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

My wife and I enjoy reading serial mysteries. We even take turns reading the stories aloud to each other. Among our favorite authors are Dorothy Sayers and Agatha Christie, two writers who created unforgettable detective characters such as Lord Peter Wimsey, Hercule Poirot, and Miss Jane Marple. We immerse ourselves in the action, following along as the detectives work to solve a puzzling crime. And our heroes, of course, always figure out the mystery.

Often the mystery’s breakthrough solution comes when some piece of evidence comes to light that was not previously known. A suspect’s umbrella shows up in an unusual place. Or a window pane has a smudge that turns out to be dried mud from the murder scene. Or someone remembers the license plate number of an automobile leaving the victim’s house. However, I almost never crack the mystery until the story’s detective hero reveals the solution.

We can think about these kinds of mystery stories in a couple of ways. On one hand, we can approach mysteries as puzzling riddles to be solved. On the other hand, we can think of them as dramatic descriptions of reality in which previously unknown facts are revealed and provide a new understanding of the situation.

In this session’s Bible passage, the apostle Paul described a “mystery ... made known to [him] by revelation” (Eph. 3:3). He also described it as “the mystery of Christ” (3:4) and “the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things” (3:9). Paul was not referring to a puzzle to be solved but instead to the reality of divine grace and truth that God revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul and other New Testament writers did not speak of mysteries as riddles to be solved or as something impossible to comprehend. Rather, they spoke of revealed truth that had not been previously known by God’s people. God had chosen not to reveal the full gospel message in Old Testament times. But with the birth, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, fresh truth of a surprising nature was made available. In this session, we will focus on what Paul explained to the Ephesians about the mystery of the church.
In the previous session’s Bible passage, Paul made the case that Jews and Gentiles who believe in Christ have been united in a new entity, the church. He used various images to describe this unity. In Christ, Jews and Gentiles become fellow citizens and members of God’s household. Moreover, all believers are being built into a holy temple, God’s own dwelling place.

In this session’s Bible passage, the apostle reflected on his personal role as one of God’s chosen servants in building the church. He had been called by God to be an apostle to the Gentiles. As such, Paul traveled and proclaimed the gospel of salvation by faith, and many Gentiles believed and were saved.

Paul was also an agent of fresh revelation from God. He was consciously aware that he was commissioned to reveal God’s plan for the inclusion of Gentile believers with Jewish believers in the new entity, the church. He was awed that God had made him a servant of this revelation. He wanted the Gentile recipients of his epistle to welcome joyfully the mystery that he was writing about.

In the New Testament, the term *mystery* generally means “previously unknown spiritual truth now revealed.” It is helpful to note that the term appears in three separate New Testament contexts. First, Jesus spoke of the mystery (or mysteries) of the kingdom of God (Matt. 13:11; Mark 4:11; Luke 8:10). He used this language in the context of His parables about the kingdom. In these stories, Jesus revealed an understanding of the kingdom of God different from what the Jewish people had come to expect.

Second, Paul used the term some twenty times in his various epistles, six times in Ephesians. Third, the Book of Revelation refers to a mystery four times (1:20; 10:7; 17:5,7). As we study this session’s Bible passage, we will discover that three times the apostle referred to a mystery. The invitation is clear. Will we recognize that God is inviting us as believers to proclaim the revealed mystery that is the church? I pray that we will!

**THE MYSTERY** (Eph. 3:1-6)

Paul described himself as a prisoner because of God’s revelation of the gospel. All persons, including Gentiles, may receive God’s salvation through faith in Jesus.
VERSE 1

For this reason, I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles—

With the words for this reason, the apostle opened a prayer for the first recipients of his letter to gain spiritual strength (see Eph. 3:14-16). Before he got to the actual content of the prayer, however, Paul described his personal calling and role in proclaiming God’s new revelation—the gospel.

First, Paul embraced the fact that he was, in effect, the prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of the Gentiles. On one hand, the apostle used the term prisoner literally. That is, Paul had spent time in jails on more than one occasion during his missionary journeys—always as a consequence of preaching the gospel (see Acts 16:22-24; 24:27). Indeed, Paul was likely confined to house arrest in Rome (awaiting trial before the emperor) when he wrote the Letter to the Ephesians. In another epistle written during that same two-year time period (see Acts 28:30), Paul wrote that “it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard, and to everyone else, that my imprisonment is because I am in Christ” (Phil. 1:13). It was in this sense, then, that the apostle could refer literally to being the prisoner of Christ Jesus.

On the other hand, Paul also spoke at times of being captured by Christ in his calling to salvation and gospel service (Phil. 3:12). From a spiritual point of view, the apostle realized that his life was no longer his but belonged to Christ, who lived in him (Gal. 2:20). Christ’s mission for Paul was to serve as an apostle and preacher especially to Gentiles (1 Tim. 2:7). Thus, Paul viewed his current imprisonment in Rome as also being on behalf of the Gentiles. As aware as he was of his Jewish heritage (see Phil. 3:4-6), Paul the prisoner of Christ fully and happily embraced his gospel ministry to Gentiles.

VERSE 2

you have heard, haven’t you, about the administration of God’s grace that he gave to me for you?

Paul had invested as much as three years establishing churches in Ephesus and throughout the province of Asia (Acts 20:31). Yet several years had passed since he had been in the city. He knew that the church contained new believers whom he had not met personally, much less discipled them in the faith. Thus, the words you have heard, haven’t you were Paul’s way of saying, “Don’t miss what I am about to say.” For Paul, it was important that all the recipients of the letter understood his devotion and service to Christ.

The term translated administration (“dispensation,” KJV; “stewardship,” ESV) essentially had to do with the management of a large household. In such a household, the steward was responsible for carrying out the owner’s
instructions. Paul had become a steward of God’s grace to the Gentiles. He had been entrusted with the responsibility of proclaiming the good news of salvation by grace through faith. Yet, there was also another element to Paul’s administration of God’s grace, as he was about to declare.

VERSE 3

The mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have briefly written above.

God commissioned Paul to be the steward of a mystery, a previously unknown spiritual truth now revealed. Paul did not conceive of this newly revealed truth. Rather, it was made known to him by revelation. God revealed the truth to Paul in Christ.

God’s revelation about Gentile inclusion in the gospel had come to Paul first on the road to Damascus. The risen Christ informed Paul that He was sending him to the Gentiles “to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a share among those who are sanctified by faith” (Acts 26:17-18). Previously in the Letter to the Ephesians, Paul had briefly written about the mystery (see 1:9,17).

VERSE 4

By reading this you are able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ.

Paul assured the recipients of his letter that he had more to tell them about the revelation he received. The words by reading this do not indicate that Paul expected his letter to be passed around among rank and file believers in Ephesus. More likely, the letter would be read aloud by a church leader during a gathering of the congregation. It seems reasonable to conclude that an Ephesian church leader would read and teach from passages in the letter at many subsequent worship gatherings. Thankfully, believers today continue to have opportunities to keep on reading and understanding Paul’s words.

Paul’s desire was that believers might truly understand his insight (“knowledge,” KJV) into God’s ways. The apostle was neither taking credit for the knowledge nor boasting about his special role as the recipient of revelation. On the contrary, he was taking pains to emphasize that knowledge of the mystery of Christ was a divine gift, not a human invention.

The phrase rendered the mystery of Christ can be literally translated as “the mystery that is Christ.” In other words, Christ Himself is the revelation of truth. He is the gospel (good news) in whom both Jews and Gentiles can receive everlasting salvation.
VERSE 5

This was not made known to people in other generations as it is now revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit:

The prophets of the Lord during Old Testament times had written about the coming of the Messiah. Yet, the full extent of Gentile inclusion in the Messiah’s redeemed community was never fully revealed in the Old Testament. Paul was now preaching and writing about that inclusion in an epistle that would come to be recognized as having the same inspired authority as the Old Testament Scriptures.

Paul further declared that previous generations—whether Jews or Gentiles—had not received the full revelation of God’s redemptive plan until Jesus the Messiah came into the world. In Christ, however, that destiny-changing spiritual truth had been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. Paul included himself in this group but also acknowledged that others received and faithfully proclaimed the gospel as well. Indeed, Paul affirmed in Ephesians 2:20 that God was building His new spiritual temple (the church) “on the foundation of the apostles and prophets.”

Today, we recognize that fresh revelation by the Spirit is no longer necessary because we have the written Word of God, a complete and perfect source of God’s truth. At the same time, as followers of Jesus, we depend on the same Spirit to illuminate our hearts and minds so that we can understand the message of truth and apply it in our lives each day.

VERSE 6

The Gentiles are coheirs, members of the same body, and partners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

In this verse, Paul spelled out clearly that the previously unknown truth now revealed in Christ was simple yet profound: the Gentiles are included in salvation right alongside Jewish believers. He used three theologically rich descriptors to explain what this truth entails. In the Greek language of the New Testament, each descriptor begins with a preposition that essentially means “together with,” “joint,” or “fellow.” The emphasis is on unity.

- **Coheirs**—Gentile believers, now united to Christ, have become joint heirs with Jewish believers of all the covenant blessings and promises of God.

- **Members of the same body**—Jewish believers and Gentile believers are not two equal but separate entities. All believers from all backgrounds comprise one body—the body of Christ—of which He is the head.

- **Partners in the promise**—Gentile believers and Jewish believers share equally in God’s promise of eternal life and salvation, even though Gentiles were formerly “foreigners to the covenants of promise” (2:12). Further, the
promise comes to all believers in Christ Jesus through the gospel. Only when the good news is preached and believed will people come to Christ. Ultimately, the gospel is the only effective means of unity between people of diverse backgrounds.

The consequences of Paul’s understanding of the mystery are overwhelming for us in the twenty-first century. God’s salvation is offered to all people everywhere, no matter what external features distinguish them. All who receive salvation in Christ are given a place in His body, the church.

**EXPLORE FURTHER**

Reflect on the truth that, as a believer, you are a joint heir, a fellow member of the body, and a copartner in eternal life with every other believer around the world. What are the implications for you in terms of your relationships with people who are different from you?

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

The apostle wrote that God had made him a servant of the gospel to proclaim Christ, especially to Gentiles. Paul—and believers today—share the good news with others based on their understanding of the depth of God’s riches and as a response to God’s grace.

**VERSE 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 continued to reflect on his role as an apostle and proclaimer of the mystery of Christ. He described himself as a servant of this gospel. The Greek term rendered servant is not the word that means “bond-slave” but rather is the root word from which we get our English term deacon. In the New Testament, this term was often used for a believer who worked in the service of Christ (2 Cor. 3:6; Eph. 6:21; Col. 1:23). Thus, Paul’s thought moved from the mystery of the church (truth revealed to him) to the ministry of the gospel (truth proclaimed by him).

Just as the mystery was not of human origin, so also the apostle’s preaching ministry was a gift of God’s grace entrusted to Paul. His calling to proclaim the gospel of Christ was all the more a matter of grace in that Paul had once persecuted those who believed the gospel. Further, he emphasized his inability to succeed in such a ministry by reminding the Ephesians that
his success was solely by the working of God’s power. In his own strength, Paul could not accomplish what God had entrusted to him. The terms working and power are synonymous, both carrying the idea of energy or might and stressing God’s provision of strength for ministry. When God entrusts His people with a task, He equips them and enables them to complete it.

VERSE 8

This grace was given to me—the least of all the saints—to proclaim to the Gentiles the incalculable riches of Christ,

Paul celebrated the undeserved privilege he enjoyed by reflecting on an additional factor beyond his own human weakness. He stated again that God’s grace was given to him beyond his ability to quantify it. In Paul’s thinking, he was the least of all the saints. Two points may be noted about this phrase. First, the phrase includes an interesting comparative term that essentially means “least of the lesser” or perhaps “lowest of the low.” Paul admitted that he of all people was undeserving of a holy God’s grace. Second, the phrase may represent a wordplay on the meaning of Paul’s name: “small.” In his own wisdom and strength, Paul was smaller than small; in Christ, however, he was an empowered proclaimer of the life-changing gospel.

The apostle described the substance of his ministry as proclamation to Gentiles. The verb rendered to proclaim is a form closely related to the noun “good news” or “gospel.” Thus, the phrase “announce the good news” expresses the basic meaning. The gospel message centered around the death and resurrection of Jesus and salvation to all who believe (1 Cor. 15:1-8). Here, however, Paul described the good news simply as the incalculable riches of Christ. He had written earlier in the epistle of the riches of Christ’s grace (1:7) and the wealth of His glorious inheritance (1:18). Here, he added an adjective meaning “unfathomable” or “past finding out”—referring to something that can never be measured (see Rom. 11:33). Christ is the infinite gift believers receive in salvation. Indeed, every other spiritual blessing is found in Him and given by Him to those who come to Him in faith.

VERSE 9

and to shed light for all about the administration of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things.

In this verse, the apostle described another aspect of his ministry. Paul had been commissioned to shed light for all concerning the unsearchable riches of Christ. Those who desperately need to hear the good news are in spiritual darkness. In his conversion experience and call to service, Paul had heard the risen Christ tell him that he would be sent to the Gentiles in order that
they might “turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God” (Acts 26:18). Paul never forgot this commission. Similarly, when we as believers engage in evangelism and people respond by believing in Jesus, this is God’s appointed means by which spiritual enlightenment occurs.

Paul then summarized the spiritual content of his message: **the mystery hidden for ages.** Now the time had come for God’s truth about salvation to be fully revealed. This was not a plan that God had recently devised; rather, it had been His purpose since He **created all things.** Now that God had established a new creation in Christ—the church (2:15), He made a fuller revelation about that new creation. Paul thus connected God’s work as Creator with His work in Christ as Redeemer.

**EXPLORE FURTHER**

Read Ephesians 1:7,18; 2:7; and 3:16. What was Paul’s focus in these verses? How did his teaching about riches differ from worldly views? What changes in your view of riches should you consider making?

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

Paul described the purpose of his ministry in terms of making God’s wisdom known in accordance with His plan for redemption. This gives believers boldness to approach God with confidence.

**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.**

God’s purpose for the church as a demonstration of His **multi-faceted wisdom** (“manifold wisdom,” KJV; ESV; NIV) extends far beyond earthly bounds. Even spiritual beings (the rulers and authorities in the heavens) cannot help but acknowledge the wisdom of God’s plan of redemption. Paul had alluded to such spiritual beings previously in the letter (1:20-21).

Here, Paul indicated that angelic hosts are observing what God is accomplishing in and through the church. This may be compared with Peter’s similar observation in 1 Peter 1:12 that “angels long to catch a glimpse of these things.” Indirectly, Paul was showing the blessed status of believers in God’s kingdom. Believers can experience salvation and then declare the gospel to others. Angels can only observe this grace-filled reality through the church.
The Greek term translated *multi-faceted* literally means “many-colored.” It was used for describing flowers, embroidered cloth, or woven carpets. In other words, the church—made up of Jews and Gentiles, slave and free, educated and uneducated, men and women, young and old—is a diverse community bound together not by nationality, language, or human coercion but by the Holy Spirit of God. The church, adorned by forgiveness and new life, is the purest reflection possible of the *multi-faceted* wisdom of God.

**VERSE 11**

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

Paul repeated his emphasis that while God’s great wisdom on display through the church was a new revelation, it was not a new plan conceived only after another plan had failed. Full Gentile inclusion in salvation—the mystery that Paul emphasized in this section of his epistle—had always been part of God’s eternal purpose. God had a plan for His creation from the moment He spoke it into being. That plan continues to unfold in history through the church.

God the Father’s eternal purpose was **accomplished in Christ Jesus** the Lord. From one perspective, Christ has been the Divine Agent who carried out the original creation (Col. 1:16). Yet here, Paul’s focus was on Christ as the One who accomplished salvation for sinful human beings and created the new entity consisting of redeemed people. He did this through His incarnation and sacrificial death on the cross to provide salvation. Paul’s expansion of Christ’s name shows His greatness: He is the **Christ**, the promised Messiah. He is **Jesus**, the name that signifies His work as Savior. He is **Lord**, the title that reflects His sovereignty.

**VERSE 12**

**In him we have boldness and confident access through faith in him.**

Paul turned from the cosmic perspective of God’s redemptive plan to the personal significance that God’s plan has for Christians. Because believers are **in him**, that is, they have **faith** in Christ, they enjoy many wonderful privileges. Paul mentioned two specific blessings that believers enjoy.

First, we as believers **have boldness** in our relationship with God. The Greek term rendered **boldness** carries the idea of freedom to speak without fear or shame. (See Eph. 6:20 on being bold before other humans. See Heb. 4:16 and 10:19 on what boldness in God’s presence implies.)

Second, we as believers **have confident access** to God through Christ. Paul previously used the term rendered **access** in Ephesians 2:18 to emphasize
that the gospel gives both Jewish and Gentile believers access to God. We may approach God directly and freely through Christ, who has forgiven our sins, enabling us to draw near to a holy God. The term rendered confident emphasizes the assurance we have in Christ that the Father accepts us.

VERSE 13

So then I ask you not to be discouraged over my afflictions on your behalf, for they are your glory.

Paul was aware that the first recipients of the Letter to the Ephesians might have become discouraged over his afflictions. They likely would have been aware already of Paul’s imprisonment in Rome and the uncertain situation the apostle was in with regard to the Roman emperor. Yet Paul was confident. He was a servant in God’s eternal, cosmic plan, displayed in the heavens. He had enjoyed the privilege and responsibility of preaching the gospel to many people in many places over many years. He had seen the life-changing power of the gospel in his own life and in the lives of those he led to faith in Christ. For Paul, suffering hardships, beatings, and imprisonment for the gospel had simply been part of God’s plan for him.

Paul ended this section by noting that his sufferings also resulted in glory for believers. There are two possible understandings of this statement. First, Paul could have meant that if he had not been willing to suffer, he would never have preached and seen people come to Christ. The salvation of the Ephesians was glorious, and personal suffering by Paul was of little consequence by comparison. Second, the apostle may have meant that by observing his afflictions for the gospel, the Ephesians would see a living example of what it means to glorify the Lord in all circumstances.

Paul was therefore confident that his current imprisonment in Rome was part of God’s purpose and plan for him. Moreover, his situation glorified God even more than if he had continued with his ministry without any problems. While we as believers may not experience the same afflictions Paul did, we can be like him in this regard: We can find purpose in sharing the gospel with others and in understanding that God is glorified when we do so.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Access” on pages 16–17 in the Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded. Why is it important for believers to know they have access to God? How can you show during the upcoming week that you understand this wonderful truth?