

Commentary

The key thing is to work out how the two halves of the chapter relate to each other. Why does Paul start and then stop his prayer in 3:1? Why does he tell us 3:2-13 before he tells us his prayer? And why pray in response to 3:2-13?

1-13 Paul tells us the purpose of this section in 13: he is asking them not to lose heart because he's in prison (3:1; 4:1). His suffering is 'for you' because he was persecuted by the Jews, explicitly for preaching a gospel which included Gentiles in God's plan by believing in Jesus, quite apart from circumcision, Sabbath laws, and food rituals (as in 2:11-22). (This matches his commission in Acts 9:15-16, and his experience in Acts 13:50; 14:2, 19; 15:2; 17:5, 13; 18:6, 12; 19:9; 21:27-31; 23:12, 27-30).

1 The sentence which begins here continues again in 14. 'For this reason' (here and in 14) probably refers back to all of ch 2: just as in 1:15 (cf 'For this reason ...') the glories of the gospel lead naturally to prayer.

3 In the NT, 'mystery' does not mean 'something mysterious', but 'a secret': if you're on the inside you know it, if you're on the outside you don't. This mystery is spelt out in 3:6, and is now no longer a secret.

4-5 This now 'open secret' was revealed by the Spirit to the 'apostles and prophets'. This group of people has been mentioned before in 2:20 (and cf 4:11) referring to Paul, the other apostles, and a group of NT 'prophets' to whom the gospel was revealed in a 'foundational' (cf 2:20) way. The OT does tell us about God's plan to include Gentiles but not 'as it has now been revealed' (ie with the clarity of, say, 2:13-16).

6 This verse summarises the 'mystery' by using three wonderful words: **co-heirs** sharing in the inheritance of God's heavenly riches (1:11-14); **co-bodied**, a made-up word meaning 'included in Christ's body' (2:16); **co-sharers** in (rather than strangers to, 2:12) the promise of eternal life. The point is clear: in the gospel, Gentiles are 'co-everything' with Jews.

7-9 Jesus called Paul to a crucial role in the out-working of this 'mystery' (Acts 9:15; 22:21) as his 'special ambassador' to the Gentiles: the mystery became known ('brought to light') as Paul preached it. All of God's unstoppable 'power' was needed to change Paul so radically to be this gospeller, so that the gospel of grace could come to Ephesus.

10 'The rulers and authorities' need to be told that they will lose: it is Jesus not them who will be head over everything at the end of time (1:10). Incredibly, it is when Christians gather as church that these powers are given evidence of the victory of God: he will win ultimately, just as he has now won the hearts of Christians. Church is God's public notification.

13 It seems that these Gentile Christians were 'discouraged' and so Paul writes (cf 6:22). To have their champion in prison (1, 13) makes his gospel appear disreputable, and seems to substantiate the Jewish slur that he was nothing but a perverter of the gospel. How does Paul pray for down-at-the-mouth Christians? He prays for them (3:14-19) just as he writes to them (1:3f) that they'd understand all they have in Christ.

14-19 Paul's prayer is (simply): that they would be empowered by God to know how big Christ's love is. Like 1:17-23, the structure of the prayer is three simple requests (complicated by NIV):

16-17 that God gives you his power/his Christ to dwell in you;

18-19a that you grasp the immensity of Jesus' love for you;

19b that you are filled up with 'the fullness of God' himself.

Paul is praying particularly for Gentile Christians (cf 'you' in 14-19; 'we' in 20-21) that they would be reassured they are full members of the people of God. In effect, by recording his prayer, he's telling them ...

16-17 if Christ dwells in you Gentiles, you are 'in'. Becoming a Jew could not possibly make you any more 'in'.

18-19a Jesus loves you Gentiles; look what he did for you Gentiles!

19b all God has to give you can be yours because you are Christian.

14 Paul resumes the thought he began in 3:1 (ie 3:2-13 is in brackets). The 'reason' is 2:11-22 (ie how Jews and Gentiles are reconciled to God by the cross and so united into one new man): because of this, Paul prays.

15 This is a tricky verse (- don't get distracted!). The thrust is that God is sovereign over every family in heaven and earth, over the heavenly realms and over the earthly one too. It is to this God that Paul prays.

16 This is the central petition. He is asking a wealthy God ('according to the riches of his glory'), more than able to answer such a prayer in abundance, to please give them inward strength. The strength is imparted by the Father 'through his Spirit', the one who is building the Church (2:22), through whom we have access to the Father (2:18), and who seals us into Christ thus guaranteeing our inheritance (1:13).

17a This is the result of praying 16. Being strengthened by God through the Spirit enables Christ to dwell in our hearts. Obviously this is not literal but 'by faith'. This is not a prayer for conversion but for controlling; if Christ is to dwell in or be 'at home' in our hearts, he will be the central figure ('head?') around whom all our thoughts and motivations revolve.

17b-18 The purpose of Christ dwelling within us is that we understand the love of Christ, the same love in which we should also walk (5:2), with all its dimensions of breadth, length, height and depth etc, and do that 'with all the saints'. If this prayer is answered, the whole church together will love one another with a Christ-like love, recognising no distinction of Jew or Gentile. This is to 'know' something 'that surpasses knowledge' ... which isn't to downplay knowledge (which he explicitly prays for in 18 and emphasises elsewhere in Ephesians) but it is to recognise that Christ's love is much bigger and wider than our knowledge, beyond our ability to box and neatly package it. It is (19) to be filled with the fullness of everything God wants them to be (cf 4:13, and 1:3f of course).

20-21 If God can save spiritually dead sinners and unite Jews and Gentiles into one church, anything else we might ask of him will be easy for him. Why is glory also to be 'in the church'? It is because God's plan of bringing everything together under Christ is currently on display there: 'church' is evidence that he will achieve all he intends for absolutely everything.

Group Study Outline

Ephesians 3:1-21 Theme Sentence

God has made his plan clear in the gospel and the church: we should pray for Christians to be sure that they are at the centre of this plan.

Launching Question

Imagine yourself talking to a Christian in Emmanuel who feels unimportant at church, with nothing really to contribute, and it's not as if Emmanuel is a massive or very significant church ... what would you say to them?

READ Ephesians 3:1-13

What are the ways Paul describes himself in these verses?
What is Paul's place in God's plan to unite all things in Christ?
Why are the Ephesians discouraged (13)?
Why is Paul suffering in prison? why is this their 'glory' (13)? (cf Acts X-refs?)

What is the mystery: list as many things that Paul says about it here?
How/where/when has God made known this mystery? Is it 'mysterious'?
What is the link between Ephesians 2:11-22 and Ephesians 3:1-13?
Who are the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms (10)?
Write out verse 10 in your own words.
What is the purpose of the church, according to 3:10?
What does that actually mean in practice?
Why is it so important that we do 4:3 (= the main application in Ephesians)?

Why does Paul tell us all this? (cf 14 continues from where Paul broke off in 1)

Thinking it through

Paul had a unique role in God's salvation history: so where do we fit in?
Why is church important in God's all-time-everywhere-everyone plans?
Why is church important at a cosmic level?
How does this mean I should think differently about the church I'm part of?
Revisit the *Launching Question*: how do these verses help that person?

READ Ephesians 3:14-21

For what reason? (ie what prompts Paul to pray?)
What does Paul pray for the Ephesians?
Why do Christians (and specifically these Gentile Christians in Ephesus) need to know the surpassing-knowledge love of Christ? aren't they already Christians?
(Try not to be vague here!) What will I be like if this prayer is answered?
Why do we need all God's mighty power (as in 1:20-23) for us to know this?

Thinking it through

1:15f has already shown us that the glories of God's plan lead Paul to pray for other Christians: does it have the same effect on us? why / why not?
Let's use the words of this passage to help us pray for one another ... now!

Ephesians 3:1-21



The story so far

1:10b is the key verse of the letter: God is working out his plan at all times and in all places 'to bring everything together under Christ as head'. And currently, he is achieving his plan by having called the church into being. This is where people (from both sides of the traditional Jew/Gentile divide) have been 'brought together'. And God has made Jesus 'head' over it.

3:2-13 stresses two points:

- that **this plan was a mystery**. How the end point of Ephesians 1:10 would be achieved is not spelt out clearly in the OT, and Israel always misunderstood her privilege as exclusivity.
- that this plan is no longer a mystery, **but is now clear** ...
 - by God's direct revelation to Paul (and the other early church apostles/prophets);
 - in the gospel, which Paul therefore preaches;
 - in the church, the public demonstration of God's plan now being achieved.

Paul prays for the Gentile Christians in particular (in 3:14-19) to be reassured that they are full members of the people of God. It has always been God's plan to include them: if they are Christians (and so, part of the church) they could not be more 'in'. So Paul longs that Christ would dwell in them, so that they would know Christ's love for them, and all the blessing of God for them.

Ephesians 3:1-21 Theme Sentence

God has made his plan clear in the gospel and the church: we should pray for Christians to be sure that they are at the centre of this plan.

Application

- **Prayer**. As in ch 1, 'for this reason' (1,14) Paul prays for other Christians. We should be praying more for others because of studying this letter or we're not understanding it right: do we pray for the same things as him?
- **Not discouraged**. Are there ways in which the seeming insignificance of the gospel discourages us? Or hardships that come to us because we are Christians that discourage us? What does Paul think is the remedy? It's probably never occurred to us that the gospel is not for Gentiles, so our problem may not be discouragement so much as presumption/arrogance.
- **Live a life**. Paul's application is in 4:1f, summarised in 4:3 as 'keep that which is already there'. God's made us one, preserve it! The rest of the letter will work out how we should 'walk' to do that preserving. Read on!