# Ephesians 3

HBC, Sunday 2nd October 2022

**Slide 1**

Well, a very good morning to you, whether you are taking part today on Zoom or in the building, and also to those listening to the recording.

Ephesians 3 is not a simple passage to understand in one reading. If you have a Bible with you today, or the chance to look one up on a device or borrow one from the bookcase, please do have the text open. You’ll find it a lot easier to make sense of it.

Have you come across the letters TL;DR?

TL;DR. You might see them at the beginning of a long social media post. They stand for Too Long; Didn’t Read. Authors sometimes expect that people won’t read everything they’ve written. Shocking, but true. So a TL;DR sums it all up. It helps you get to the point quickly.

**Slide 2**

I’m going to give you a TL;DR summary of Ephesians 3, but then I’m going to explain the key points, using as little jargon as possible.

## TL;DR

1. Paul is in **prison** – this is because he told non-Jewish people about Jesus. However, he is not upset about this but considers it a privilege.
2. Paul has had a special **mystery** revealed to him and he is excited to share this with others.
3. Paul understands that the new non-Jewish followers of Jesus need strengthening and inspiring and he prays a special **blessing** for them.

Prison. Mystery. Blessing. Got that?

Ok, let’s unpack it.

**Slide 3**

## Prison

You can picture the scene. Paul is probably under house arrest, chained and guarded by Roman soldiers. Friends can visit with food and letters. Tom Wright, an astute moden theologian, thinks Paul was imprisoned in Ephesus itself, although previously most people assumed that it was written in Rome. We don’t actually know for certain.

The big inconvenience for Paul is that he cannot speak in public or travel around. The good news for us however, is that when people have to communicate in writing, there is a written record! If Paul had not been stuck in prison, he would not have needed to use letters to correspond, so we would not have the things he needed to communicate; things God wanted the new followers of Jesus to know and understand.

So often limits are placed on us: health changes, time, wellbeing, pressures of life, emergencies – and when limits come our way, we often see them as bad news. But I don’t think God always does.

Paul writes a letter. To Gentile Christians. It’s these Gentiles – people born outside the Jewish faith – that Paul has a passion for. They are, quite literally, his calling.

Some of the Jewish leaders rejected Paul. Roman officials recognised that he was telling people they should no longer call Caesar Lord and God, and they were concerned. In Ephesus itself some people made a living through making images of the goddess Artemis. They were furious that the gospel meant a loss of business. See Acts 19 for details of what happened there.

Paul’s calling came at a huge personal cost.

All of us who take a step of obedience will discover this at some stage. Calling involves cost. Self-sacrifice. Serving others. Humility. Limits.

I’ve read that “the value we place on something determines the hardship we are willing to endure for it.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Think about that. I bet you would go to greater lengths for those you are closest to. When my mother-in-law recently had a fall on holiday, Matthew and his brother had to work out how to get her and their dad safely back home over 300 miles away. It was their parents, so of course they were willing to be inconvenienced, to drop everything and go the extra miles.

You don’t tell an injured child you’ll take them to A&E at the weekend when you have more time.

When friends are grieving, you find ways to reassure and support them in their loss.

People who want to achieve something badly, eat differently, train hard, study hard.

We endure hardships when we place value on something or someone.

Paul was willing to endure the indignity and limits of prison because he valued the people of Ephesus and the area.

If you find yourself in a place of real cost and self-sacrifice, know that God is using you and loves you. If you give your time for others, willingly volunteering, working hours you won’t be properly reimbursed for, because you value others, you are being Jesus’ hands and feet in your situation and God is right there with you, championing this important work, excited about your love and obedience and humility.

All of us have opportunity to bless others. Limits aren’t the things that stop us. Perhaps lack of faith or lack of imagination might be. Offer your time and energies to God and ask him where he wants to use you next. If Paul can be used in prison, you can be used in your situation.

You might have noticed that Paul talks about being in prison in verse 1 – and then goes off on a bit of a tangent – but he comes back to it again in verse 13.

*Don’t be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.*

Wow. Paul finds it a genuine privilege to be going through hardships in order to communicate with people and tell them about Jesus.

Let’s take a look at his tangent now – verses 2-12.

**Slide 4**

## Mystery

I think listening to Paul speak would have been quite difficult if I’m honest. He tends to throw in so much jargon and so many subloops, as soon as you think you are following, something else pops in. If he had an editor today, they would be rewriting much of this in plainer English. If you want, you can find easier versions, for example in *The Message* translation. But let me tell you how this section works in normal English as best I can.

The Mystery is this:

Jewish people and non-Jewish people together share the promises God has made

Together. Jointly. All at the table, no one more important than anyone else. Like King Charles inviting you to eat with him and explaining that you are now entitled to everything he has. You are a co-heir of the Queen, with Charles.

The more you consider it, the more audacious and crazy this sounds. God chose a special group of people to be different from other nations – to behave differently, to love and worship him exclusively and to be the family from which he would raise up an individual who would solve everything that was wrong and broken between people and God. And he did that.

Jesus came: a good Jewish boy. He kept the law, explained what Love is by actually living it, was sacrificed in a brutal death and was seen after that perfectly alive.

For the Jews, identity was (and is) critical. Although it is possible to convert to Judaism, Jews don’t actively recruit people. Why would they? If your heritage is about living differently from the rest of the world, how does that work if everyone joins in?

### Not revealed until now

Note that Paul points something important out in verse 5 – *it has now been revealed.*

Previously, Jews weren’t fully aware that God’s purposes were much bigger than just the family of Abraham. They acknowledged that Abraham’s God was the One God, that he was Creator, and more powerful than land or sea, war or food provision, putting him well ahead of false gods other nations worshipped. But they did not properly see a universal agenda.

There are clues, though. Jesus had hinted at it.

**Slide 5**

Look at Mark 11. Jesus goes to the temple, realises that people are using the large open area that is set aside for Gentiles as a marketplace, and he is furious. This is the only area Gentiles can come into to worship, and they are not able to. He says in verse 17:

*‘Is it not written: “My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations”?
But you have made it “a den of robbers”.’*

Jesus is quoting Isaiah 56:7 here:

*for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations*

All nations. Everyone is welcome here. And the courtyard of the Gentiles, the vast majority of the open outdoor space at the temple, has been taken over by unscrupulous traders. It’s like us setting up a shop on a wheelchair ramp. How insensitive and inappropriate!

Stopping people from accessing God is something God hates.

There were clues before in the Old and New Testament that God wanted to bless all the nations, all the people, and not exclude anyone, but the Mystery only became clear after Jesus. Paul was one of the first to get it.

**Slide 6**

### The Church lives the Mystery

Paul calls it manifold wisdom in the New International Version. We don’t use the word manifold very often, and when we do we’re often talking about combustion engines.

Well, I’m pretty sure Paul wasn’t talking about combustion engines here. Manifold means *multi-faceted*. It is beautiful that God wants his family to incorporate every kind of person, from every kind of place. It has huge significance on the world. Did you know, people inspired by God have been at the forefront in history of medicine and hospitals, schools, universities and learning, travel, science, justice, creativity and community. Think about the huge legacy Christians in history have left.

The Mystery of a united group of broken people, all drawn together through a yearning for God and his love, is *multi-faceted*.

Paul is actually rather passionate about all this. No wonder – it is his own calling. This Mystery, now revealed, is God’s Genius Move.

How is it genius?

What had previously been a light shining in the darkness, now has expression in billions of lives, each with their own facet, colour and brilliance.

This light now gets refracted out to every part of the world. God’s goodness is not limited to a particular area or people group.

I noticed something else the more I considered this. Imagine you are a part of a beautiful, brilliant diamond. You are reflecting God’s light into a dark world.

And then your own world goes dark.

You feel the cracks forming – something is crushing you. Even diamond can be crushed if there is enough pressure.

And you break.

You fracture, and instead of one facet of love, you now have many facets. Most of us have had experiences that have broken us.

Your brokenness is never wasted. God can shine love through what can seem the most broken situations, as we allow him to work through us.

God’s design here is genius. He is with us in our pain, using us in our diversity and loves the multi-faceted-ness.

In all this, no one is prevented from approaching God’s throne. The opposite in fact; we are all welcome. There is no point in approaching by merit, like those receiving honours, because *all of us are failures*. All of us, on our knees, approach God in humility and awe.

### The impact goes beyond our world

Here’s another astonishing thing about the Mystery.

It goes beyond our world. Because the promises of God are now available to anyone, no one is more chosen than anyone else. God chooses and uses people the world does not expect – over and over again.

But how does this go beyond our world?

Verse 10 says that this manifold wisdom, this genius plan of God,

*should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms*

or in other words,

our unity as God’s family sends an earthquake through heaven. A *heavenquake*, if you like. The angels get it and rejoice. The demons – well, that is another matter. Try catching light that has been refracted out in a billion directions. Try placing everything in shadow. They can’t do it!

God’s genius idea is to start at the bottom. Where Satan tries to use power and might to instill fear and rejection of God, God instead uses Love and he begins with those willing to be humble. With the weak. With all of us who are diverse – uniting us. God will shine through anyone who trust him.

This is genius.

Why?

Because the demons cannot win using Power, which is their weapon.

When dark power tries to fight humility, it discovers the light is refracted outwards and cannot be contained.

When dark power tries to fight weakness, the beautiful and awesome power of God is revealed.

When dark power tries to fight united diversity, it has to work on too many fronts. Many targets. Many directions. Many colours.

When dark power tries to battle faith, it cannot win. Why? Because all power can ultimately do is to kill you, and we know Jesus already overcame that one. Death is not final, therefore Satan’s power is ultimately pointless.

Ok, so that leaves us with the third point.

**Slide 7**

## Blessing

These young Christians were on the front line. Paul loved them. Despite distance, he could copy those before him: Isaac, Jacob, Moses and Aaron, and give them a special blessing – a blessing of inheritance and protection and of inspiration.

Paul had meant to bless them at the start of the chapter, and now he gets back to the point. He knows (verse 15) that they will need strengthening – and (verse 16) that they will need inspiring – literally inspiring by the Spirit of God.

What is inspiring?

These young Ephesian Christians were to learn what it means to live with Jesus dwelling in them, influencing their attitudes and thoughts, actions and reactions, decisions and emotions.

Previously only a Jewish high priest was entitled to close proximity with God. This is both astonishing and humbling.

They, like us, needed a foundation or root of Love. And Love as they grew. They needed a sense of just how much Love was coming to them from God – in order for them to Love generously and freely.

God’s love, according to verse 19, *surpasses knowledge*. You cannot understand it or the scale of it. But that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t consider it. Verse 18 tells us that the scale of it is enormous. I want to challenge us today on this, because these verses may be over-familiar to a few of us.

Yes, God’s love is huge. It is wide. And long. And high. And deep. So high, you can’t go over it. So low, you can’t go under it. So wide, you can’t go round it – [oh, wonderful love].

Wonderful love. You cannot outlove God. You may love someone to the Moon and back. He’ll love to you to the end of time and back. To the end of the universe – and then some – and back.

It’s more than just scale though.

Let’s look at it another way. God’s love is beautiful. It is colourful. It is rich and variegated. It is fresh. It is awe-inspiring. It is at your frequency, and at every other frequency. It is your favourite type of music. And the favourite type of music of other people. It is every bird song. Every sunrise. Every act of kindness. Every good thing, and so much more than you can or will imagine.

This love is powerful. It is genius. It is flowing from God, through Jesus and through us when he lives in us, into the world at large. It challenges demons and knocks the power out of them.

This love is about what again?

Unity.

Shared ownership of God’s promises. There are many promises in the Bible and I encourage you to go and find them. We are all now *co-heirs* with others of everything God wants to bless us with.

It means when we are limited, imprisoned and made small, God is working on a much bigger level *and he is using you*. So, are you going to let your limits or circumstances define you? Can we afford to wallow in excuses when God has plans for us? Who is God blessing through you today? And who is God blessing through you tomorrow?

Be a blessing to others. Continue to be a blessing to others.

Let God’s love fill you and flow through you. He will energise you for the task.

Embrace unity with others who are not like you. God loves this.

Be encouraged when you endure hardships for doing God’s will. Your limits are not God’s limits.

**Slide 8**  from a window in a church in Bristol[[2]](#footnote-2)

Let me bless you now, using words from Paul’s blessing from The Message translation:

I ask him to strengthen you by his Spirit—not a brute strength but a glorious inner strength—that Christ will live in you as you open the door and invite him in. And I ask him that with both feet planted firmly on love, you’ll be able to take in with all followers of Jesus the extravagant dimensions of Christ’s love. Reach out and experience the breadth! Test its length! Plumb the depths! Rise to the heights! Live full lives, full in the fullness of God.

**20-21**God can do anything, you know—far more than you could ever imagine or guess or request in your wildest dreams! He does it not by pushing us around but by working within us, his Spirit deeply and gently within us.

Glory to God in the church!
Glory to God in the Messiah, in Jesus!
Glory down all the generations!
Glory through all millennia! Oh, yes! / AMEN

1. Klyne Snodgrass, NIV Application Commentary on Ephesians [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2022/30-september/news/uk/for-those-in-peril-on-the-sea-new-windows-to-tell-a-different-story-about-bristol> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)