Ephesians

Lesson 5

**Introduction**

In Ephesians 2:11-22, Paul contends the followers of Christ constitute a new community in which their shared spiritual identification with Christ trumps any cultural differences, including the historical tension between gentiles and Jews. This shared spiritual identity includes access to God based on Christ’s sacrifice through the same Holy Spirit. Christ’s community is not just a dwelling place for believers from all backgrounds, but also a holy dwelling place for God.

**Eph. 3:1-6** **The recently revealed mystery that gentiles are covenant beneficiaries through Christ**

In Eph. 3:1, Paul prepares to follow up his discussion about Christ’s formation of a new community including gentiles and Jewish believers with a prayer for that community, but he interrupts himself with a lengthy “footnote” that becomes Eph. 3:2-13, which delays the prayer until 3:14-20.

“For this reason, I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus in behalf of you gentiles.” “For this reason” connects the prayer coming in verses 14-20 with the previous discussion about Christ’s formation of a new community. “I, Paul” is intended to show Paul’s strong personal feelings about the prayer and the Ephesians. Paul then describes himself as “the prisoner of Christ Jesus in behalf of you gentiles.” This is Paul’s first reference to his difficult circumstances. The discussion of other topics before this seemingly urgent news shows Paul’s genuine concern for the Ephesians. It is interesting that Paul describes himself as a prisoner “of” or “belonging to” Christ Jesus. The Romans may have custody of Paul, but Paul believes Christ is his true Lord and so the Romans can only hold Paul if Jesus lets them do so. The phrase “in behalf of you gentiles” communicates that Paul views his imprisonment as part of his ministry for the benefit of gentiles including the gentile believers in the Ephesian church. This mention of Paul’s imprisonment causes Paul to break his train of thought and provide further details concerning what he means by a prisoner of Christ Jesus for the gentiles’ benefit, with the apparent purpose of assuring the Ephesians that Paul’s imprisonment is not a cause for alarm but rather is another phase in his God-given ministry focused on bringing the good news to gentiles.

“surely you have heard of the administration of the grace of God that was given to me for you” The conjunction that begins this clause is hard to translate concisely. A fuller translation would be: “If you have heard—and I recognize that you have heard something about what I am about to say, so this won’t be completely new.” That’s pretty awkward. The next phrase is also tough to translate. “administration” is a literal translation, but not something an American would say. The sense is Paul received a divine appointment to do something related to the grace of God. Moreover, he describes that appointment as a grace that was given to him for the gentiles. (See Col. 1:25-27.)

“that by revelation the mystery was made known to me, as I wrote before briefly.” Paul then describes this divine appointment as a mystery made known to him by revelation. Paul uses the term “mystery” to means a truth not discernible by logical deduction until God chooses to reveal it. “revelation” indicates that Paul learned this truth directly from God by means of the Holy Spirit. Paul viewed his receipt of divine revelation as critical to his apostolic authority. (Gal. 1:12; 1 Cor. 11:12) “as I wrote before briefly” could refer to any number of things, but one good candidate is Eph. 2:14-18, where Paul first mentioned the concept of Christ creating one new community consisting of gentiles and Jewish believers.

“whereby when reading it you are able to perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ” Another difficult translation, but seems to mean that reviewing Paul’s previous brief mention of the mystery should provide enough clues or guidance for the Ephesians to have an idea, or be prepared to comprehend, the further insight concerning the mystery of Christ that Paul is about to share.

“which in other generations was not made known to people as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.” Paul contends that this mystery was not revealed to people in past generations. Use of “revealed” or “was made known” is consistent with the idea that the mystery had to be revealed by the Holy Spirit; hence, the timing of its revelation in Paul’s generation was God’s choice, not some failure of previous generations or because of Paul’s intelligence. The “holy apostles and prophets” most likely means NT apostles and prophets because the revelation occurred in Paul’s day, and apostles are listed before prophets, suggesting these prophets are contemporaries and less prominent than the apostles. That being said, the term “holy” most likely applies to both apostles and prophets. Note that, although Paul claims to have received this mystery through revelation, he acknowledges that others received the same revelation.

“that the gentiles are fellow heirs, and fellow members of the body, and fellow participants of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” Paul finally reveals the core of the mystery: that believing gentiles are fellow beneficiaries of the covenant promises along with believing Israelites. The surprise is not that individual gentiles could become believers; the surprise is that gentiles could experience covenant blessings without having to become Israelites, and that there is no difference in the level of the gentiles’ participation in the benefits. How could this be? It happens “in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” The good news of the gospel is that Jesus lived a perfect life and therefore anyone—Jew or gentile—can received full covenant blessing in Him, i.e., when God identifies Christ with that person. Paul expresses a very similar idea in Gal. 3:26-29 focusing on the Abrahamic covenant.

The spiritual jujitsu involved in gentile inclusion is interesting with regard to the Davidic Covenant. As mentioned last week, a core part of the Messianic promise was a leader who would defend and protect Israel from gentile oppressors. (2 Sam. 7:10-11; Psalm 2:1-3.) The NT reveals, however, that there will be people from “every tribe and language and people and nation” who will align themselves with Christ. (Rev. 5:-9-10.) With the benefit of hindsight, one can see references to gentile inclusion in the OT (Isaiah 49:6-7), but it is also easy to see how people living before the NT era would have understood these verses to mean that gentile believers were “B-team” or “junior partners” with regard to covenant benefits. Both the OT and NT indicate that enough gentiles will reject Christ’s claims that there will still be a great conflict between gentile nations and Christ, so the OT passages talking about conflict between gentile world powers and the Messiah remain true. (Rev.19:19; Zech. 12:3.)

**Eph. 3:7-13 God assigned Paul the task of sharing this good news with gentiles, so his imprisonment is simply another phase in this ministry and should not discourage the Ephesians.**

“of which I was made a minister according to the gift of God’s grace which was given to me according to the working of his power to me, who am less than the least of all the saints, was this grace given.” Paul asserts that he “was made” a minister, or more literally, servant or deacon, of the good news/gospel. Paul says that this service role was an unearned or undeserved gift and further describes the gift as the grace of God and being enabled by God’s power working in Paul. God thus graciously gave Paul both this responsibility and the ability to fulfill it. Paul parenthetically expresses amazement that God would give this role to Paul, the least of all believers/saints. Paul does not say why he has this view here, but in other passages expressing a similar idea, Paul cites his blasphemy (denial that Jesus was the Messiah and redeemer) and his violent persecution of believers. (1 Cor. 15:8-10; 1 Tim. 1:12-14.) All of these passages emphasize the role of grace in Paul’s ministry.

“to preach to the gentiles the unfathomable wealth of Christ.” Paul’s specific role with regard to the gospel included telling this good news about the unfathomable wealth of Christ to gentiles. Passages discussing this special commission to gentiles include: Acts 9:15 and 22:21; Rom. 11:13 and 15:16-21; Gal. 2:8-9; 1 Tim. 2:7. “Unfathomable” means too big to be fully comprehended or measured.

“and to enlighten all what is the administration of the mystery which had been hidden for ages in God who created all things.” Another aspect of Paul’s specific role with regard to the gospel was enlightening or disclosing to everyone—all types of people (Rom. 1:14)—the strategy/purpose of this mystery or hidden truth. Paul adds that the mystery had been hidden “for ages.” (Col. 1:26.) The mystery was hidden “in God who created all things.” It is not clear why Paul mentions this last phrase. Perhaps it helps explain why the mystery could not be, and was not, discovered until the time the omnipotent God chose to reveal it.

“in order that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly realms through the church according to the eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Paul asserts that this mystery was so hidden that it is only now being revealed to spiritual beings—likely angels and demons—through their observation of the church. The “manifold wisdom of God” likely conveys that observing gentiles and Jews worshipping and serving together as one community demonstrates the wisdom of God’s plan. The “eternal purpose” indicates that God is not reacting or adjusting his salvific plans in real time. Instead, God is carrying out, and gradually revealing, a plan God the Father has always known and has now been accomplished in Jesus the Messiah and Lord of this new community including Paul and his readers.

“in whom we have the boldness and access with confidence through faith in him.” Paul adds that in Christ believers can speak freely to God the Father and can freely approach God the Father and can do so with confidence. This is a great benefit. Anyone with even a little bit of self-awareness would never approach God with confidence based on their own merit. The reason believers can do so with confidence stems from our faith or reliance on Christ’s merit.

“Therefore, I ask you not to lose heart in my tribulations on behalf of you, which is your glory.” With this clause, Paul finally gets to the point of this detailed discussion about the mystery of gentile inclusion and Paul’s God-given ministry to share this good news with gentiles: he hopes and requests that the Ephesians not to lose heart due to his tribulations, meaning his being held in Roman custody and facing a trial. Paul says that his tribulations are “on behalf of you,” meaning gentiles, because the Jewish accusation against Paul was that he was “against” the Jewish people, the Mosaic code, and the temple, and had even defiled the temple by bringing gentiles into it. (Acts 21:28-29; 23:29.) Throughout the legal proceedings the Jewish leaders expanded their accusations against Paul in ways they thought would be persuasive to the Romans, such as accusing Paul of stirring up riots among Jews. (Acts 24:5.) But it is clear that the original motive for wanting Paul arrested was their disagreements with Paul’s view of Jesus and reaching out to gentiles. Paul admitted to following Jesus, but argued that his beliefs were not adverse or against the Mosaic code, the temple or Caesar. (Act 25:8.) In appealing to Caesar, Paul was fighting for legal permission to continue sharing the good news with gentiles. Conversely, Paul could have gained his freedom early in this process simply by agreeing that he would retire from ministry and stop spreading these ideas about Jesus. Paul’s tribulations thus were intended to benefit gentile believers and potential believers. Paul says his tribulations are the Ephesians’ “glory.” This does not mean the Ephesians are taking pleasure or gaining honor because Paul is suffering. Paul more likely means that the Ephesian’s status in Christ is their glory, and that they would not have encountered Christ but for Paul’s willingness to suffer for the cause of sharing the good news with gentiles. Paul’s tribulations have brought the Ephesians glory by facilitating their relationship with Christ.

**Eph. 3:14-21 Paul’s prayer for this new spiritual community built on Christ**

In Eph. 3:14, having explained why his custody in Rome should not discourage the Ephesians, Paul returns to his main thread, which left off with his description of how Jesus Christ has ended the hostility between gentile and Jewish believers and how the community of Christ-followers from all cultural backgrounds are growing into a new dwelling place for God’s presence.

“For this reason, I bow my knees before the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named,” Paul’s reaction to the revelation about the new spiritual community is to humbly petition God the Father in prayer. He asserts that God the Father has named every family in heaven and earth. Naming something signifies authority, (see Gen. 3:19), so this phrase suggests that all the families on earth belong to God the Father. In other words, Paul’s discussion of this new multi-cultural spiritual community has inspired him to petition the God who created and is sovereign over all these communities.

“in order that he may grant you according to the wealth of his glory to be strengthened with power through his Spirit to the inner person, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith” Paul’s request of the Ephesians’ behalf relies on the wealth or great abundance of God’s glory. In this context, glory refers to the summation of one’s attributes, so Paul is acknowledging that God the Father has more than sufficient ability to grant this request through his glorious attributes. The first request is for the members of the new community to be “strengthened with power through his Spirit in the inner spirit.” This seems similar to Paul’s first prayer where he requested that the Ephesians would increase in their understanding and experience of God’s power. Here, Paul requests that this power would strengthen their “inner person.” Like “heart,” the term “inner” is a way of distinguishing a person’s mental/spiritual will from their physical bodies. The reason to strengthen their inner beings is so that Christ may dwell in their hearts or inner being through faith. The NT often talks about the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. (Acts 1:8.) But here we see that through the Holy Spirit, Christ mysteriously is present with believers. (See also Rom. 8:9-11.) This a good example of already-not yet thinking. Paul has said that the Ephesians have already been sealed by the Holy Spirit, and in Romans he says that all believers have the Spirit of Christ, but in this life believers continue to struggle with sin, and so it is possible for them to grow in inner strength by God’s grace and become a more fit dwelling place for Christ. (Eph. 5:18.) Combining this thought with the new temple imagery creates a complex picture. God dwells within each believer/stone through the Holy Spirit/Spirit of Christ. But the believers/stones collectively become a temple for God to dwell within. It reminds me of John 14:10-11 where Jesus can say he is in the Father, and the Father is in me.

“in order that you, being and grounded in love, might be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and so to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, in order that you might be filled up to all the fullness of God.” Paul next provides an additional purpose for his request that God would strengthen the Ephesians’ inner persons. He begins with a premise—that the Ephesians have been “rooted” or “planted,” which is agricultural, and “grounded” or “founded,” which is construction related and refers to laying a foundation, “in love.” There is much debate concerning the reference for love. In Eph 2:4, and more generally throughout chapters one and two, Paul has emphasized the role of God’s love for believers in the beginning of salvation. Others argue that, if God’s love were in view, there would be some pronoun, such as “his” in the phrase. In 1 Cor. 3:9, Paul tells the Corinthians they are God’s field and God’s building. Given all the emphasis in Ephesians on God’s love, it makes the most sense to me that Paul is reminding them that God’s love was an integral part of the beginning of their faith. Paul prays, however, that they “together with all believers” can build on that good beginning by having sufficient strength to grasp the vastness of Christ’s love. Paul uses multiple spatial terms in an effort to give a sense of the enormity of Christ’s love. “Together with” indicates that this mission is individual and corporate. Paul clearly wants each individual believer to grasp Christ’s love, but “together with” indicates this isn’t like a math worksheet that each student takes home and completes by himself. All believers are to be gaining the strength together that they need to comprehend Christ’s vast love. Paul adds a parallel request that is a paradox or word play. He prays that the Ephesians would “know” the love of Christ that “surpasses knowing.” This tells us that, when Paul describes Christ’s love as vast, he means so vast that humans can’t fully comprehend it. But he still wants believers to comprehend the vastness of Christ’s love as much as they can with assistance from God.

The final purpose of the prayer is so that the Ephesians “might be filled up to all the fullness of God.” Being “filled” with the “fulness” of God is another word play. The “fullness of God” probably refers to the collections of God’s moral attributes, such as holiness, mercy, love, peace, etc. (Col. 2:9; Gal. 5:22.) Paul wants believers to appreciate Christ’s love because that appreciation will lead to further development of God’s attributes in their lives.

Paul ends the theologically-focused section of the letter with a statement of praise. “Now to him who is able to do infinitely beyond all that we ask or think according to the power that works in us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.” Paul praises God the Father, stating that He has the power/ability to do far beyond everything we ask or even think/imagine and acknowledges that power is working in believers. Paul also expresses the desire that God the Father would receive “glory,” in this context meaning honor and praise, through/from the “assembly” or “church,” which is the community of believers and “in Christ Jesus.” The church is “in Christ Jesus” so this phrase might seem redundant, but it is a reminder that Christ is head of the church, and the church can only glorify God the Father as it acts in and through its leader, Jesus Christ. Paul expresses the hope that the church would glorify God the Father for “all generations, for ever and ever.” All the commentators assumes that Paul is looking to the future and hoping that future generations of believers will glorify God, continuing into eternity. The meaning of “generations,” however, includes “race” or “people having like characteristics.” I wonder why none of the commentators consider the possibility that Paul is expressing the hope that God the Father would be glorified in all peoples/races for ever and ever. I could not find any commentaries even mentioning this as an option, which usually means it’s a bad idea.

**Application**

To recap, Paul follows up his discussion about how Christ ended the hostility between gentiles and Jews and created a new community combining believers from both groups into one body/building founded on Jesus Christ with two big ideas (1) God specifically assigned to Paul the ministry of sharing this good news with gentiles and explaining it to everyone, so Paul being in Roman custody preparing to explain this truth to the highest levels of the Roman government is simply another phase in his ministry and should not be discouraging; and (2) Paul ask that God, having founded this new multi-cultural community in love, with strengthen all its members together so that they can all appreciate the love of Christ and display God’s characteristics in their lives.

One application concerns our definition of success or “metrics.” Starting with the individual level, one could easily view the years Paul spent in custody in Caesarea and then in Rome as a time of threat, failure, suffering, lack of productivity, absence of blessing, or abandonment by God. It would clearly be a failure based on any worldly definition of success. Even from a Christian perspective, it would be easy to question why God would allow such an outstanding church planter to be held in custody for so long or why God would allow such a devoted follower to experience such extended suffering. Paul seems to have avoided losing heart in part by recognizing that his willingness to endure the lengthy custody so that he could explain the good news to Roman leaders in Palestine and Rome itself was what God had called him to do, and that this time was a success because he was doing what God wanted him to do. On an individual basis, we should not measure the success of what we do by money, worldly social status, or even worldly measures of Christian ministry but rather we should use the standard of what God has called us to do. This means each of us needs to think about what God is calling us to do with our time, which may change over time.

This passage also gives us an interesting metric for our church. One standard/goal should be for all members to help each other grow in their knowledge of Christ’s love and display of God’s characteristics. This leads to questions like: (1) how am I helping other members of this church grow in the knowledge of Christ’s love? One way is through traditional ministry, but we can also ask how we are investing other members’ lives; (2) am I allowing other members of this church to help me grow in the knowledge of Christ’s love? If I have a need or area where I can grow, am I allowing God to address that need or growth area through the church or am I self-medicating with individual or worldly strategies? When we have a need (dirty feet), it’s not just a problem for ourselves, it’s potentially a service/growth opportunity for someone else (washing feet). It’s not healthy to be “giving to” or “taking from” the community all the time.