



The Mystery of Oneness in Christ Ephesians 3

Introduction

Thus far in our study of Ephesians, Paul has described the believer's position in Christ (1:1-14) and possessions in Christ (2:1-22), separated by a prayer (1:15-23). Christians are seen by God as already seated with our risen Lord Jesus Christ *in the heavenly places*, another dimension.

In our dimension on earth, a believer's possessions include:

- A new life which is spiritual and eternal. Formerly *dead in trespasses and sins*, believers were *made alive* (2:1) as individuals, God's workmanship created for *good works, which God prepared beforehand* (2:10)
- A new humanity. Previously excluded and far away from God, Gentiles have been *brought near by the blood of Christ* (2:13). All those in Christ are a new creation, reconciled to God through the cross
- A new purpose. All believers are part of a body, the body of Christ, which is likened to a building in which each one is a living stone, *being built up a spiritual house....acceptable to God through Jesus Christ* (1 Peter 2:5). As such, we are part of a process involving every single believer, *being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit* (Ephesians 2:22).

In Ephesians 3, Paul unfolds the mystery of Jewish and Gentile unity, which he introduced in Ephesians 2:14; *For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one*. In Christ both Jews and Gentiles (literally "the nations") are equal. In Christ there is no separation by the Law of Moses. In Christ both Jew and Gentile have a whole new identity and a whole new purpose in living, to build a temple for God to inhabit. This temple is, as Jesus said, *a temple for all nations and a house of prayer* (Mark 11:17). Chapter 3 closes with Paul's prayer for all believers to comprehend the greatness of Christ's love which desires a home in their hearts. Are you included in this?

Outline of Ephesians 3

- I. Mystery of Oneness Revealed - Ephesians 3:1-13
- II. Prayer for Comprehension of Christ's Love - Ephesians 3:14-21

I. Mystery of Oneness Revealed - Ephesians 3:1-13

A. Paul, the Prisoner – Ephesians 3:1

1. The prisoner of Jesus Christ

For the first time in his letters, Paul calls himself a prisoner, *For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ*. He does not refer to himself as a prisoner of Rome but rather of Jesus Christ, for Paul disregarded second causes. Some would see him as Rome's prisoner and he surely was. But he saw himself as Christ's prisoner since he was imprisoned for the sake of the gospel.

Are you suffering, or limited because of circumstances? Will you choose to see that your circumstances are allowed by God for your good as a prisoner of Jesus Christ? Will you concede that God knows what is best for you and knows what He is doing? Will you trust Him in your circumstances?

2. For you Gentiles

Paul was in prison because of his love for the Gentiles and his determination to have them accepted as equal, in Christ, with the Jews (for background see Acts 21:27-33). Considering his audience might think he was blaming them for his imprisonment caused Paul to digress and explain how privileged he felt. His digression is one of the longest sentences in the letter (3:1-13). At the end of the sentence he repeated, *For this reason I* (3:14), and picked up the thread of his previous thought.

B. Paul's Parenthesis - Ephesians 3:2-13

1. The dispensation of the grace of God - 3:2

Paul began his parenthetical thought with his responsibility to preach the grace of God as a steward. The word translated "*dispensation*" is "*oikonomia*", literally "house law" or "the laws of the house". It refers to taking care of a household or household management. The one who had this responsibility in Roman times was a steward, from which we get our word stewardship. Paul was the steward of God's grace and charged with the responsibility of dispensing it, particularly to the Gentiles.

2. The revelation of the mystery - 3:3-4

The mystery Paul revealed in Ephesians 2:11-19 was the unifying of Jews and Gentiles into one new body, a new humanity. How did he know the mystery and how did he solve it? He received the knowledge of the mystery and its meaning by revelation. Joseph and Daniel received special knowledge in the same way (Genesis 40:8; 41:16; Daniel 2:28). Paul also received the call to apostleship by revelation (Galatians 1:11-12). Obviously these are rare occurrences, documented and verified by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21). Today we have God's complete Word, the Bible, and do not need special private revelations.

3. Unknown in other ages - 3:5

This mystery was not revealed or prophesied in the Old Testament. What was prophesied was the conversion of the Gentiles, as was always God's plan. (See Amos 9:11, 12; Acts 15:14, 18). But Gentiles being united with Jews in a new way was unforeseen. It seems God likes to keep some surprises!

4. Two aspects of the mystery - 3:6

Paul continued to unravel the mystery of Gentile inclusion with two points.

a. *Fellow heirs of the same body*

Converted Gentiles become fellow heirs with converted Jews. Together they have an inheritance in Christ as God's people, parts of the same body.

b. *Partakers of His promise in Christ*

Gentiles partake of God's promises in Christ. These are not the promises the Jews received as Jews, nor the Jews' inheritance. Rather, Gentiles partake of the promises in Christ. The promises and inheritance given to Abraham regarding the nation and the land of Israel belong to Israel (Genesis 12:1-3; 15:4-8). However, promises made to Abraham, and included in Christ as Savior of the world, belong to all people who believe in Him (Genesis 12:3; Galatians 3:8-9).

5. Paul's ministry - 3:7-8

a. *Of the grace of God*

Paul was called to minister to Gentiles by God's grace so they could know His grace through the gospel.

b. *Least of all the saints*

Paul quickly declared himself to be *less than the least of all the saints*. He humbly resisted promoting his

office or boasting. We can see a three-step growth in Paul's humility. In 1 Corinthians 15:9, an early letter, he admitted to being *the least of the apostles....not worthy to be called an apostle*. In Philippians 3:8 he was willing to count all his credentials as *rubbish* for Christ. In 1 Timothy 1:15, written later in his life, he confessed to being the *chief* of sinners.

Have you made a similar retreat from pride? Do you take your place beside the apostle Paul as a lowly sinner saved by grace? Nothing less is true humility.

6. *The unsearchable riches of Christ* - 3:8-9

Paul was called not only to teach doctrine and enlighten people, but to share the unfathomable riches of Christ. He was sent to attract Gentiles into a "*new and living way*" (Hebrews 10:20) with a wonderful Savior, who is also Lord. He was sent with the good news to pull people out of the ditch where they would die and enter an eternity without Christ. His mission was to redirect them to heaven, eternally with the Lord.

7. *The manifold wisdom of God* - 3:10-11

God's *manifold wisdom* is made known by the church. The church is ordained by the Lord as God's repository of knowledge and wisdom. God's people, the body of believers, have been given the Bible and the Spirit-filled task of teaching and preaching the Bible. Even *principalities and powers in the heavenly places* look to the church for revelation (see 1 Peter 1:12). Paul says the wisdom of God decreed this eternal purpose which is accomplished for us in Christ.

8. *Access with confidence through faith in Him*
- 3:12

Knowing that God's purpose to bring all of His people together is accomplished in Christ gives us boldness and confidence in our access to Him. The way to God's throne is always open. We access it by prayer (Romans 5:2; Hebrews 4:16). Have you gone to the throne of grace lately with your cares? Have you taken your praises to Him there too?

C. Conclusion - 3:13

Therefore...do not lose heart at my tribulations. The conclusion of Paul's parenthesis is an exhortation to courage. Things are not really what they may seem. It is all part of God's grand plan. Paul's imprisonment for the benefit of the saints was part of God's eternal purpose, which was for their glory. We can view all things in our lives this way. God has allowed it for His eternal purpose, which is for our glory. By adopting this view we put events into perspective, whether they are tragedies or delights. After losing almost everything

Job said, *Blessed be the name of the LORD* (Job 1:21). The LORD's name refers to His character.

3. *To comprehend...the love of Christ* - 3:18-19

II. Prayer for Comprehension of Christ's Love - Ephesians 3:14-21

A. Praise - Ephesians 3:14-15

1. *For this reason*

Paul's thoughts return to the subject he began in 3:1, and he drops to his knees to pray in his cell. This writer wonders if we are often too casual when we address Almighty God, letting our minds wander, with ungodly music or television in the background, or calling it "prayer" while we are driving, vacuuming, or dressing?

2. *The Father of our Lord Jesus Christ*

This is a wonderful title for God - Father of Jesus. We should use it often, as Paul does.

3. *The whole family in heaven and earth*

Until now, Paul has been content to pull Jews and Gentiles together. Here he pulls together the vast family of the ages, at least past and present, and probably future too.

B. Threefold Petition - Ephesians 3:16-19

1. *Strengthened with might* - 3:16

Paul prays believers will be *strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man*. Which of us does not need more inner strength, more resolve, more courage, more steel in our backbone, more self-discipline, self-control and most of all, more of the Holy Spirit's power in our lives?

2. *That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith* - 3:17

Christ is already in the believer's heart. However, the meaning here is not only His presence, but having Him "at home" in your heart. Is Christ at home in your heart as He was in Bethany in the home of Martha and Mary? There He was comfortable, at ease, sharing conversation, and revealing His deep truths to them.

Paul prays that we might not only understand the love of Christ but grasp hold and experience the vastness of His love in a comprehensive way. He wants us to know it is immeasurable and inexhaustible, and nothing can separate us from it (Romans 8:35, 38-39). He prays we will experience all of Christ's love in every dimension and in its fullness. The *width, and length, and depth, and height* are probably not meant to define Christ's love, but to present it as multi-faceted, like a rare gem, endlessly fascinating from every angle.

C. Power Anticipated - Ephesians 3:20-21

- *Now to Him Who is able to do exceedingly abundantly*
- *Above all that we ask or think*
- *According to the power that works in us [you and me]*
- *To Him be glory in the church [and in your church and mine]*
- *By Christ Jesus to all generations [ours included],*
- *Forever and ever. Amen.*

Applications

1. In what way are you a steward of God's grace, ministering that grace to others?
2. How serious are you about prayer? Do you set aside time daily to drop to your knees in humble worship and conversation with the Lord about your dreams, fears, heart desires, His will for your life, and needs of others?
3. Does Christ dwell in your heart by faith? In what ways are you strengthened by the power of His Holy Spirit?
4. How has Paul's letter helped you know you are secure in God's love?
5. Will you pray for other Christians to comprehend the love of Christ and experience the security it provides for them now and for eternity? Who needs your prayers today?