

Small Group Leaders Notes

Ephesians 3

Context

- **“For this reason...” (2:19-3:1 and 3:14)**
 - The way that Paul starts chapter 3 shows us that this chapter is closely related to the previous chapter. It is because Jews and Gentiles are now united in Christ, fellow citizens and members of God’s household who are being built together to become God’s holy temple (2:19-22) that Paul is now going to pray for them in chapter 3.
- **“The mystery of his will...” (1:9-10)**
 - A big theme in chapter 3 is “the mystery of Christ” (3:4, 6, 9.) This takes us back to 1:9-10 where Paul told us that “[God] made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfilment - to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.” God’s plan for his universe is to unite all things in heaven and on earth under Christ and this is exactly what he is doing in the church as we have seen in chapter 2 and now in chapter 3.
- **The unity of the church (3:6 → ch4)**
 - Following on from the previous theme is the idea of the unity of the church. Paul has already told us that Jew and Gentiles are now united in Christ and he will go on to practically unpack this further in chapter 4. For now it is worth noticing just how corporate the language is in chapter 3.
- **The dimensions of Christ’s love (chs1-2 → 3:18)**
 - In 3:18 Paul will pray that the Ephesians may have power to grasp the dimensions of Christ’s love and he has already shown us something of these dimensions in chapters 1-2. See for example 2:17 (width - both near and far from God,) 1:4-5 (long - it’s an eternal love,) 2:1-7 (high - it’s a love that lifts us up from the grave to exalt us with Christ in the heavenly realms,) 2:13 (depth - it is a deep and sacrificial love.)

Structure

- Key to understanding the structure of this chapter is to notice the repeated phrase “For this reason...” which comes in 3:1 and 3:14. Having explained how Jewish and Gentile Christians are together being built into God’s holy temple Paul is about to pray for them but having described himself as “the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles...” he feels the need to explain what he means by this and why they should not be discouraged by his suffering (see v13.) The structure of the chapter therefore looks something like this;

v1 - Paul is about to pray for them but breaks off so as to explain why they shouldn’t be discouraged by his suffering for them.

v2-13 - Paul explains his role as a suffering servant of Christ in God’s great plan of salvation.

v14-21 - Paul returns to pray for the Ephesians in light of chapter 2.

Notes

• **v1-13 - Paul's Role in God's Plan**

- ***Don't lose sight of v13*** - There is so much great theology in this section that it could be easy to miss Paul's reason for telling us all of this. V13 is the application of v2-12, Paul wrote these verses so that the Ephesians would not be discouraged by Paul's suffering but would instead see how it fits into God's plan and is actually for their good. As we study these verses we need to keep Paul's purpose in view to help us understand and apply these verses properly.

• ***The Mystery of Christ;***

- ***How has it been revealed?*** - It has been revealed by revelation (v3) by the Spirit (v4.) This is not something that Paul created or that has evolved over time. The gospel is not something that we have worked out for ourselves. It is something that God had to reveal to us.
- ***When was it revealed?*** Paul tells us that the mystery was not revealed to previous generations (v5, v9) but has now been revealed to the Apostles and Prophets (more on them in Tricky Bits.) In the Old Testament God had promised that he would bring unity to his broken world (see Genesis 12) but what was hidden was how God was going to do this. It is the 'How' that has now been revealed to the Apostles and Prophets in the gospel.
- ***What is it?*** - v6 is key here - "through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus." In many ways this verses summarises the message of chapter 2. Jew and Gentile Christians now look forward to the same glorious future (heirs together), they are members together of the same body of Christ and all this is guaranteed and equipped by being sharers together of the same Spirit.
- ***Why has it been revealed now?*** - v10 - God's purpose is to display through the church his amazing multi-faceted wisdom not only to the watching world but to Satan and his forces (more on this in the trick bits.) The church is God's pride and joy, the centre piece of his exhibition on display for everyone to see.
- ***So what?*** Paul will unpack the implications of v6 in chapter 4 and there is much that we can take from this now as we think about our role in the church and how we view others in the church. The other key applications come in v12-13. We can now have great confidence as we come to God in prayer (which Paul is about to model in v14-21) and we therefore need not be discouraged when we or others are suffering for the gospel. God is achieving his wonderful plan and even the suffering of his servants is part of this plan to build his church and display his glory!

• **v14-21 - Paul's Prayer for the Ephesians because of their Place in God's Plan**

• ***Who does Paul pray to?***

- ***"The Father (v14)... .. Who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine... (v20)"*** - Paul prays such a big prayer for the Ephesians because of who he is praying to. He is praying to the Father who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing (1:3). He is the God who can do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, indeed through chapters 1-2 Paul has shown us that God has indeed already done more than we could ever have imagined.

Knowing who it is that he prays to, Paul prays with confidence and boldness through the access won by Christ (3:12.)

- **What does Paul pray for?**

- *Power to make Christ at home in us (v16-17)* - Christ already dwells in the Ephesian Christians by his Spirit but Paul prays that Christ may be more and more at home in them. He is praying that the Ephesians may have the power to renovate and redecorate their lives so that they are a more and more appropriate dwelling for Christ. From 4:17 onwards Paul will list various ways in which we need to renovate and redecorate our lives so that Christ will be more and more at home in us. In effect this is a prayer for the Ephesians continuing sanctification and growth in holiness.
- *Power to grasp the love of Christ for us (v17-19)* - Paul is not just praying that the Ephesians would have a greater intellectual grasp of the love of Christ. He is also praying that they would have a greater experiential grasp of the love of Christ. In effect Paul is praying that the great truths that he has been expounding in the first part of the letter would be applied deeply to the Ephesians hearts and minds. You could say that he wants the Ephesians to grasp and be grasped by the love of Christ.

Tricky Bits

- **Apostles and Prophets (v5)** - There is often much debate about whether Apostles and Prophets were unique to the early church or whether they still exist today.
 - First we need to understand that the New Testament uses the term 'apostle' in two ways.
 - 1st it can be used in a general sense for anyone who has been sent (apostle literally means 'sent one'.) We find an example of this usage in Romans 16:7.
 - 2nd the term apostle can be used more specifically to refer to those men who Jesus commissioned to be his Apostles as witnesses of his resurrection. These were the twelve and Paul.
 - Having seen this distinction we can see that whilst the first group may still exist today the second group cannot because those original apostles have died out. Some people therefore like to distinguish between 'apostles' and 'The Apostles.'
 - As we come to Ephesians 3:5 the question is, 'which type of apostles is Paul referring to?' Here context is key. In 2:20 Paul said that the church was "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone..." Again in 4:11 he will say that "Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers..." From these references it seems that Paul is talking about the Apostles who played a unique foundational role in the establishment of the church.
 - Similarly when it comes to Prophets there is much debate. Without getting into the question of prophets today, it seems that Paul is referring to some sort of unique group of foundational prophets who were present in the early church as the foundations of the church, receiving God's revelation that we now have in the New Testament.
- **Rulers and Authorities in the Heavenly Realms (v10)** Again context is key as Paul makes several references to rulers and authorities and the heavenly realms in Ephesians. When we compare all the references to the heavenly realms (see 1:3, 1:20-21, 2:6, 3:10 and 6:11-12) it becomes clear that the Rulers and Authorities that

Paul is referring to here are not earthly rulers and authorities but rather Satan and his spiritual forces who are in rebellion against God. This raises the question of why God wants to display his wisdom to Satan through the church. A bit of biblical theology helps at this point. When we think back to Genesis 1-3 we see that God created a perfect world of harmony and unity. Satan attempted and succeeded in sowing disharmony and division between men and women and people and God. What we are being told in Ephesians 3 is that through the gospel and in the church, God is bringing harmony and unity under Christ where previously there was Satan's mess of disharmony and division. God therefore wants Satan to see that Satan's plan has failed and God has triumphed and will triumph ultimately and finally at the end of the age.

- **Every family in heaven and on earth derives its name (v15)** There is a bit of debate over exactly what this is referring to but however we interpret this phrase it doesn't affect the content of the prayer.
 - Some translators take the reference to family to be referring to God's family the church (see the 1984 NIV). This would make sense of the reference to heaven and on earth as there is the church gathered around the throne in heaven and the church on earth.
 - Alternatively it could be referring to all the different kinds of families that there are (see the new NIV.) If this is right then Paul is making a broader point that all the different families (not just the church) have their origin in God. The reference to heavenly families is perhaps a bit trickier with this interpretation but O'Brien argues that;

"Every family in heaven points to family groupings and classes of angels (see on 1:21), good and rebellious alike, which owe their origin to God, while every family on earth speaks of family groupings and so of the basic structures of human relationships which owe their existence to him."

Big Ideas

v1-13 - Paul's Role - Making known the mystery of how Jews and Gentiles are now united in Christ

v14-21 - Paul's Prayer - For power to to make Christ more at home in us and for power to grasp more of Christ's love for us

Applications

- **A higher view of the local church** - The local church is God's pride and joy (v10.) He puts the local church on display to as the place where his incredible wisdom is seen most clearly. Through bad or boring experiences of church we can easily have too low a view of the local church. This chapter helps us to see the local church as God sees it.
- **Understanding our role in the local church** - We are all members together of the body of Christ. As Paul will go on to show us in chapter 4 this means that we all have a part to play in building up the local church. We don't just come to be served and built up, we come to serve and to build others up.
- **Changing our view of other people in the local church** - We might be tempted to look down on other people or simply to ignore them and think that church is just about 'me and God.' Ephesians 3 helps us to see that no matter what our backgrounds we are

now “heirs together... members together... and sharers together.” We are equal and united in Christ which means that we each need each other.

- **Changing our prayers for the local church** - So often we can pray very practical prayers based on people’s material needs. Paul urges us to pray big spiritual prayers because we pray to a big God who has already done big things and can do bigger things than we could ever imagine. It is worth thinking about how you pray as a group? When do you pray? What do you pray for? Do you ever pray the sorts of prayers that Paul prays here? Do you just pray about the needs and activities of the church or do we also pray for one another’s spiritual wellbeing and progress. Perhaps after studying this passage you might decide to make some changes.
- **Not being discouraged by suffering but see how God can use it for the good of others** - Remember that in v1-13 Paul is showing them why they shouldn’t be discouraged by their suffering. He wants them to see that this is all part of God’s plan and that amazingly his suffering is actually for their good. This should give us confidence that God is in complete control even when things seem to be going wrong. Everything is going according to God’s plan and he can use even the suffering of his servants for the good of others.

Bible Study

Starter - Talk about the different people/situations/things that your group have prayed for recently. What do our prayers tell us about ourselves? Our relationships with one another? Our view of the church?

If you are like me then a lot of your prayers are about very practical things such as people's physical and material needs. It is right that we pray for these things but Paul prays big spiritual prayers and this chapter helps us to see why.

v1-13

1. What does Paul tell us about himself and his situation? (v1, v7, v13)

Paul's a prisoner for Christ, he's suffering for the sake of the Gentiles and he's a servant of the gospel.

2. How are the Ephesians tempted to feel when they hear what's happening to Paul? (v13)

The Ephesians seem to be discouraged by this news. They probably didn't expect God's apostle to be suffering. How could this be part of God's plan?

3. v2-13 are full of reasons why they shouldn't be discouraged and they centre on the mystery of Christ that Paul was proclaiming.

A. What does Paul say is the mystery of Christ? (v6)

Try to focus on the content of the mystery in v6. This is the mystery that Paul is suffering for. Here we see that the mystery is how God is reconciling Jews and Gentiles not only to one another but also to himself. We see here that we're actively members of Christ's body now, we share the same hope of glory and we're empowered and sealed with the same Spirit. This is great news, no wonder Paul was so keen to proclaim this mystery and suffer in the process.

B. Why should the Ephesians not be discouraged by Paul's suffering?

God's plan is working! Jews and Gentiles are being united together in Christ through the gospel and even when Paul is imprisoned it's actually all part of God's plan.

4. How will v6 and v10 change our attitude to BEC and the other people who make up BEC?

v6 shows us how no matter what our background we are all equal and united in the church. We are all equal in Christ and we all need each other. We are all different parts of the same body and we need each other if we are to be built up and mature in Christ (see chapter 4.)

v10 shows us that the church is God's masterpiece, he puts the church on display for all to see because it's in the local church that God's wisdom is displayed.

v14-21

5. What does Paul pray for in v16-17?

He prays that the Holy Spirit's power would be at work in their inner being (soul) so that Christ may dwell in their hearts by faith. In effect he is praying that they would have the power to change for Christ so that Christ would really feel at home in them. Paul is praying that they would have the power to renovate their lives so that they really would be a home fit for Christ. We see what this will look like in practice in 4:17 onwards.

6. How have you experienced the Spirit's renovating power in your life?

Here's an opportunity for the group to share ways in which they have seen the Holy Spirit change and sanctify them. Some people might find this too personal, others may feel that they don't have much of a story to tell. As group leaders we want to gently encourage the group to be open with one another. We also want to encourage the group to celebrate and give thanks for any ways (however small) that God has been at work in people's lives.

7. What does Paul pray for in v17-19?

He prays that they would all together (important detail) know more and more of the love of Christ. You may want to review the dimensions of Christ's love from chapters 1-2. We need to make sure that we see why Paul prays this prayer - v19 it's so that we might be mature, filled to the measure of the fulness of God/all that God wants us to be. In other words Paul prays they would know more of Christ's love so that they might grow up to be mature Christians.

8. How can we help one another to know more of the love of Christ?

Again here is an opportunity for the group to share practical things that we can do to help one another grow in Christ's love. You might want to point out from v18 that this is something that we're to do together not just on our own.

9. Why does Paul pray these sorts of prayers for the Ephesians?

1. What does he believe about the church? (3:14)

The reason Paul prays as he does is because he sees that the church is God's holy temple (2:21-22) and that we're heirs together, members together and sharers together and that through the church God's wisdom is displayed. Paul prays the way he does because of how he sees the church. My prayers for the church will very often reflect my view of the church (see back to the starter question.)]

2. What does he believe about God? (3:14-15 and 3:20-21)

Paul's theology (beliefs about God) shape his prayers for the Ephesians. It is because he believes that God can do immeasurably more than all he asks or imagines that he is emboldened to pray these big prayers for the Ephesians.

10. If I really believed v20-21 were true, how would it change my prayers?

This final question brings us back to the starter question and gives us the opportunity to examine and change how we pray in the light of the passage. You might want to talk about how this will change what we pray for and maybe also how we pray.