

Study 4: Ephesians Chapter 3

Introduction

God's plan to bring His people back to Him through the death of the Messiah, and as His glorious family in the church, began before He created the world. Yet that plan took some time to unveil. This was not because God lacked power, but because man needed to learn and understand about God, His nature, and our state. The Law of Moses was put in place as a "temporary arrangement" – our tutor *to bring us to Christ* Gal 3:24.

The church is the fulfilment of God's eternal purpose – why would we want to go anywhere else?

Body of the Study

Homework and preparation for next week:

Background to the text:

Our Access to God

A Prisoner Bound to Christ

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Paul's Prayer for Them

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Homework and preparation for next week:

Read through chapter 3 again

Read the notes as a review of the study

What are the characteristics that a person who is "rooted and grounded in love" would display?

How can we help each other to "comprehend what is the width and length and depth and height of Christ's love"?

Read chapter 4 in preparation for next week

Notes for study 4: Ephesians Chapter 3

We all have goals in our lives – things that we are planning to do in the future. For some of us, it might be the goal of owning our own home, or owning a new car, or perhaps an overseas holiday (“the holiday of a lifetime”). Some of us have achieved our goals, some of us haven’t.

We don’t just “stand still” waiting for our dreams to come true, and so we put into place temporary arrangements that will keep us going until our dreams are fulfilled. We might have to rent a house until we can get one of our own. We have to put a savings plan in place so that we can afford the deposit on the house (or the car). We have to get ourselves into a financial position to be able to afford the mortgage. If we want a new car, we might have to drive around in an old jalopy until we can afford the new one. We probably don’t stop taking holidays just because we are aiming for the “holiday of a lifetime”, but we have to put in place temporary strategies of local and cheap holidays until the time comes when we can fulfil our dreams.

God had a plan to bring His people back to Him from before He created the world. Yet that plan took some time to unveil. This was not because of a lack of His power, but because man needed to learn and understand about God, His nature, and the state of Man. Because of this, God put in place the “temporary arrangements” through the Law of Moses – which was to be our tutor *to bring us to Christ* Gal 3:24.

Background to the text:

The church at Ephesus was “multi-cultural”. It had Jews, Greeks, and (probably) Romans.

The falling away from the faith would either come from Judaisers (those saying that Christianity is OK, but it is just another Jewish sect like the Pharisees or Sadducees or Zealots – but if you want to be a Christian you first have to become a Jew and you also have to keep the Law of Moses), or it would come from the Greek Gnostics (these followed the Greek philosophers, and always sought after knowledge and some new thing – Acts 17:18-21).

The Jews had not understood that the Law of Moses was not God’s eternal purpose. The Jewish religion and that Law was only a temporary measure. They saw it as the “ultimate”, when God saw it as transient. Paul spells out for them (and us) that we are the recipients of God’s ultimate accolade, and are the fulfilment of His eternal purpose.

The Greeks saw the church and Christianity as “something new”. They were fascinated by learning about it, but they didn’t see it as God’s ultimate fulfilment. It wouldn’t be long before the novelty wore off and they went looking for something else. Paul got the same reaction in Athens: “Hey, here’s something new – let’s have a listen to this – Oh thanks Paul that was really interesting, now, what else is around that we can investigate?” When Paul wrote to Timothy (in Ephesus) he said that some would be “always learning, but never able to come to the knowledge of the truth” (2 Tim 3:7). Paul calls to the attention of the Greeks in Ephesus, that this is not just a flash-in-the-pan new thing, but the revelation of God’s plan that was put in place before the World began.

God brought us back into relationship with Him, through the blood of Jesus. As a result of our being “in Him” we have boldness and access with confidence through faith (to God).(3:12).

Our Access to God

The name of God (YHWY) was so holy to the Jews that they would not even say the name. For this reason, no-one actually knows how the word YHWY is pronounced (generally pronounced ‘Yarway’). From this word we get a derivative “Jehovah” often translated LORD in our bibles (note the all capital letters). The Jews generally did not have access directly to God, but only through the Priests – the Levites. And the Levites themselves had a very long path – probably

several years of learning the Jewish religion - to even get to say “Abraham is our father” in the Temple.

Paul makes a contrast with this “arms length” approach to God. Rather than being “afraid” of God and being so “timid” in His presence that we would not even mention His name, we now have “boldness” and “access with confidence” to Him. WOW! How great are our blessings that we have because we are “in Christ”.

Much more than this, God brought us together as His children in the church. The church is to make known the manifold wisdom of God to the principalities and powers (3:10)

A Prisoner Bound to Christ

Paul begins the chapter with a greeting, in which he confirms himself as the author of the letter, and directs it to the recipients “...*For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles...*” (3:1 NIV). As discussed in the introductory study, there may be reasons to dismiss 1:1 as authentic, but we are still left with this passage, in which Paul describes himself (amongst other things) as the apostle to the Gentiles (c/f Acts 9:15; Rom 11:13). At the time of writing, Paul was also *a prisoner* – during his first Roman imprisonment. He uses this as an analogy – that whilst he was physically *chained to the wall* (although this is probably a metaphor, since during that imprisonment he was under house arrest – free to roam the house, but not free to leave it) – in the same way he was spiritually bound to Jesus Christ.

He breaks off his chain of thought here, and doesn’t return to it until vs 14. He reminds them that they have all heard about his life and work. Many of them knew him personally (see comments (The Recipients of the Letter) in the introductory study), but others would only know him *by reputation*. “...*Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you...*” (3:2 NIV). As the apostle to the Gentiles, Paul had a special ministry in the spread of the gospel throughout the world. He started out as a persecutor of christians, but through his conversion became the recipient of God’s grace –as we all are. We are all sinners and fall short of God’s glory (Rom 3:23), and none of us are saved without God’s grace, Paul regarded himself as *the chief of sinners* because he persecuted God’s church. He thought that he was doing God a favour by rounding up the christians and bringing them bound to Jerusalem, voting against them, and having them put to death (Acts 22:1-5), since he acted in all good conscience.

As an apostle, Paul was the recipient of God’s revelation by the Holy Spirit “...*that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly...*” (3:3 NIV). Jesus promised that the apostles would be guided by the Holy Spirit in *all truth* – not some of it – not most of it – ALL OF IT (Jn 14:26; 16:13). Jesus spent three years with Paul after his conversion, during which he was in Arabia (Gal 1:16-18. Further details can be found in my Acts notes – Study 13). He has previously mentioned this briefly in the letter (1:9-10; 2:11-22).

Paul had a complete understanding of God’s plan, and as the apostle to the Gentiles he was active in communicating it to others – not only by what he taught in person, but specifically in the things that he wrote “...*In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ...*” (3:4 NIV). Specifically, the mystery is that the Gentiles would have a part in God’s plan in the same way as the Jews. Paul shows his specific intention for the things that he wrote, that we might understand and know his revelation from God. In the first century the miraculous gifts were given as a temporary (transitional) delivery of God’s revelation. But after the New Testament was written, there was no need for the transitional arrangements, and the miraculous gifts died out soon after the end of the first century, because there was no apostles left who could pass on the gifts.

Having the Gentiles as a part of God’s family was inconceivable to the Jews, and was hidden to them in the past times “...*which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets...*” (3:5 NIV). As discussed in the

previous study, the apostles and (New Testament) prophets had a special place in delivering God's revelation to man.

Although God's blessing intended for Gentiles through the people of God was revealed in the OT from Ge 12:3 onward, it was not proclaimed so fully or so extensively as now under the new dispensation. In particular, OT saints did not clearly realize that the old theocracy would be superseded by the body of Christ composed of Jews and Gentiles forming "one new man" (2:15) (NIVBC).

In case there is any doubt, Paul spells out for us just what the mystery is "...*This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus...*" (3:6 NIV). In the *one body* – the church – both Jews and Gentiles are reconciled together in Christ. We all receive the promise, and it is through Christ – and Him alone – that we receive the blessings promised to Abraham *that all the nations of the earth will be blessed* (Gal 3:16).

Paul's Place in God's Plan

Although he started out persecuting God's people, Paul was specifically selected by Jesus for the role as apostle to the Gentiles "...*I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power...*" (3:8 NIV). The word *servant* is key – as Jesus demonstrated His own role in *coming not to be served, but to serve* (Mt 20:28; Jn 13:12-14). Paul was not in the least seeking a pre-eminent role in the church, but rather one as a servant. He writes about the role of an apostle as one which is despised by man (1 Cor 4:9-16). But by God's grace he received his calling and commission as an apostle and servant.

He had a special place as the apostle to the Gentiles "...*Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ...*" (3:8 NIV).

Paul acknowledges that in himself he is a nobody, while at the same time recognizing that God has made him a somebody. Such humility is an essential qualification for effective service. (NIVBC)

Paul's role as an apostle and as an evangelist was "...*to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things...*" (3:9 NIV). He wants us all to know and to understand the mystery which was revealed to him by the Holy Spirit. These things were deliberately not revealed (hidden) by God during previous dispensations. We can understand and clearly see God's mystery, which in times past *angels longed to see and to look into* (1 Pet 1:12).

The Church is God's Eternal Purpose

If Satan had understood God's eternal plan and purpose, he would never have had Jesus put to death. He thought that he had won the war by putting Jesus to death. However, God knew that that very act would result in the achievement of His eternal purpose. "...*His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms,*¹¹ *according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord...*" (3:10-11 NIV). God demonstrates His handiwork by *His manifold wisdom*, and there is also the idea that the (members of the) church declares God to the world. God achieved His plan and purpose, despite the efforts of Satan to intervene (Mt 16:18).

Even though we are sinners, we are *made right* by Jesus' blood, and our approach to God is one of confidence "...*In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence...*" (3:12 NIV). This is in direct contrast to the Jews who would only approach God with trepidation (see the introduction to this study). As the members of the church (Christians) we are now God's chosen people. We are "His workmanship created to do good works" (2:10). As

His children, we worship and *glorify Him – throughout all ages, and until the end of the world* (3:21).

Whilst Paul was suffering because of the gospel – and in a real sense because of some of the Ephesian brethren – he encourages them not to lose heart “...*I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory...*” (3:13 NIV). After the meeting with the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:17-38), Paul went to Jerusalem with the gift for the poor saints. He had only been there for about a week before he is mobbed by the Jews (Acts 21:15-26; 28-29). The specific charge against him was “Bringing Gentiles into the Temple”, which arose because Paul had been seen in the Temple, and he had previously been seen in the city of Jerusalem with Trophimus from Ephesus. The Jews had incorrectly assumed that Paul had taken Trophimus into the Temple. As a result of this uproar, Paul is taken into protective custody, and then quickly moved to custody in Caesarea where he is “forgotten about” by the Roman authorities. The Jews still want him stoned to death (for defiling the Temple), and Paul appeals to Caesar. He was then sent to Rome where he remained under house arrest until his accusers came to lay the charges against him (they never did come). After two years, the statute of limitations expired, and Paul was released. It was during this imprisonment that Paul wrote the letter to the Ephesians. We can read between the lines to imagine how Trophimus specifically, and many others of the Ephesians would have been feeling – that they were responsible for Paul’s predicament. Paul tells them not to feel that way!

Paul’s Prayer for Them

Paul picks up the thought from verse 1, with a prayer for the Ephesians “...*For this reason I kneel before the Father,* ¹⁵ *from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name...*” (3:14-15 NIV). The word translated *before* (pros) has the idea of closeness and ‘with the ultimate aim of’ or ‘leading to’. He is approaching the Father in an intimate relationship in prayer for the Ephesians. He introduces the idea of family – and will relate this specifically to the church. “...*I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being,* ¹⁷ *so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith...*” (3:16-17 NIV). Notice the structure of Paul’s prayer:

- The source of the blessings is God, and He blesses us with His glorious riches
- Through those blessings we receive inner strength through the Holy Spirit
- In the end, Christ dwells in our hearts through faith,

Our growth as christians doesn’t end there – and we need to grow, having been firmly established through faith (and the process he has talked about above) “...*And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love,* ¹⁸ *may have power, together with all the saints...*” (3:17-18 NIV). Paul is petitioning God to bless the Ephesians lavishly, and that as they grow they will share this experience with other saints – in fact all saints everywhere. He then describes Christ’s love in four dimensions. Of course – we can only think in three dimensions – and this illustrates the point, that God’s power exceeds our ability to comprehend it. “...*to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ...*” (3:18 NIV).

The four dimensions Paul now presents as the object of such perception are closely linked with the knowledge of Christ's love. That love, exemplified in Christ's magnanimity to the Gentiles, is too large to be confined by any geometrical measurements. It is "wide" enough to reach the whole world and beyond (1:9-10, 20). It is "long" enough to stretch from eternity to eternity (1:4-6, 18; 3:9). It is "high" enough to raise both Gentiles and Jews to heavenly places in Christ Jesus (1:13; 2:6). It is "deep" enough to rescue people from sin's degradation and even from the grip of Satan himself (2:1-5; 6:11-12). The love of Christ is the love he has for the church as a united body (5:25, 29-30) and for those who trust in him as individuals (3:17) (NIVBC)

This requires us to first be rooted and grounded in love. “...and to know this love that surpasses knowledge--that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God...” (3:19 NIV). We might think that attaining knowledge – knowing God – is our aim. But Paul spells out for us that we don’t know God at all if we don’t have love – since God is love! (1 Jn 4:8). Only then we *may be filled with the fullness of God*, and attain the full maturity and knowledge that God would have us to do.

Doxology

The prayer ends with a short doxology – a word of praise to God “...Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen...” (3:20-21 NIV). God has already been described in immeasurable terms, and Paul continues here. He can not only do more than we imagine – He can do immeasurably more! And we are recipients of God’s immeasurable blessings through the church.

God’s eternal purpose was to reconcile man back to God through the church – not as Jews or Gentiles – but as christians, His pride possession!

Why would we want to go anywhere else?