

OUR REVELATION OF CHRIST

Summary and Historical Background

Two key words must be understood in order to grasp the message of chapter three: "dispensation" and "mystery." A dispensation is a distinguishable economy in the development of God's purpose: that is, it is God's distinct way of managing the world in different ages to accomplish His overall plan. Each dispensation has a new revelation given from God with new responsibilities for believers that have ultimate accountability to Him. Salvation and godly living in each dispensation are always by faith, but the expression of that faith can be different. The dispensation that Paul discusses in chapter three is the dispensation of grace (also called the church age), which included Gentiles on an equal footing with Israelites (3:6). This was a new concept and a major difference from the dispensation of law (also called the age of Israel), which gave no hope to the Gentiles unless they became proselytes.

"Mystery" in biblical terms is not something mysterious, magical, or enigmatic. It refers to God's revelation of truth which He previously had concealed. The mystery of which Paul wrote in this chapter is the mystery of the church. The church was composed of Gentiles in union with Israelites having an equal standing. This elevation of Gentiles in the church had not been revealed in the Old Testament. God revealed this truth to Paul (and other apostles and prophets) so that the believers might understand this new thing that God was doing. A discussion of this mystery and new dispensation occupies Paul's thoughts from 3:2-13.

In 3:1 Paul had begun the second prayer of this epistle (cf. 1:15-23), but he digressed briefly (3:2-13). Then, in 3:14, he returned to the thought of his prayer again (note: "For this cause" is repeated). This prayer is similar to 1:15-23 in its elevated language, but the theme is different. The prayer in chapter one centers on knowledge; the prayer in chapter three centers on love. Paul prayed that the Christians might be empowered to integrate all the truths he had given them in chapters one through three concerning Christian character and love. The doxology in the last two verses is Paul's praise of God for His ability to do more than he asked.

I. Explanation of God's Business — 3:1-13

A. Missionary to the Gentiles — 13:1

3:1 — "For this cause" - because of the eternal results of God's great plan and God's great redemption, Paul begins a prayer for the Christians to grow in their inner man and in their love. This prayer is interrupted, however, when Paul thought about God's special work through him to reveal the new dispensation (3:2-13).

"The prisoner of Jesus Christ" — Paul is now under house arrest at Rome. Though free to receive visitors, he cannot go out. But Paul looks beyond the Jews who caused his imprisonment and the Romans who enforced it. He sees the hand of God in it. He is "the prisoner of Jesus Christ."

"For you Gentiles" — the cause of Paul's imprisonment was his proclamation of God's grace to every man, but especially to the Gentiles. It was Paul's association with Trophimus, a convert from Ephesus, that led to his imprisonment (Acts 21:28, 29). His imprisonment was indeed for all Gentiles, but he is not discouraged. In fact, the thought inspires Paul's digression of 3:2-13.

B. Mystery of Christ's Church — 3:2-6

3:2 — "If you have heard" - Paul begins to explain the revelation that God had most completely given to him regarding the new dispensation of the church composed of Jews and Gentiles. "If" should not suggest uncertainty, because it is a first class condition which assumes a fact to be true. It might better be translated, "since" or "inasmuch as."

"The dispensation of the grace of God" — the word "dispensation" refers to household management or stewardship (Luke 16:2). The death of Christ had initiated God's new way of dealing with the world. Instead of dealing with the world on the basis of the Mosaic Covenant (circumcision, sacrifice, Sabbath and obeying the laws of Moses), God now deals with the world on the basis of Jesus Christ (His work of regeneration, baptism into His body by the Spirit, obeying His commands and building His church). This stewardship (dispensation) refers especially to Paul's ministry as an apostle of Christ.

3:3-5 — The revelation of the church was new to the world.

"As I wrote afore in a few words" — this is a reference to Paul's earlier statement about his knowledge of the mystery of the church (1:8-10).

"The mystery of Christ" — mystery does not refer to something mysterious or difficult to understand. It simply means that this knowledge from God had not been revealed to anyone before He gave it to Paul.

"Which in other ages" — the revelation of the church (as a body in which both Jews and Gentiles had equal privileges) is not in the Old Testament. The Old Testament does reveal that the Gentiles would be converted, but Gentiles would be under the Jews in the Messianic Kingdom, not equal.

"Unto His holy apostles and prophets" — Paul was not the only one to receive God's revelation concerning the church; other apostles and prophets (New Testament prophets) also had received this knowledge. However, Paul seems to have had the most complete knowledge.

3:6 — Paul describes the unique relationship of the Jews and Gentiles in the church by using three Greek words that have "joint" in them. These words suggest the closest possible connection between Gentiles and Jews. The Gentiles are "fellow-heirs" (joint-heirs) with Jews, that is, they have the same inheritance in the Kingdom of God. The Gentiles also are "of the same body" (joint-body) with Jews, that is, they are legally and organically joined together with the Jews in the church. They now have a common nature. The Gentiles; furthermore, are "partakers of His promise" (joint-body). The word "partakers" is used of joint-owners of a house. This term suggests common rights. Gentiles have the same standing and privileges within the Body of Christ.

3:7 — "Made a minister . . . by the effectual working of His power" - God's power changed Paul from a Christ-opposer into a Christ-server. He became a minister particularly to the Gentiles. This power is effectual, actually getting the job done ("effectual working"); and it is dynamic, having sufficient power within itself to overcome all obstacles.

C. Ministry of the Apostle Paul — 3:7-13

3:8 — "Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints" - this ministry was humbling to Paul. He keenly felt the fact that he had persecuted the church (1 Cor. 15:9; 1 Tim. 1:13-15). But even though he had been an active enemy, God showed him His grace.

"Less than the least" is a double comparative.

"I should preach among the Gentiles" — God's grace is not only seen in the instrument of proclamation (Paul), but also in the objects of the proclamation (Gentiles). The Gentiles were not attractive candidates for salvation either.

"The unsearchable riches of Christ" — God's grace is finally seen in the substance of the revelation (Jesus Christ). The word "unsearchable" means that which cannot be tracked or traced. The wealth of God's salvation in Christ can never be fully comprehended by man (Rom. 11:33).

3:9-10 — "And to make all men see" - this revelation is universal. All men can share in the responsibilities and privileges of the church. It was Paul's task not only to proclaim the Gospel, but to make the church concept clear to all believers.

"The fellowship of the mystery" — "fellowship" is not found in most manuscripts. Instead the word that is translated "stewardship" or "administration" is found in more than 95% of the ancient Greek manuscripts. Paul was given details for the administration of the churches, which were given in detail to Timothy and Titus.

"The principalities and powers in heavenly places" — this revelation also affects the universe itself. The holy angels are taught by the church as they see the reconciling effect of the Gospel on Jews and Gentiles. These are truths that they could not learn any other way.

"Manifold wisdom of God" — the word "manifold" means many-colored or much variegated, suggesting the great diversity and the scintillating beauty of God's grace. A one-word English translation would be "iridescent."

3:11-13 — this revelation gives confidence to men.

"We have boldness and access with confidence" — through Jesus Christ believers have boldness and confident access to God. In Judaism, access to God was restricted to Jews and proselytes, but a bold and confident access to God was unknown. Such boldness is peculiar to Christianity. The word for boldness is composed of two words "all" and "speech." We have "all speech," freedom of speaking with God. We also have access, like having a private audience with the King. We also have confidence that as we approach Him He hears and answers our prayers (1 Jn. 5:14, 15).

"I desire that you faint not" — our confidence in approaching God leads to confidence in adverse circumstances. Paul asks that the Christians faint not, do not lose heart, because of his circumstances.

"My tribulations" — the idea conveyed by tribulations is that of crushing pressure; the verb was used of crushing grapes in a wine vat. The popular expression "between a rock and a hard place" describes the idea well. In tribulation we can be confident because God uses them to accomplish something good. Here Paul's tribulations are for the glory of the believers in Ephesus. Paul saw no need for sadness over his imprisonment.

II. Entreaty for God's Blessings — 3:14-21

A. Approach — 3:14-15

3:14-15 — "For this cause I bow my knees" - Paul resumes his prayer for the Ephesians after his digression of 3:2-13. Notice the phrase, "For this cause," is repeated (see 3:1, 13). Kneeling in prayer suggests humility and earnestness.

"Unto the Father...of whom the whole family...is named" — the Greek contains a wordplay which cannot be translated: *pater* (father), *patria* (family). Paul addresses God as "the Father," the ultimate source of human life, the one who upholds human life. The "whole family" looks at the church as one household, one family. "Of whom" shows the church derives her new nature from one God (the Father).

B. Appeal — 3:16-19

3:16 — "That he would grant you, according to the riches of His glory" - Paul prays that God would give on the basis of His glory, His rich glory, expressing itself in light unapproachable. God's riches are abundant and overflowing. His riches cannot be exhausted. No petition can be too great for God to handle.

"To be strengthened with might" — Paul first asks for strength for the inner man, the spiritual part of man. The inner man is in the greatest need for spiritual changes and it is the place where man is least able to make those changes. It takes supernatural power to accomplish these changes. This work is done by the Spirit so that the Christian is radically improved and perfected on the inside.

3:17 — "That Christ might dwell" - the purpose for strengthening the inner man is to prepare the believer's spiritual life for the dwelling of Christ. To "dwell" means to settle down and abide in someone. When Christ dwells in a believer, He settles down and lives in a believer.

"In love rooted and grounded" — Paul uses two images in this phrase. First, the tree-image pictures the Christian as rooted (past event with permanent results) in the soul of Christian love. Such love (1 Cor. 13) is necessary for true fruit to be grown. In botany, a tree can only grow high if its roots reach deep. Second, the building-image pictures the Christian as built on the foundation of love. A firm foundation is necessary for the construction of a skyscraper. When Christian lives are built on the bedrock of Christ's love, they can build a "skyscraper" life.

3:18 — "May be able to comprehend" - the verb to "be able" means to be eminently able to do something or to have full capacity. Such a full capacity can only come when the believer is rooted in love. This full capacity is to comprehend (or better, to apprehend) Christ's love. The believer is to firmly and thoroughly grasp and understand the extent of Christ's love. Perhaps the best allegorical explanation of Christ's love is as follows: the "breadth" refers to His love extended to all; the "length" is His love planned from eternity to eternity; the "depth" is His love expressed in Christ's death and descent to the grave; and the "height" is His love by interceding for believers with His Father in Heaven.

3:19 — "And to know" - the conjunction "and" shows a close relationship between the two thoughts in 3:18 and 19. "To know" refers to the personal experiential knowledge of Christ's love. There is a real knowledge of Christ's love, but it is impossible to exhaust all there is to know about His love--it "passes knowledge."

"That you might be filled with all the fullness of God" — the idea is that of a vessel being filled from a source outside of itself, being filled to the very limit of its capacity. Paul desires that the believer's inward man might be filled to the limit of his capacity with the attributes of God which can be shared (love, holiness, longsuffering, truth, etc.).

C. Acclaim — 3:20-21

3:20 — Paul concludes his prayer with a claim for God's ability.

"Now unto Him that is able to do" — God has the capability, the dynamic, to do whatever is needed to be done.

"Exceeding abundantly" — Paul coins a word here to express the super-capacity of God's power. Paul says several things about God's power:

He can do everything we ask.

He can do everything we think (imagine).

He can do more than we ask.

He can do more than we think.

He can do much more than we ask.

He can do much more than we think.

He can do "exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think."

"The power that works in us" — the amazing thing is that this tremendous power is at work in us already (1:19; 3:16; 6:10; Phil. 2:13; 4:13; 2 Tim. 1:7; Acts 1:8).

3:21 — "Unto Him be glory in the church" - Paul ascribes glory to God forever and ever, to all generations of the ages. How shall He receive such glory? He will receive it in the church by Christ Jesus. The marvelous work He has done in the church by bringing Jews and Gentiles together into such beautiful harmony will ever be glory to His name.