



Northland Christian Church

CHRISTIANS ARE CHOSEN TO PURSUE AND SPREAD HARMONY EPHESIANS 3:1-13 •

MAIN POINT

Because of God's grace, Christians are God's chosen instruments to spread the gospel to the entire world.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

Do you view your daily tasks as obligations or opportunities? Why?

Does the task itself or your attitude make the difference in whether it's an obligation or opportunity? Explain.

Would you say the majority of Christians regard service in the church as grace opportunities or guilt obligations?

Christians certainly recognize God's grace and power as necessary for salvation. We may even ask God to show His grace and power by praying for something miraculous, such as relief from a medical crisis. Yet we may not look at everyday ministry to others as evidence of God's grace and expressions of His power. This study in Ephesians 3 looks at Paul's account of his ministry, especially as that ministry stands as an example of serving God. Paul's example demonstrates that whenever we accept opportunities to serve God, He extends the grace and power we need to do whatever He asks.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

ASK A VOLUNTEER READ EPHESIANS 3:1-2.

Why would Paul have felt a responsibility to take the message of God's grace to the Gentiles?

What was likely Paul's attitude about being in prison? How does this reflect the ministry and passion of Jesus? How should it inform and influence our approach to life and ministry?

the Gentiles were the focus of Paul's ministry. As his readers very well knew, Paul was now a prisoner because of this ministry. Notice that the apostle considered himself detained because of Christ Jesus, although from an earthly perspective, he was the prisoner of Rome. Paul looked at reality from a heavenly perspective.

How often do you remember that part of the reason you were saved is so that you can be steward of God's grace reaching to others? How does this affect your attitude toward service?

How has God used a negative experience (job loss, strained relationship, or sickness) as evidence of His grace in your life? What about as opportunities to serve?

What might prevent believers from recognizing God's grace in their lives?

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ EPHESIANS 3:3-6

What, in your own words, was the mystery Paul was talking about here?

The big mystery was that God was extending His grace not only to the Jews but also to the Gentiles. These two groups were being brought together, in Christ, into a new entity of the church.

What one word would you use to define this mystery Paul shares? Why?

What is your personal responsibility since you know about this mystery, too?

Paul's mystery revealed speaks primarily to the unity of believers. He calls Christians to acknowledge that God has revealed that His eternal plan includes Gentiles as equal partners with Jews in Christ. It's important to continually ask the Lord to help us receive this revelation and then use it as a springboard for opportunities to serve Him.

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ EPHESIANS 3:7-13.

As he had done also in 3:2, the apostle declared that God's grace toward him was an undeserved gift. Only the working of His power could change a self-sufficient sinner into a steward of God. Paul humbly summarized his entire ministry with the word "servant." This term can also be translated "minister" or "deacon" and referred to a person who tended to the needs of others.

Is service in the church is our gift to God or God's gift to us?

How can we have the right attitude and ability to serve God?

What part does evangelism have in our service? What happens when we serve without faithfully sharing the good news of Jesus?

How can our acts of service and sharing, carried out as grace opportunities rather than guilt obligations, lead others to rejoice?

We can rejoice no matter what happens because we know God's plan is unfolding exactly as He intended. Through His grace and power, He's allowing us to play a part in that eternal plan through service. Whatever happens to help others take part in God's eternal plan is a matter for rejoicing.

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

What are some specific ways God has revealed His grace in your own life?

What opportunities has God given you that you need to view as gifts of God's grace rather than obligations?

What attitudes are necessary for us to regard these as opportunities rather than obligations?

How has this week's study helped you see that all serving and sharing is an opportunity of grace, not an obligation of guilt? What will you do differently as a result?

PRAYER

Thank God for His grace given to us, even in the most unexpected way. Pray that we would view every chance to serve or share as an opportunity rather than an obligation. Pray that God would continually give us humble attitudes as we seek to serve Him.

COMMENTARY

EPHESIANS 3:1-13

In verse 1, Paul began a prayer for spiritual power for the Ephesian believers. Before he actually got into the body of his prayer, he interrupted himself and launched into a parenthetical discussion of the great mystery of both Jews and Gentiles being united as one in Christ. His explanation lasts through verse 13, after which he resumes his original prayer begun in verse 1.

His primary statement in verses 1–7 is basically this: “God has revealed to me the message that there is no longer a distinction between Jew and Gentile, and he has made me a minister of that message.” However, he preceded that with the phrase, For this reason. The reason is found in 2:13–22: Jews and Gentiles have been brought near by the blood of Christ. Christ abolished the barrier between Jew and Gentile, and they are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.

We could summarize it this way: Christ abolished the barrier between Jew and Gentile and made them one new thing (a dwelling place of God in the Spirit), and Paul was made a minister of this message—that Gentiles are fellow-heirs, fellow-members, and fellow-partakers with the Jews of the promises of God.

3:1. Paul was in prison in Rome when he wrote Ephesians. He did not consider himself to be a prisoner of Rome. He considered himself a prisoner of Christ Jesus, because it was out of obedience to Jesus that he was a prisoner there; and he trusted completely in the sovereignty of God. He considered his circumstances to be in the will of God so that the gospel could be spread to the Gentiles. Therefore, he considered himself a prisoner for the sake of the Gentiles.

3:2-5. Human teachers did not make known the revelation of this great mystery to Paul. The Lord himself made it known by direct revelation. Paul had mentioned this mystery briefly in chapter 2. It was not revealed in the Old Testament but was revealed to the apostles and prophets in the opening days of the New Testament.

3:6. A mystery, in this biblical sense, is not to be understood in the same sense of mystery in modern usage. It does not mean that the truth Paul is proclaiming is mysterious or puzzling. Rather, mystery is a technical term, meaning “something that has not previously been made known.” The mystery is that Gentiles are fellow-heirs with Jews of the promises of God.

3:7. Paul was a minister of this message, specially commissioned to take the message to Gentiles. This mystery is now termed gospel, good news. Just as salvation comes by grace, so this gospel mystery mission came to Paul because of God's grace. This grace came to Paul as God worked in His power. Paul did not request or manipulate things to get to deliver this mystery gospel to the Gentiles. God in His grace worked it out so Paul would have this mission.

3:8. Paul considered himself to have no qualifications for the mission God gave him. He ranked last on the list of applicants. God chooses by different criteria than we do. He did not search out Paul's resumé to determine if he could do the job. God in love gave Paul the opportunity to tell Gentiles who had never heard the gospel the story of God's unsearchable riches of Christ.

3:9. Paul's mission included more than defining the mystery. He had to show Jew and Gentile alike exactly how God planned and carried out this mystery. He had to explain how God took the message entrusted to Jews and expanded it to include every person. Paul's own call on the Damascus Road was an essential part in this administration. Until this time God had kept both the mystery and its administration to Himself—a mystery reaching back to the time of creation. The mystery was not a recent addition to God's salvation plan for His world, just a recent revelation to His people.

3:10. Why wait until now? God saw the time was right. This mystery was more than it appeared. It was the very wisdom of God. Now that this stunning secret was revealed, this wisdom could be made known throughout heaven. Who should know it in heaven? The rulers and authorities. As in 1:20–21 (see 1 Cor. 15:24–26; Col. 1:16; 2:10, 15) these heavenly powers are angelic representatives of earthly rulers thought by some in Paul's audience to control access to God's throne. In 1:20–21, Paul showed that Christ alone had such control. Here he shows that the church is the means by which these evil forces could recognize God's plan and His operation of that plan—to create a church of Jews and Gentiles with the same way of salvation by grace.

3:11. The revealing and execution of this "church plan" is consistent with the eternal purpose of God. This purpose is no longer just a plan to be realized at a later date. In the cross of Christ, God's eternal plan of salvation has been realized. The church lets all the world see that plan accomplished and in action.

3:12. God's plan of salvation purposed before the world and executed in the cross clears the path to God. Through Christ, a person can enter God's presence with freedom and confidence. The cross has provided salvation that cleanses us of sin, forgives us, makes us holy, and thus enables us to enter the presence of the Holy one.

3:13. The eternal plan accomplished in Christ was administered in many ways. These included Paul's becoming a prisoner and proclaiming this message while in chains. Paul's situation in prison could easily discourage young churches and turn them away from Jesus. Paul urged the Ephesians not to let this happen. His suffering was no reason for sadness. It helped accomplish God's plan. Through Paul's suffering, the Ephesian believers gain glory—that is, they are led to know Christ more intimately and experience salvation more fully.