privilege and had been promised many good things by God
    - They had promise of a Deliverer to lead them out of sin and into everlasting righteousness

- They had promise of an inheritance in a Kingdom where they enjoy peace and security
- They had promise of an abiding relationship with their God
- The Jews received these promises by God's promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob
  - The Jewish people did nothing to deserve nor earn these things
  - In fact, they weren't even a people until God Himself made them out of Abraham's barren wife
  - And because the Jewish people were descended from Abraham, they were heirs to these promises
- An heir is typically a family member, and so they receive an inheritance because they have a relationship with the one who died
  - When the Son of God died, He delivered an inheritance to God's people
  - This inheritance was promised to those Jews who were in the family of God by faith
- Now Paul reveals to the world that God desired for Gentiles to be fellow heirs of these promises with the Jewish people
  - God intended the Gentiles to be fellow partakers in the promises given to Israel
    - How did these strangers become fellow heirs?
    - How did they obtain that opportunity?
  - Paul says at the end of v.6 that they obtained it through the Gospel
    - The Gospel is the call to repent and believe in Jesus Christ as Savior
    - It's the call to be born again, to receive a new spirit
    - It's a message that resurrects dead souls and bodies
  - Salvation has always been by faith in the promises of God
    - And the promise of a Messiah has always been the salvation message for both Jew and Gentile

- The difference now is that God was prepared to bring repentance to Gentile as well as Jew
- As the apostles themselves discovered early in the life of the Church

**Acts 13:44** The next Sabbath nearly the whole city assembled to hear the word of the Lord.

**Acts 13:45** But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began contradicting the things spoken by Paul, and were blaspheming.

**Acts 13:46** Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and said, "It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you first; since you repudiate it and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles.

**Acts 13:47** "For so the Lord has commanded us,  
 'I have placed You as a light for the Gentiles,  
 That You may bring salvation to the end of the earth.'"

**Acts 13:48** When the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.

- Paul and Barnabas were preaching the Gospel to Jews who were hardened and did not receive it
  - So the apostles declared they were turning to preach to Gentiles instead
  - And when Gentiles heard this, they rejoiced in the same message, leading to their salvation
  - The message for both is the same
  - But the difference is that God was now prepared to appoint salvation to the ends of the earth
- Furthermore, Paul says in v.7 that he was God's chosen minister of this Gospel by the power of God
  - The Greek word for minister means deacon, which is an office of service to God
    - Paul served God in bringing this message to the world
    - Paul didn't invent this idea
    - He worked this plan because he was entrusted with the plan by God

- Furthermore, Paul served in the power God gave Paul to validate his calling
  - Paul, like all apostles, possessed supernatural gifts intended to demonstrate the working of the Spirit in these men
  - Paul united service with God's power and that's a powerful combination
  - We know we can't accomplish anything in our own power
  - But neither can we accomplish anything if we make no effort to serve God
- Paul says in vs.8-9 he was the very least of the saints, and certainly many in the early church would have agreed with Paul's assessment
  - He's referring to his past of persecuting Christians
  - If opportunities to serve God were based on merit, Paul would have been the last person qualified to serve God
  - But then so would we
- We all serve in our own way according to the same terms
  - We serve God because he entrusts some work of service to Him
  - We serve despite our disqualification
  - And we serve in His power so that everything we accomplish is credit to Him
- And this is why Paul's personal history was so important to His work in the church, and particularly to this mystery
  - Paul was the last person you would expect to encourage inviting Gentiles to come to God
    - Paul's unlikely conversion story disarmed his critics, because they couldn't claim Paul had been a lifelong Gentile sympathizer
    - Everyone knew Paul hated Gentiles, or so he used to
    - Therefore, his sudden affection for Gentiles could only be explained supernaturally
  - So Paul says in v.9 that he brought to light the plan of this mystery which had been hidden for past ages

- For centuries and millennia the Lord held back this truth
- Generations of Gentiles came and went without opportunity to know God
- Then the Lord appeared and then the mystery was revealed
- Why did God chose to reveal this truth in this way? And why wait until Jesus' appearing before uniting the two peoples?
  - Paul gives the answer in v.10

**Eph. 3:10** so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places.

**Eph. 3:11** This was in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord,

**Eph. 3:12** in whom we have boldness and confident access through faith in Him.

- Paul says this mystery was hidden for ages to be revealed by the apostles so that God's manifold wisdom would be made known
  - The word manifold means diverse, multifaceted, made up of many kinds
  - Paul's talking about the intricacies of God's work
  - The incredible details and unexpected twists and turns of how God shuts up all people in disobedience yet brings salvation to many
  - The unfathomable depths of his wisdom that brings all events in human history together culminating in the work of His church
- For truly the Church is the pinnacle of that work
  - The Church is where every detail of the Old and New Testaments come together
  - The Church is where the Spirit of God dwells, where the Law of God is written, where perfect obedience will occur
  - And it's the place where the Son of God is preached in His full revelation in fulfillment of past prophecies
- That's why this mystery waited for so long to be revealed

- The Lord was waiting for the appearing of His Son before He revealed the plans for His church
  - In prior generations, the Lord alluded to this day
  - Speaking through prophets, the Lord said He would make His people jealous by a people who were not God's people
  - And He used pictures like Boaz and Ruth to leave clues to the coming union of Christ and Gentiles
- But no one could understand those things until the mystery was fully revealed in the New Testament, as God intended
  - The Church would be God's grand display, the pièce de résistance
  - And so it waited for His Son's arrival before it could be known and appreciated
- Paul says in v.11 that all these things were in accordance with the eternal purpose He carried out in Jesus Christ
  - From the beginning of Creation, the plan of God centered on Jesus dying to redeem humanity from sin
  - That plan existed before sin existed
  - And therefore, the plan of a Church uniting Jew and Gentile existed before either Jew or Gentile existed
- That's why both Jew and Gentile can have boldness and confident access to the Father through Jesus Christ
  - Because after all, if God planned all this for our sake from so long ago, why be timid? Why doubt?
  - Instead, we should celebrate our place in the family of God
  - We should live as children of the King, secure in our place in His family, determined to serve Him and enjoying access to His wisdom and power
  - And we should unite with others who share those same privileges
- But Paul says God was working this plan for another audience beyond you and me

- Did you notice at the end of v.10 that Paul made mention of another group of observers?
  - He says that God wanted to make known his multifaceted wisdom to rulers and authorities in the heavenly places
  - Who are these rulers in heavenly places?
- At first, we might think angels
  - But this doesn't make a lot of sense
  - Because angels need not be taught of God's wisdom or even his plan
  - They are spirits created to minister to the needs of the saints, including the Gentiles
  - Certainly God's wisdom is self-evident to the angels
- So what other heavenly rulers need to be taught the wisdom of God?
  - Consider another verse from this same letter

**Eph. 6:12** For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.

- In this verse Paul is clearly speaking about unholy forces
- He calls them wicked and darkness
- Yet notice he also refers to them as rulers, as authorities in heavenly places
  - All three of these words are the same ones Paul uses in here in v.10
  - These are the demonic forces that inhabit the spiritual world and war against God and God's people
- Remember, the enemy fell into sin because in his beauty and pride he thought himself a rival for God's throne
  - Somehow he imagined he could compete with God and even exceed Him in power and wisdom

- In Revelation 12, we learn that Satan recruited a third of the angelic realm to follow him into rebellion against God
- These are the rulers, the authorities in heavenly places
  - They are not ultimate rulers, they do not have ultimate authority
  - But they possess authority for a time
  - And they are an audience for this amazing work of God
- Here's the message I think God wanted to send to those rebellious angels through His mystery of the church
  - That God's wisdom and power is far beyond anything they could comprehend
    - That God could work for so long, through so many people and nations to accomplish His plan
    - That every detail would come together in the end
    - That promises made so long ago would still come to pass in time
    - That people seemingly beyond reach were yet found
  - And that nothing the enemy might try would change even one detail
    - That even when he thought he was destroying the seed promise with Abel, with Isaac, with Judah, with David, with the Christ child
    - Still, the promise kept moving
    - And even when the Enemy was killing Jesus, he was actually hammering the nails into his own coffin
  - The mystery of the church is God's triumphant statement to spiritual darkness: Game Over!
    - You lost, and your proof is that the Gospel is reaching to the ends of the earth
    - Not only are Jews being saved, but so are Gentiles
    - And not only did Christ live again, but so will all these
- But fallen angels have only one future

- As the writer of Hebrews says

**Heb. 2:16** For assuredly He does not give help to angels, but He gives help to the descendant of Abraham.

- They are destined for destruction for there is no promise of salvation for them
- They know this, and the existence of the Church simply stands as testimony that God could have saved them...but chose not to
- So these fallen angels see the Church as proof they have been passed over in God's mercy, and so they hate God all the more
  - Which is why Paul ends this passage in v.13

**Eph. 3:13** Therefore I ask you not to lose heart at my tribulations on your behalf, for they are your glory.

- The demons take out their hatred for God on God's people, including Paul
- And so Paul says his tribulations are simply proof of the glory God has brought to Gentiles like you and me

**Rom. 11:33** Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!