



Ephesians

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...if indeed you have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which was given to me for you, Ephesians 3:2

To maintain context, verse 2 should be read with verse 1 –

“For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles— ² if indeed you have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which was given to me for you...”

The word translated as “if” here does not imply uncertainty. Rather it is a statement of affirmation. The NIV translates this as “Surely you have heard” in order to more closely translate the thought. Charles Ellicott says that it is “a half-ironical reference to a thing not doubtful.” Understanding this correctly, Paul’s words of verse 1 fall into their proper place. He noted that he was “the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles.” His position as a prisoner does not affect “the dispensation of the grace of God which was given to” him.

He was selected as the Apostle to the Gentiles and his position was being fulfilled through the circumstances which occurred to him, even being a “prisoner of Christ Jesus.” The words “which was given to me” are not referring to “the dispensation,” but to “the grace of God.” The word “dispensation” will begin to be described in verse 3. As grace is being described here, a question arises as to what this grace is referring to. Is it the grace of being granted his apostleship, or is it the grace of God for salvation which is found in the gospel message?

Although scholars are divided on this, what seems most likely is that he is speaking of the grace bestowed upon him for his apostleship. First, the context of his words are that he is a prisoner for Christ. Secondly, he uses the same idea in Romans 1, and elsewhere, to define his apostleship –

“Through Him we have received grace and apostleship for obedience to the faith among all nations for His name, ⁶ among whom you also are the called of Jesus Christ;”
Romans 1:5, 6

Paul understood that his calling was solely of grace and it had been given to him for the purpose of bringing the message of the gospel to the Gentile people of the world. It is this message which is found in the “dispensation” which formed the time his apostolic office. The word “dispensation” is the Greek word *oikonomia*. It gives the idea of the management of the affairs of a household. Paul had just been speaking of the “household of God” in the last verses of the previous chapter. The adding of the Gentiles at this time in history (meaning the period which we consider the “Gentile-led church age”) is the dispensation which Paul is referring to now.

As noted above, this dispensation will be described more fully in the coming verses.

Life application: It is very wise to not be captivated by a single translation of the Bible. If one is, they will inevitably come to erroneous conclusions about what is being said in the original languages. Be wise, study and show yourself approved, and don't get swayed into a “one version only” belief.

...how that by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I have briefly written already, Ephesians 3:3

The words of this verse note the way that Paul learned of the “dispensation” he mentioned in the previous verse. It was “by revelation.” The words are emphatic in the Greek. It was not by man's wisdom that this was made known, nor could it have been discerned by man. Rather, it was a “mystery.”

As noted in Ephesians 1:9, the word mystery carries with it more than what we would think of as a mere mystery that can't be known. Although it does imply that which was unknown, it also means that which has been now made known by God's revelation. And so this mystery is that which is entirely unknowable except and unless it is revealed by God. When it is so revealed, it is a “mystery made known.”

What was unknown and unknowable to man apart from it being revealed by God, was made known through this special revelation to Paul. This is something he notes in Galatians 1 as well-

“For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught *it*, but *it came* through the revelation of Jesus Christ.” Galatians 1:12

He finishes this verse with a parenthetical thought, “as I have briefly written already.” This is not referring to another letter which is now lost. Rather it is referring to what he has already said in this letter. The thought was introduced in Ephesians 1:9 and explained through 1:14. He then expanded on it in Chapter 2 as well. The mystery that he is referring to is not the gospel specifically. Rather, it is the fact that the Gentiles are a part of the gospel. They are now included in the rights and benefits of the commonwealth of Israel. He is the apostle who was chosen to transmit this mystery to the world and to give the epistles which govern this dispensation of time.

Life application: Without studying Paul’s epistles, the message of Christ’s work for the Gentiles will be completely misunderstood. This is why he is so maligned by Judaizers and others who want to re-insert the law into their theology. Diminishing the writings of Paul are the only option. Thus, such people diminish the word of God. They are heretics who are to be rejected. Stand on Paul’s epistles for your proper church-age doctrine.

...by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ),
Ephesians 3:4

The Greek words “by which” indicate what he has already written. This is more evident when the previous verse is taken together with this one –

“...how that by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I have briefly written already, ⁴by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ),”

Paul has been writing concerning the revelation by which Christ made known to him the mystery. In reading this, he says that he expects his reader would understand his “knowledge in the mystery of Christ.” Again, the word mystery is used in the sense of something which was previously hidden, but which is now made known through God’s special revelation. Paul was the one chosen to receive the unveiling of this mystery. Once received, he has then shared it with those to whom he was sent, meaning the Gentiles.

He did this both verbally as he travelled, and in writing as well, in order to support the message he had proclaimed. We are the continued recipients of those writings as they are included in the pages of Scripture. The mystery of Christ is now open and available to be read and understood by any who will pay heed.

For Jews who reject the New Testament, they believe that they alone are the recipients of God’s word, both in writing and in the application of it to themselves as a people. For those

who accept the New Testament, but diminish the importance of, and twist the meaning of, Paul's epistles, the mystery is not properly understood. Thus, the grace of Christ is often missed, and there tends to be a reinsertion of the Old Testament laws into their theology. Both of these are heretical concepts.

Paul's reception of the revelation of this mystery is what opens up the truth of the church age to the people of the world. Jew and Gentile alike equally share in the finished work of Christ. Their inclusion into this body is solely an act of grace, and it comes only by faith in what He has done.

Life application: A thorough study of Paul's words, and then the application of them to our Christian walk, is expected of every believer. They are an integral part of what God has done through Jesus Christ. Without them, there is only confused theology and an improper walk, a walk which is not of faith in Christ's finished work.

...which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets: Ephesians 3:5

The word "which" is referring to the "mystery" of verses 3 & 4. This mystery is the work of God in Christ for Jew and Gentile which Paul has been speaking of and which he will continue to explain. This mystery was not made known "in other ages." God has worked through "dispensations" or "ages" in order to effect His redemptive purposes for fallen man. In the previous ages, there was one line of people specially chosen to lead humanity to the Messiah.

However, rather than focusing solely on that one line, he notes that this mystery was unknown to all. This is understood by his words that it "was not made known to the sons of men. This term, "sons of men," is speaking of all of those born into the stream of humanity. Jesus is often called the Son of man, thus declaring that He is truly and fully human. Paul uses the term this way to then make a distinction between the general stock of humanity and those chosen for a particular purpose. All born into humanity are sons of men, but some sons of men have been granted particular abilities. This is seen in the next clause.

The words "as it has now been revealed," mean that what was an unknown mystery has now become known by the means of revelation. Paul didn't say that in the past ages the mystery "had not been revealed." Instead, he said that it "was not made known." The mystery does not come about by mere logic or mental training. Instead, it only came about through revelation "by the Spirit." In the book of John, Christ spoke of how the Spirit testified of Him. First, in John 5 He said –

"You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me." John 5:39

Then, in John 15 He said –

“But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me.” John 15:26

The first was speaking of the Spirit-inspired Old Testament. The second speaks of the coming Spirit-inspired New Testament. The Old Testament certainly gives types and shadows and even hints as to what was coming, but it could not have been understood without the further revelation of the Spirit in the New. And this revelation of the Spirit was “to His holy apostles and prophets.”

The word “holy” is given in contrast to “the sons of men.” Only those chosen by God and granted this special revelation could then turn and reveal it to the world for an understanding of what God has done. This shows that those “holy apostles and prophets” were granted this insight at a particular point in time and for a particular purpose; to reveal the Word of God to the world. They proclaimed the word; the word was recorded, and which is now our New Testament; and then the revelation stopped. In the pages of the Bible, we have all the information necessary for our life and practice as Christians. No further revelation is required. Nor should more revelation be anticipated.

Life application: Beware of those who say, “The Lord has given me a prophetic word.” Unless he repeats and then explains a passage of Scripture, he is to be shunned. God has revealed His will to us in the pages of the Holy Bible.

...that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel, Ephesians 3:6

This is the explanation of the “mystery” which Paul has been referring to in the previous verses. It is the revelation of that which would have been (and continues to be) unimaginable - even unthinkable - to the Jews. They had been the selected and chosen people. They had received the oracles of God. They had been the stewards of the law. It was promised that the Messiah would come through them. Because of these, and a thousand other reasons, they assumed that they alone would be the recipients of the promises of God. But they were wrong.

Paul now explains this with the words, “that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs.” Everything that was promised as coming to the Jews would likewise be shared by the Gentiles. There was no “greater inheritance” for the Jews than for the Gentiles.

He next says that the Gentiles would be “of the same body.” Both Jew and Gentile would be a part of the same organism which God is building in Christ. They would be equal members of the household of God without distinction.

Thirdly, Paul says that the Gentiles would be “partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel.” This means that every honor and blessing bestowed upon one would be bestowed upon the other. The sealing of the Holy Spirit which came upon one would also be granted to the other. This sealing is the authorization to receive the fullness of what God has planned for His people, and it is given in full measure to all who come to Christ.

Further, none of these points which Paul makes come indirectly through the Jew. The Gentiles were not required to become Jews before receiving the honors. Instead, they receive them apart from this earthly badge of distinction. This is seen in the three words which Paul chose to use in order to describe the state of the Gentiles who are in Christ. They reveal that the Gentiles hold the status of being joint-heirs, in a joint-body, and jointly partaking of that which is granted.

So particular is Paul in his choice of wording here, that two of the three descriptive words are unique to the New Testament and to classical Greek. Paul had to invent words to show the results of the outstanding plan of God which is revealed in this mystery.

It is solely through the work of Christ that either category is granted this status. The sealing of the Holy Spirit can only come through His work. When it comes, the person – regardless of their earthly status – is brought into the family of God.

Life application: Two important points of doctrine can be deduced from this single verse. The first is that though there is no distinction in Christ between Jew and Gentile, the two categories still remain. Gentiles cannot be joint-anything with Jews if the two become one in personal category. Further, the idea that Gentiles need to either convert to Judaism, or to hold to the precepts of the law which originally established their faith, is proven false. One category (Jew or Gentile) cannot be a joint-anything with another if they have become the same in life-walk. Gentiles remain Gentiles, Jews remain Jews, and that which makes a person one or another is not imposed on the other.