

The Book of Ephesians, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 5: The Mystery of the Gospel

Ephesians 3:1–13

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This lesson celebrates the gospel as a revealed mystery, and its sharpest doctrinal point is the nature of that revelation. Paul says the mystery was made known by revelation to God's holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit (vv. 3–5). The once-hidden plan of God has now been fully and finally revealed through the inspired apostles and prophets of the first century. This is the doctrinal stake to drive in: the revelation is complete. The teacher should help the class see that what was hidden for ages has now been disclosed, written down, and delivered to us in the New Testament, which guards us against the modern claims of fresh revelations, continuing apostleship, and new doctrines that go beyond what the apostles delivered once for all (Jude 3; 2 Timothy 3:16–17).

The lesson also lifts the church to a stunning height. Through the church, Paul says, the manifold wisdom of God is being made known even to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places (v. 10). The reconciled community of Jew and Gentile is God's display of wisdom before the watching universe. The teacher should let this dignify the ordinary work of the local congregation, which is never merely a club but an exhibition of the wisdom of God.

Formationally, the passage models humble, grateful service. Paul, who calls himself the least of all the saints, marvels that he was entrusted with the unsearchable riches of Christ. The aim is to lead students to embrace their own stewardship of grace, to take their full place as heirs, and to draw near to God with the boldness Christ has secured. Doctrine and devotion meet here: a completed revelation, a glorious church, and a believer freed to serve.

Question 1

Student Question:

In verses 1 through 6 Paul speaks of the mystery of Christ. What does Paul mean by a mystery, and what is the actual content of this mystery according to verse 6?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

In ordinary speech a mystery is a problem to be solved. In Paul's vocabulary a mystery is something once hidden in God and now revealed by God, a truth no one could have reasoned their way to, which God has graciously disclosed. The emphasis falls on God's initiative in making known what was concealed.

Paul states the content plainly in verse 6: the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. The astonishing secret is the full inclusion of the nations into the people of God on equal footing, through the gospel.

This was genuinely new in its fullness. The Old Testament hinted that the nations would be blessed through Abraham, but the depth of this equality, Gentiles as fellow heirs and fellow members of one body with no second status, was hidden until Christ. Now it is openly proclaimed.

Help the class feel the wonder. The gospel is not a human discovery but a divine disclosure, and its content is breathtakingly generous: the door of God's family flung open to all.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Mystery as truth once hidden in God, now revealed by God
- The content of the mystery: Gentiles as fellow heirs and equal members
- The gospel as divine disclosure, not human discovery
- The generosity of God's saving plan

Discussion Prompts

- What does Paul mean by mystery, and how is it different from a puzzle?
- What is the actual content of the mystery in verse 6?
- Why is the full inclusion of the Gentiles such good news?

Question 2

Student Question:

The mystery is that Gentiles are fellow heirs and full members of the body, with no second-class status. Where do you still live as though you were a second-class member of God's family, and how does this truth invite you to take your full place in Christ?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question applies the mystery personally. Paul insists that Gentile believers are fellow heirs and full members with no asterisk. Yet many believers carry a quiet sense of being second-class, less loved, less qualified, on the edge of the family rather than at its center.

Such feelings may come from a difficult past, a sense of unworthiness, or comparison with more impressive Christians. The gospel answers them all: in Christ there is no second tier. Every believer is a full heir of the same inheritance.

Encourage students to take their full place. Belonging is not earned by performance or seniority; it is given in Christ. Living as a full member means serving, contributing, and drawing near without waiting to feel qualified.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- No second-class members in the body of Christ
- Full inheritance and belonging given in Christ
- Overcoming a sense of unworthiness with the gospel
- Taking one's full place in God's family

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you live as though you were a second-class member of God's family?
- What feeds that sense of being on the edge rather than fully in?
- What would taking your full place in Christ look like this week?

Question 3

Student Question:

In verse 7 Paul says he became a minister of this gospel according to the gift of God's grace, given him by the working of His power. What does it mean that Paul's ministry was a gift of grace rather than a personal achievement, and how does that shape the way we think about serving God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul says he became a minister of the gospel according to the gift of God's grace, given by the working of His power (v. 7). He frames his entire ministry as a gift received, not a position achieved. Even the power to carry it out is God's.

This reframes how we think about all Christian service. Ministry is not a reward for the talented or a platform for the ambitious; it is a stewardship of grace entrusted by God. The one who serves is a recipient before he is a worker.

It also guards against both pride and despair. Pride is checked because the gift and the power are God's, not ours. Despair is checked because we serve in His strength, not our own. The same grace that saved us equips us to serve.

Help the class apply this to their own service in the church, so that they neither boast in their contributions nor shrink back as though they had nothing to give.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Ministry as a gift of grace, not a personal achievement
- Serving in God's power rather than our own
- Grace as a guard against both pride and despair
- Every believer as a steward of God's grace

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that Paul's ministry was a gift, not an accomplishment?
- How does this protect us from both pride and discouragement in service?
- How might it change your serving to see it as stewarding God's grace?

Question 4

Student Question:

Paul received grace not only to be saved but to serve. What gift of grace has God given you to serve others, and are you stewarding it or burying it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Scripture teaches that God gives grace not only for salvation but for service; every believer receives some gift to be used for the good of the body (1 Peter 4:10; Romans 12:6). This question asks students to identify and steward theirs.

Help them think broadly. Gifts of grace include teaching, encouragement, hospitality, mercy, giving, administration, and quiet faithful service. Many undervalue their gift because it is not visible or dramatic.

The pointed question is whether they are stewarding the gift or burying it, like the servant in the parable who hid his talent in the ground. Grace received is meant to be put to work, not preserved unused.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Grace given to every believer for service
- The breadth of spiritual gifts, including hidden ones
- Stewarding rather than burying our gifts
- Service as the natural overflow of received grace

Discussion Prompts

- What gift of grace has God given you to serve others?
- Are you using that gift, or burying it? Why?
- What is one way you could put it to work this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

In verse 8 Paul calls himself the very least of all the saints, yet he was given the task of preaching the unsearchable riches of Christ. How do Paul's deep humility and his high calling fit together, and what does the phrase unsearchable riches of Christ tell us about the gospel?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verse 8 holds together two things that rarely meet: Paul calls himself the very least of all the saints, and in the same breath names his calling to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ. Deep humility and high calling sit side by side.

Paul's humility was not false modesty. He remembered that he had persecuted the church (1 Corinthians 15:9), and he never got over the grace that saved and commissioned him. Yet his low view of himself did not lower his view of his task; it heightened his wonder that God would use him.

The phrase unsearchable riches of Christ means wealth that can never be fully explored or exhausted. However deeply we go into Christ, there is always more, more grace, more love, more wisdom, more glory. The gospel is a treasure with no bottom.

Help the class see that humility and confidence in the gospel are not opposites. The smaller we feel before such riches, the more freely we can speak of them, because the glory is all Christ's.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Genuine humility joined to a high calling
- Paul's wonder at being used despite his past
- The unsearchable, inexhaustible riches of Christ
- Humility and gospel confidence as partners, not rivals

Discussion Prompts

- How do Paul's humility and his high calling fit together?
- What does unsearchable riches of Christ tell you about the gospel?
- Why does humility magnify, rather than diminish, the glory of Christ?

Question 6

Student Question:

Paul held together a low view of himself and a high view of his calling. How might genuine humility actually free you to serve more boldly, rather than holding you back?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question challenges a common misuse of humility, treating it as a reason to do nothing. Many hold back from serving or speaking because they feel unqualified. Paul shows a better way: true humility frees us to serve boldly because it takes the focus off ourselves.

When our confidence rests on our own adequacy, every weakness becomes a reason to retreat. When our confidence rests on God's grace and the riches of Christ, our weakness becomes the

very stage for His power (2 Corinthians 12:9). The least of the saints can preach the greatest of treasures.

Encourage students to stop waiting until they feel qualified. The gospel is not made true by our adequacy. Humble service offered in dependence on God is exactly what He delights to use.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Humility that frees rather than paralyzes
- Confidence resting on God's grace, not our adequacy
- Weakness as the stage for God's power
- Serving without waiting to feel qualified

Discussion Prompts

- How can genuine humility actually make you bolder, not more timid?
- Where has a sense of being unqualified held you back?
- What would it look like to serve in dependence rather than self-confidence?

Question 7

Student Question:

In verses 9 and 10 Paul says that through the church the manifold wisdom of God is now made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. What does it mean that the church is the means by which God displays His wisdom, even to the spiritual realm?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul makes a soaring claim in verses 9 and 10: God's purpose is that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. The word manifold means many-colored or many-sided, like light through a prism.

The means of this display is the church. Not the church's programs or buildings, but the very existence of a reconciled community, Jew and Gentile made one, is itself an exhibition of God's wisdom. What no philosophy or empire could achieve, the gospel achieves in the church.

Astonishingly, the audience includes the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places, the spiritual realm. Heaven looks on at the church and beholds the wisdom of God. The local congregation is on a far larger stage than it knows.

Help the class grasp that this dignifies ordinary church life. Every act of reconciliation, every crossing of a dividing line, every display of unity in Christ is part of God's cosmic exhibition of wisdom.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The church as God's display of His many-sided wisdom
- Reconciled community as itself a testimony
- The heavenly realm as part of the audience
- The cosmic significance of ordinary church life

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that God displays His wisdom through the church?
- How does it change your view of church to know heaven is watching?
- What ordinary acts in the church actually display God's wisdom?

Question 8

Student Question:

If the church is meant to display God's wisdom to the watching world and even to heaven, your participation in it matters. How does this lift your view of ordinary church life, and what is one way you can help your congregation display God's wisdom more clearly?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns the glory of the church toward personal participation. If the church is God's exhibition of wisdom, then no member is a spectator. Each person's involvement, or withdrawal, affects how clearly that wisdom is seen.

Help students resist a consumer view of church, where they attend to receive and evaluate. Paul's vision calls for contribution: the believer is part of the display, not merely an observer of it. Showing up matters; serving matters; pursuing unity matters.

Press for one concrete way to help the congregation display God's wisdom more clearly, perhaps by reconciling a strained relationship, welcoming an outsider, serving where there is need, or strengthening unity rather than division.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Every member as part of the display, not a spectator
- Resisting a consumer approach to church
- Contribution to the unity and witness of the body
- Personal responsibility for the church's testimony

Discussion Prompts

- How does this passage lift your view of ordinary church life?
- Where have you been a spectator rather than a participant?

- What is one way you could help your church display God's wisdom?

Question 9

Student Question:

Verses 3 through 5 say the mystery was made known to Paul by revelation, and that it was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed to God's holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. How was this mystery revealed, and to whom? What does this teach us about the completed revelation we now have in the New Testament, over against the claim that God is still giving new revelations or that there are apostles today?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal center of the lesson, and the teacher should handle it carefully. Paul says the mystery was made known to him by revelation, and that it 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 (vv. 3–5). Three things stand out: the source is revelation by the Spirit, the recipients are the holy apostles and prophets, and the timing is now, in contrast to former generations.

This tells us how God's saving truth has come to us. It was not discovered by human wisdom; it was revealed by the Spirit. And it was revealed to a specific group, the apostles and prophets of the first century, who were appointed and inspired to receive and deliver it. We have that revelation today in the writings of the New Testament, which the same Spirit guided the apostles to give (John 16:13; 2 Peter 1:20–21).

The crucial doctrinal point is that this revelation is complete. The mystery hidden for ages has now been fully made known and recorded. The faith was once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3), Scripture is breathed out by God and thoroughly equips us for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16–17), and God who spoke in many ways through the prophets has now spoken finally in His Son (Hebrews 1:1–2). There is no further mystery to be disclosed.

This guards us against several modern errors. It stands against claims of present-day new revelation, as though God were still adding to or correcting the apostolic message. It stands against the claim that there are apostles today in the original sense, men who receive fresh, authoritative revelation, since the apostles were eyewitnesses uniquely appointed and inspired for the founding of the church. And it stands against any gospel that goes beyond what the apostles delivered, which Paul himself anathematizes in Galatians 1:8–9. The complete New Testament is now our authority.

Teach this with confidence and gratitude rather than mere defensiveness. We are not impoverished by living after the apostolic age; we are richly blessed, holding in our hands the full and final revelation of the mystery that prophets longed to see. Our task is not to seek new words from God but to know, obey, and proclaim the word He has already given.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Revelation given by the Spirit to the apostles and prophets
- The mystery now fully and finally revealed and recorded in the New Testament
- The completeness of revelation (Jude 3; 2 Timothy 3:16–17; Hebrews 1:1–2)
- Against present-day new revelation and continuing apostleship
- Against any gospel beyond what the apostles delivered (Galatians 1:8–9)
- The complete New Testament as our authority today

Discussion Prompts

- How was the mystery revealed, and to whom, according to verses 3 through 5?
- Why does it matter that the revelation given to the apostles is complete?
- How should we respond to claims of new revelations or apostles today?

Question 10

Student Question:

In verses 11 through 13 Paul says that in Christ we have boldness and access to God with confidence through faith in Him, and he urges them not to lose heart. Looking back over this whole passage, name one specific way the Lord is forming you through it, and one place where you need to draw near to God with the boldness Christ has given.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone draws on verses 11 through 13, where Paul says that in Christ we have boldness and access to God with confidence through faith in Him, and urges his readers not to lose heart over his sufferings. The revealed mystery is not only information; it opens the way to God.

Note that boldness and access are through faith in Christ, the fruit of the whole gospel Paul has been describing. The believer may come to God freely and confidently, not because of personal worthiness but because of Christ. This is the practical payoff of the mystery now revealed.

Press for a personal response. Ask each student to name one way this passage is forming them, perhaps a higher view of the church, a readiness to serve, gratitude for the completed Scriptures, or a renewed confidence in approaching God.

Then ask where they most need to draw near with boldness, perhaps a burden they have hesitated to bring, a sin they have feared to confess, a request they have not dared to make. The gospel says the way is open; encourage them to walk in.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Boldness and access to God through faith in Christ
- Confidence grounded in Christ, not personal worthiness

- Not losing heart in the face of hardship
- The revealed gospel as the open door to God

Discussion Prompts

- Which truth from this passage most needs to shape your heart this week?
- Where do you need to draw near to God with the boldness Christ gives?
- What burden or request have you hesitated to bring to God?