

DAY
4

A New Building Ephesians 3:6, 8-12

On each day of our devotional this week, we read about a new community. Paul specifically points out the benefits of this new community. Paul calls Jews and Gentiles “sharers together” in Christ’s promises. When Paul writes that we are “members together of one body,” he was actually inventing a new Greek word. How interesting that Paul had to come up with a brand new word for this new community he was describing. Even the New Testament’s greatest writer struggled to describe this new people that God was building.

Think about what this experience would have been like for the people of Paul’s time. On one hand, the Jews had experienced the privilege of being God’s chosen people. They had a favored status. They were accustomed, perhaps, to looking down their noses at those poor Gentiles. And here comes Jesus, mixing up the status quo! Now, where they once had privilege, they were experiencing equality. It probably felt a little unfair, or strange, or uncomfortable.

On the other side, the Gentiles were being welcomed into an established way of life with new rituals and customs. Based on Paul’s writings in Galatians, it’s pretty likely that they were experiencing discrimination from ethnically Jewish Christ followers. They probably felt like outsiders.

But together, this group is free to approach God. They are coheirs in the boundless riches of Christ. The Church is made richer, more beautiful, and more effective by all of us with our differing backgrounds. John Stott writes, “The church as a multi-racial, multi-cultural community is like a beautiful tapestry. Its members come from a wide range of colorful backgrounds. No other human community resembles it. Its diversity and harmony are unique. It is God’s new society.”

Revelation 7 describes a scene in heaven of a diverse group of Christ followers: ‘After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.’ In your prayer time today, ask God how you can help build up his new society here on earth. Are you holding hidden prejudices in your heart? Do you feel like others belong more than you? Ask God to forgive you of any hidden thoughts that keep you from fully participating in this new community.

DAY
5

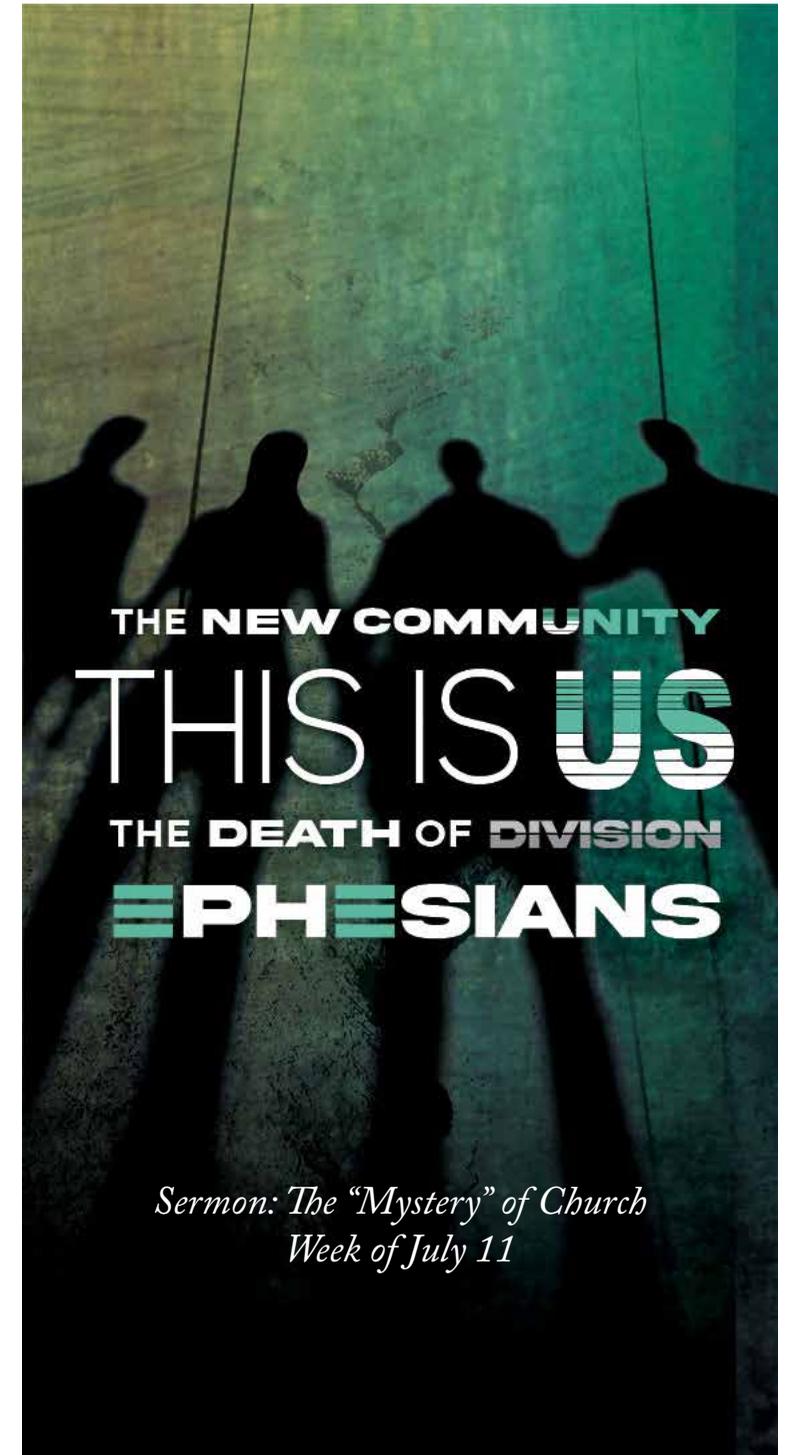
God’s Temple Skim Ephesians 3:1-13

Paul dedicated his whole life to the church. He spread the gospel of Jesus. He established new Church communities. He was imprisoned. He suffered. Through his letters, he outlined theology, settled disputes, and disciplined the new Christians with writings that still teach us today what it means to follow Jesus.

Few of us will be asked to make the sorts of sacrifices that Paul experienced, but we still share his same mission. We are still here to help establish the new community of Jesus. Hebrews 10:24-25 says, “So let’s do it—full of belief, confident that we’re presentable inside and out. Let’s keep a firm grip on the promises that keep us going. He always keeps his word. Let’s see how inventive we can be in encouraging love and helping out, not avoiding worshiping together as some do but spurring each other on, especially as we see the big Day approaching.”

Take some time to think and pray about the following questions:

How inventive can you be in encouraging love and helping out? Who in our church community needs your encouraging word? How can you inspire others to good deeds? Who are the people that you need to invite into this new community? Do you harbor any ill will toward fellow church members? Do you need to seek reconciliation with anyone?



DAY
1

A Mystery Revealed Ephesians 3:1-13

Last week, we took a look at what Jesus' reconciling work has done for the Gentiles. Today, we have asked you to read the entire section that kicks off chapter three. Throughout this week, we'll break down individual verses.

Paul now moves into a section where he talks a little more about himself and his purpose. He gets a little reflective about his place in God's big plan to create a new people. At first glance, this section seems a little complicated. Paul keeps talking about some mystery. There is a mystery of Christ (v. 4), and a mystery of how he brings people together (v. 6), and how that mystery is administered that has been hidden (v. 9).

Do you like mysteries? Some people love to watch movies or read books that keep them guessing. They get a thrill in trying to uncover a mystery, piece together clues, and solve the puzzle before the character in the movie or book does. This is what we often think of when we hear the word *mystery*.

But, it is important to note that the word we read in English as *mystery* has a slightly different meaning in the Greek. John Stott writes, "Originally, the Greek word referred to a truth into which someone had been initiated. . . More simply, *mysterion* is a truth hitherto hidden from human knowledge or understanding but now disclosed by the revelation of God."

Through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.

This new revelation is the way that Jews and Gentiles are now brought together in Christ. They are brought together in union with one another. Paul has been given a special part to play in this mystery being revealed. He gets to share 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."

Are there any people that you think are beyond God's saving grace? Do they seem too far for God to bring near? Paul's special truth was that God wants to reconcile people who are far from one another and far from him. Pray for specific people in your life and in our community who need the saving and reconciling work of God.

DAY
2

God's Big Family Ephesians 3:1-13

Yesterday, we looked at God's big purpose that had been revealed. This is the way it is translated in *The Message*: "The mystery is that people who have never heard of God and those who have heard of him all their lives (what I've been calling outsiders and insiders) stand on the same ground before God. They get the same offer, same help, same promises in Christ Jesus. The Message is accessible and welcoming to everyone, across the board."

God saves individuals, yes, but this is his big plan, his big purpose, his big revealed mystery: insiders and outsiders are all on the same ground before God! This was radical in Paul's time, and it is radical in our time. God is interested in building a new, diverse community of people of all different backgrounds and experiences. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "When people are baptized into the body of Christ, not only is their personal status as regards salvation changed, but so are the relationships of daily life."

Howard A. Snyder describes something interesting that was happening during Paul's time: "Christians began to think of themselves as a third race: neither Jew nor Gentile, but something new transcending both. . . The church became not just a subculture within a dominant culture, but a new counterculture, a contrast community in the Greco-Roman world."

And somehow, this rag-tag bunch of problematic people from messy backgrounds has to figure out how to get along! What a powerful example their unity was to the people around them. Back in Galatians 3, Paul had written, "In Christ's family there can be no division into Jew and non-Jew, slave and free, male and female. Among us you are all equal. That is, we are all in a common relationship with Jesus Christ."

Scripture describes us Christians as "In the world but not of it." What if we could reclaim this full unity experienced by the early church? What if we could show the world around us what true unity and community looks like? Pray that the Holy Spirit would continue to make us humble, make us unified, and make us a distinct community, different than the division-plagued world around us.

DAY
3

Paul's Mission Ephesians 3:1, 7, 8, 13

Paul has, perhaps, one of the greatest conversion stories in all of scripture. It was certainly very dramatic! Before he became a Christian, Paul was someone who punished followers of Jesus. In Galatians 1:13-14 he writes, "For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers." Then, as he was traveling down the road to Damascus one day, Paul had a dramatic encounter with Jesus. You can read this entire story in Acts 9:1-19.

After this, Paul became a powerful preacher of God's word, and he went on missionary journeys, establishing new Christian communities. After an early incident with some influential Jews (you can read about that in Acts 13), Paul changed his mission to focusing specifically on Gentiles. Later, he even had a confrontation with Peter when he was being prejudiced toward Gentiles. (Read more about this incident in Galatians 2.) In between teaching and traveling, Paul faced intense backlash for his ministry, and was often imprisoned.

This background can give you a little more context about the man who, in Ephesians 3, calls himself a "prisoner for the sake of the Gentiles." Paul dedicated his life, his freedom, his safety, and his comfort for the sake of the Gentiles.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul references his story. He is assuming that the audience would have heard about his dramatic story. It's a difficult story, certainly, but it is also a story of God's grace. Paul describes himself as a prisoner, a servant and "less than the least." But he can take heart that his sufferings are all to help advance this beautiful revealed mystery of God.

Paul had a laser-sharp focus on who he was trying to reach. He had a clearly defined mission and purpose. What is your personal mission? Where is God calling you? Is it to your family, your coworkers, people who need help in our community? If you need help clarifying this mission, pray to God and ask him to reveal your mission and give you Paul's focus on who you are meant to reach.