

THE REVEALED MYSTERY OF GENTILE SALVATION

A Sermon on Ephesians 3:1–7

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Pray with me....

The title of today's message is "The Revealed Mystery of Gentile Salvation." Since 2:11, the Apostle Paul has been stressing the need for the church's unity; Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians are one people of God in Christ. In 2:11–22 he urged the Ephesian church to remember the unifying power of Christ's love, and now in 3:1–21 he prays that they will know it. The apostle introduces this prayer in 3:1–13, and we'll focus this week on verses 1–7, which highlight that Gentile Christians as Gentiles are full fellow participants in God's people. Follow along as I read....

The Initial Opening to Paul's Prayer (3:1–2)

Two weeks ago, Pastor Charles showed us from Eph 2:11–18 how Jesus is the messenger of peace who creates in himself a new humanity and reconciles both Jews and Gentiles to God, removing all former separation. Then last week Taylor highlighted in 2:19–22 how the predominantly Gentile Christians in Ephesus were full-fledged fellow citizens with all the saints, full members of God's household, and together a holy temple in which God dwells.

"For this reason," 3:1 tells us that Paul prays, asking God to make known to the church the unifying power of Christ's love. But the prayer itself doesn't come until verse 14. Note how both 3:1 and 3:14 begin with "for this reason." In 3:1–2, Paul opens his prayer and clarifies for whom he prays, but then before getting to the content of the prayer, he digresses to provide an illustration of the unifying power of Christ's love.

Paul highlights in 3:1 that he is in prison "for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles." On the road to Damascus, Jesus told Paul that he was sending him to the Gentiles "to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me" (Acts 26:18). At the same time, the Lord said that he would show Paul "how much he must suffer for the sake of my name" as he carried Christ's name before the Gentiles (9:15–16). The unifying love of Christ is validated by the fact that Paul, Jewish missionary to the Gentiles, is willing to suffer imprisonment for their sake.

Remember that Paul was "a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent" of the church (1 Tim 1:13) who wanted nothing to do with Christians of any sort, let alone Gentiles. As we read in Ephesians 2:11–12, the Gentiles were the

“uncircumcision” who were “separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise.” Yet now Paul was “a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles.” His life illustrates the unifying love of Christ.

Two Saturdays ago, some missionary friends sent from our previous church buried their twelve-year-old daughter.¹ Ministering in northern Africa, this precious image-bearer got Typhoid fever, received treatment, went to sleep, and never woke up. This dear family is bearing a great cost for their discipleship, and their willingness to return to Africa to continue their mission with their seven remaining kids testifies to the love of God for their target people.

Paul’s willingness to suffer for Christ’s sake to see Gentiles saved also testified to the amazing love of Christ. All Christians, though citizens of a different homeland, remain on this earth with gospel purpose, and our suffering provides a context to display both the worth of God and the love of Christ to a world in need of both. That God, after saving you, has kept you on this planet and has led you into suffering is designed to testify to the world of Christ’s amazing love. You are among those of whom the world is not worthy, yet the love of Christ has planted you here to display his love to your neighbors and his worth to the power of darkness, even through your trials. When you face trials this week, consider how your trust in Jesus and steadiness amidst suffering and hope in pain bear witness to Christ’s love and worth to your kids, your neighbors, and your coworkers.

Paul now catches himself before moving on, saying, “assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God’s grace that was given to me for you” (Eph 3:2). This term translated “stewardship” is the same word translated “plan” in 1:9–10, which highlights that God has made “known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a *plan* for the fulness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.” I would render 3:2: “assuming that you have heard of the *plan* of God’s grace that was given to me for you.”

From the beginning of world history, God always intended to overcome the universal problem with a universal solution. For literally thousands of years, God’s people had been anticipating a day when the right order that was present in the beginning would be restored. Whereas blessing was lost in the garden through Adam’s sin, God promised one day to overcome the curse through Abraham and his offspring. In the hourglass of time, history broadly focused first on Adam’s fall and the curse on all humanity but then narrowed to focus on one nation, Israel,

¹ Perpetua Joy Broten (Dec 6, 2012–July 31, 2025). <https://www.gofundme.com/f/support-the-broten-family-in-their-time-of-loss>.

through whom God would reverse the curse by raising up a single deliver, Jesus, thus restoring blessing to some from the whole world. “And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘In you shall all the nations be blessed’” (Gal 3:8). Paul was convinced that he was living in the fulness of time and that Christ Jesus’s resurrection and ascension had marked the shift in world history from promise to fulfillment. Saving grace and every spiritual blessing was coming to all who by faith were united to Jesus—from both Jews and Gentiles. Paul’s mission to see both these groups reconciled to each other and to God was fulfilling a long-standing plan in the mysterious purposes of God.

At this, Paul digresses to clarify further the shape of the revealed mystery of Gentile salvation. Our verses today focus on the recipients and scope of the revealed mystery (vv. 3–5) and the content of the revealed mystery (vv. 6–7).

The Recipients and Scope of the Revealed Mystery of Gentile Salvation (3:3–5)

Paul notes first in verse 3 that “the mystery was made known to me by revelation.” Here the apostle refers to when the resurrected Jesus revealed himself and commissioned Paul on the road to Damascus. Saul the Christian persecutor became blind, unable to see, and then when his heart was changed, the Lord granted him physical sight, thus pointing to his spiritual enlightenment. Elsewhere Paul says, “I did not receive [the gospel] from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.... [God] was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles” (Gal 1:12, 16).

Paul states that this mystery is something about which he has already “written briefly,” which I believe recalls his words in 1:9–10. There he stresses that the proof all Christians—Jews and Gentiles alike—are redeemed or forgiven is that we understand “the *mystery* of [God’s] will ... set forth in Christ ... to unite all things in him.” Christians are those who grasp God’s progressive purposes to save some from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation.

In the Bible, the term “mystery” refers to something partially understood but not fully disclosed. The term occurs first in the book of Daniel, where the prophet refers to King Nebuchadnezzar’s dream as a “mystery” that God then reveals (Dan 2:27–30). The king could retell his dream but did not know its interpretation, and Paul believes that something about Gentile salvation is a mystery “that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed” (Rom 16:25–26).

Note verses 4–5: “When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other

generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.” Paul here contrasts what was understood before Jesus’s coming to what was newly revealed to the apostles and prophets.

But what does Paul mean when he states that “the mystery of Christ ... was not made known ... in other generations *as* it has now been revealed”? In my preparation, I shaped a two-page answer to this question that I cannot cover in full this morning, so I have placed print outs in the back for any who are interested. In short, I believe the particle “as” in 3:5 marks a shift from partial awareness to fuller awareness and not a move from complete ignorance to knowledge. Prophets like Abraham (Gen 17:4; 22:17–18), David (Pss 2:9; 18:49; cf. 87; 117:1), Isaiah (Isa 49:6; cf. Acts 13:47; 26:23), Jeremiah (Jer 3:17; 12:16; 30:8–9), and Zechariah (2:11; 8:22–23) foretold how a massive number of Gentiles would join the people of God in the days of the Messiah. On the one hand, Paul says that when God declared to Abraham, “In you shall all the nations be blessed,” the patriarch was hearing the gospel that “that God would justify the Gentiles by faith” (Gal 3:8). But Jesus could also note that “many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it” (Matt 13:17; cf. Heb 11:13). Yet the difference between what the Old Testament saints understood and what we now understand is more than just a shift from promise to fulfillment. What the apostles and prophets uniquely grew to understand is that when the Gentiles became Christians they would do so without having to embrace all the old covenant markers that distinguished Jews from non-Jews. And Paul was pointing to this fact when he said in 2:14–16:

For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.

The Old Testament believers anticipated that the Gentiles would one day join the people of God, but they didn’t fully understand that they would do so as Gentiles without having to make pilgrimages to Jerusalem and without having to being involved in Sabbath keeping, the food laws, festivals, and sacrifices. But all these shadows find their substance in Christ (Col 2:16–17). Rahab the Canaanite, Ruth the Moabite, and Uriah the Hittite had to become Israelites to join the people of God. Yet today, it’s our faith in Jesus and not our Sabbath keeping or festivals that mark Christians. Having addressed the recipients and scope of the revealed mystery, Paul now turns to address its content in verses 6–7.

The Content of the Revealed Mystery of Gentile Salvation (3:6–7)

In verse 6 Paul writes, “This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” In 1:10 Paul had defined the revealed mystery set forth in Christ to be the uniting of “all things ... in heaven and on earth.” In chapter 3 he is focusing specifically on the uniting of things on earth. What he says has been made known to the apostles and prophets is that the Gentiles are fully a part of God’s people. Paul uses a prefix that he repeats three times to stress the togetherness of the Gentiles and Jews in Christ: *fellow* heirs, *fellow* body members, and *fellow* partakers of the promise. Let’s take each of these in turn.

With the coming of Christ, Paul has recognized that those from non-Israelite nations, while remaining Gentiles, are “fellow heirs” alongside Jewish Christians, both of whom are adopted into God’s household (1:5; 2:19; cf. Rom 8:16–17; Gal 3:19; 4:6–7). The language of inheritance recalls 1:14, which highlights how all who have been adopted in Christ will redeem possession of an “inheritance.” 5:5 calls it an “inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.” Last week as my family drove past beautiful vistas of Lake Superior, I said jokingly to Teresa, “Wow, let’s buy that property.” She immediately responded, “It’s already all yours.” My mind immediately went to Paul’s statement in 1 Corinthians 3, “For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s” (1 Cor 3:21–23). God “put all things under [Jesus’s] feet and gave him as head over all things for the church” (Eph 1:22). And all things that are Christ’s become ours, including God’s presence and the entire new earth. If you have in meekness trusted in Christ alone for your life, the peaks of the Himalayas, the rain forests of the Amazon, the depths of Lake Superior, and the farmlands of the Midwest will be yours when the curse is finally overcome and the earth is transformed. And in the center of all will be the King in all his beauty; all sorrow will cease, and our joy will be full. Just think of it! “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth” (Matt 5:5).

Next, the Gentiles are “members of the same body” (Eph 3:6). Paul has already highlighted how Jesus creates in himself “one new man in place of the two”—a new humanity and Israel of God. Later the apostle will speak of Christ as “the head of the church, his body” (5:23), and he’ll highlight that, because there is “one body and one Spirit,” Christians must seek to “maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (4:3). Elsewhere he writes,

There are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the

contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable.... God has so composed the body ... that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. (1 Cor 21–22, 24–25)

As a church, we must fight to “maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph 4:3). Because we are equally part of Christ’s body, we must honor every member, valuing even the weaker parts. In our times of fellowship before and after a service or in our prayer groups or even throughout the week, it’s so easy to be drawn to those most like us—similar age, similar education, similar stage in life. Yet the call of this text is to fight all prejudice and to celebrate that in Christ everyone is equally valued and valuable. Consider this week how you may show value for a body member of whom you often take little notice. Set up a time for conversation over coffee; invite them over to play a game and ask them their story. Paul’s main point here is that Gentile Christians should not in any way feel like second-class members, even though they were once “separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise” (2:12). The body needs the head, and the head needs the body. In Christ, you are valued and newly created with purpose. “We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (2:10).

Finally, the mystery revealed to the apostles and prophets is that, in Christ Jesus and through the gospel, the Gentile believers are fellow “partakers of the promise” (2:6). It doesn’t say “promises” but “*the* promise.” In 1:13–14 Paul notes that in Christ the Gentile believers “were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance.” In 2:12 Paul then says that the Gentiles were “strangers to the covenants of promise” and, therefore, had “no hope without God in the world.” But 2:18 says that “through [Jesus] we both [Jewish and Gentile Christians] have access in one Spirit to the Father.” The promise seems to point to the gift of God’s Spirit (cf. John 7:39; Gal 3:14). Through the prophet Joel Yahweh foretold a day when “I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh” (Joel 2:28), something that Pentecost begins to realize (Acts 2:17). Isaiah, too, envisioned a day when God’s Spirit that rested on the Messiah (11:2; 42:1; 61:1) would be poured out on his offspring, sparking a new creation (32:15; 44:3; 59:21). For Paul, the presence of God’s Spirit among all the new covenant people signaled the international church was the end-times temple, the dwelling place of the living God.

To know that you partake of the Spirit means that God is always with you. You are never alone. Yet it is also this Spirit that unites you and me with every other believer on the planet and gives us hope for a future without pain and

pressures and problems. The one who revealed the Scriptures is now here to remind you of his promises. The one through whom God birthed your new life is present in you to bring that work to completion. Because God has now fulfilled all the Old Testament covenants of promise that anticipated the day when God's presence would be among his people, you and I have both hope and God in this world (2:12).

At the end of verse 6, Paul now stresses how all these beautiful blessings—fellow heirs, fellow body members, and fellow partakers of the promise—come to Gentiles “in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” There is no other way. Christianity is the only religion that declares the solution to the universal problem of sin and brokenness cannot be found in those who are part of the problem. The solution must be found outside of us—“in Christ through the gospel.”

Paul then adds, “Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power” (3:7). These final words bring us back to how Paul's own life provides an illustration of the unifying love of Christ. As he writes this letter, this Jewish missionary is suffering in prison because he was driven by the power of God to proclaim saving grace in Christ to the Gentiles. What a precious kindness to those only having bad news that God would reveal to his apostles and prophets the good news that non-Israelites as Gentiles could be saved and become fellow heirs, fellow body members, and fellow partakers of the Spirit. These are among the spiritual blessings that are fully ours in Christ Jesus (1:3).

Part of the revealed mystery of Christ is that Gentile Christians as Gentiles are full fellow participants in God's people. And because of this fact, we—a predominantly Gentile church in the northern suburbs of Kansas City—have great hope. Be encouraged today and find rest in knowing that you have an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ, that you are a vital member of this body, and that the very Spirit of the living God is with you and for you and will never leave you alone. Let us pray....

WHAT IS NEW ABOUT THE REVEALED MYSTERY OF GENTILE SALVATION?

Jason S. DeRouchie, PhD (8/17/2025)

What does Paul mean in Eph 3:5 that that “the mystery of Christ”—the mystery related to Gentile salvation—“was not made known ... in other generations *as* it has now been revealed”? Both the Old and New Testaments make clear that the Old Testament saints were anticipating that the Messiah would save a remnant from Israel and from the nations. For example, ...

1. God declared that Abraham would become “the father of a multitude of nations” (Gen 17:4) and then promised that his future singular “offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed” (22:17–18; cf. Gal 3:8).
2. God also noted through Isaiah that his servant would not only “bring back the preserved of Israel” but also be “a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (Isa 49:6; cf. Acts 13:47; 26:23).
3. Through Jeremiah, God spoke of a day when “all the nations shall gather to ... the presence of the LORD” (Jer 3:17; cf. 12:16; 30:8–9), and through Zechariah, he foretold how “many nations shall join themselves to the LORD ... and shall be my people” (Zech 2:11; cf. 8:22–23).

These types of verses could be multiplied into the dozens if not hundreds. Thus, Paul could say, “The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘In you shall all the nations be blessed.’” The apostle believed that the very “gospel of God” was “promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures concerning his Son” (Rom 1:1–3), and he draws on passages from the Law and the Prophets and Writings (15:8–12; cf. Ps 18:49; Deut 32:43; Ps 117:1; Isa 11:10) to justify his mission to the Gentiles. So, when Paul says the mystery of Gentile salvation “was not made known to the sons of men in other generations *as* it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit,” he must mean it wasn’t revealed to the extent that God disclosed it to the new covenant apostles and prophets. That is, the particle “*as*” in 3:5 marks a shift from partial awareness to fuller awareness and not a move from complete ignorance to knowledge. There is continuity between the testimony of the Testaments, but there is also discontinuity.

Jesus said, “Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it” (Matt 13:17). Indeed, saints from Abel to Abraham “all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar” (Heb 11:13). Part of what has changed in the progression between the old age to the new is the movement from anticipation to realization. Yet I think there is more.

The challenge of the early church was not in grasping that the Gentiles could become part of God’s people. Rahab the Canaanite, Ruth the Moabite, and Uriah the Hittite had all become Israelites in the old covenant era, and for Uriah this would have included circumcision. The old covenant Scriptures gave new covenant saints categories for Gentile inclusion in the people of God, and they also foretold that the days of the Messiah would bring in a massive influx of those from the nations. For centuries the Jews had anticipated that the Messiah of God would bring the saving blessing of God to a transformed people of God from all the nations of the earth.

But if this is the case, what does Paul mean when he says that “the mystery of Christ” for the Gentiles “was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit”? *I think what was not as clear in the Old Testament was that, when the Gentiles became Christians, they would do so without having to embrace all the old covenant markers that distinguished Jews from Gentiles.*

Many of the Old Testament passages that foretell Gentile inclusion in God’s future people imply circumcision (Ezek 47:22; cf. Exod 12:48–49) and speak of their pilgrimages to God’s temple (e.g., Isa 2:2–4; Jer 3:17; Zech 2:22–23) and their involvement in Sabbath keeping (Isa 56:4–5), sacrifices (56:6–7; 66:21), and feasts (Zech 14:16–19). Yet Jesus’s person and work culminating in his bodily resurrection showed that he was the substance to which all these old covenant shadows pointed (Col 2:16–17). Jesus was the ultimate temple (John 2:18–22), and all who by grace through faith participate in him become God’s temple and dwelling place, whether Jews or Gentiles (Eph 2:19–22). The Old Testament texts portraying a future pilgrimage to the temple Jerusalem are properly understood symbolically to portray an international ingathering to God in Christ at the end of the age. The center of Christianity is not the earthly Jerusalem but Jesus and the heavenly Jerusalem from which he reigns (1:20–21; 2:6; cf. Gal 4:25–26; Heb 12:22–24). Similarly, Old Testament texts that refer to those from the nations keeping Sabbaths and feasts and performing sacrifices we should read figuratively as typological and not direct prophecy. Jesus is now “Lord of the Sabbath” in who we find our rest (Matt 11:28–30; 12:8), he is our “Passover Lamb” through whom we find pardon (1 Cor 5:7), and we should offer our bodies as living sacrifices (Rom 12:1), praising him with our lips and doing good and sharing, for “such sacrifices are pleasing to God” (Heb 13:15–16; cf. 1 Pet 2:5). Because at the cross Jesus overcame the unclean serpent, the distinction between clean and unclean animals is abolished in the new covenant and with it the distinction between Israelites and non-Israelites that the food laws created (Mark 7:19; Acts 10:14–15, 28; cf. Lev 20:25–26).

Supporting my reading, just recall Paul’s comments from the previous passages. Beginning in 2:11:

Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. (2:11–12)

Because the Gentiles were separated from Israel, they were separated from Christ.

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. (2:13–18)

Both Jews and Gentiles needed reconciliation with God, and in Christ a new humanity is formed that is marked by faith in Christ and not “the law of commandments expressed in ordinances.” Thus, part of the revealed mystery of Christ is that Gentile Christians as Gentiles are full fellow participants in God’s people.