

# Mysterious Paradox

## The Divine Warrior and Paul's Imprisonment

**Ephesians 3:1** For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles--

<sup>2</sup> assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you,

<sup>3</sup> how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly.

<sup>4</sup> When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ,

<sup>5</sup> which 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.

<sup>6</sup> This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

<sup>7</sup> Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power.

<sup>8</sup> To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ,

<sup>9</sup> and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things,

<sup>10</sup> so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

<sup>11</sup> This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord,

<sup>12</sup> in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him.

<sup>13</sup> So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory.

(Eph 3:1-13)

# Paradox

WHAT DO YOU CALL two physicians working together? A **Paradox**! Long ago, Noah Webster defined a paradox as “A tenet or proposition contrary to received opinion, or seemingly absurd, yet true in fact” (*Webster’s Dictionary 1828 Edition*). Paradox is quite different from a **contradiction** where you have ideas or statements that are opposed to one another logically. Contradictions are not true. Contradictions cannot be true. Paradoxes often are.

Someone has said, “The Bible is the ultimate sourcebook for the greatest paradoxes in the sphere of human thinking. God’s word is a rich sourcebook of paradoxical statements.”<sup>1</sup> Someone else has said, “Without paradoxes, there is no Christianity.” In fact, he notices that, “The central truth of Christianity is its greatest paradox—the God-Man.”<sup>2</sup> How can God be fully God and fully man? It seems impossible. But it is true; it is a paradox.

If you don’t learn to think about life through **biblical paradoxes**, I honestly don’t think you will ever be able to

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<sup>1</sup> **Robert J. Morgan**, “The Paradoxes of Christianity,” *Robert J. Morgan* (2017), <https://www.robertjmorgan.com/devotional/the-paradoxes-of-christianity/>.

<sup>2</sup> **Herbert W. Howell**, “The Joy of Christ,” *Record of Christian Work* vol. 20, ed, William Revell Moody (Northfield, Mass: W. R. Moody, 1901), 493.

look at life correctly. Here are some paradoxes that someone has summarized for us from the Bible:

- We see unseen things.
- We conquer by yielding.
- We find rest under a yoke.
- We reign by serving.
- We are made great by becoming small.
- We are exalted when we are humble.
- We become wise by being fools for Christ's sake.
- We are made free by becoming bondservants.
- We gain strength when we are weak.
- We triumph through defeat.
- We find victory by glorying in our infirmities.
- We live by dying.<sup>3</sup>

Remember the things Jesus said. “Many who are first will be last, and the last first” (Matt 19:29). “Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Matt 10:39). You can basically summarize another as,

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<sup>3</sup> Richard P. Hansen, “Making the Most of Biblical Paradoxes,” in *The Art & Craft of Biblical Preaching: A Comprehensive Resource for Today's Communicators*, ed. Haddon Robinson and Craig Brian Larson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 434.

“To meet your needs, don’t seek them first” (Matt 6:33). And there are many others.

In this light, Isaiah once overheard the LORD say, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways” (Isa 55:8). He was speaking about people who are wicked forsaking their way; a paradox. He was also telling them that if they return to the LORD, he will pardon them; another paradox. People do not normally think this is at all what God is like. Paradoxes like these certainly bear that out. God is not like you and he thinks about life very differently from us in our natural state.

One of the things God loves to do is confound their so-called “wisdom.” Listen to this paradox, “But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong” (1Co 1:27). As we are going to see, this is exactly what God is doing in Ephesians 3 through a rather unexpected detour that Paul takes the Ephesians on.

## Detour

The passage is Ephesians 3:1-13. Someone summarizes the whole chapter, “Ephesians 3 consists of a prayer report

by Paul, which is interrupted just as it begins [3:1] by a long digression (3:2–13), wherein he discusses the ministry given to him by God on behalf of his readers. He then returns to the report of his prayer (3:14–19) before concluding with a doxology (3:20–21).<sup>4</sup> We will only be looking at the long digression, which is fascinating on many levels.

One level is that of **the structure**, which can help us get a handle on what is trying to be communicated. It can be seen as a **chiasm** with the “B” pair being quite long and the “A” pair giving the reason for the lengthy digression:

- A. Paul, a prisoner (3:1)
- B. The mystery made known through the church (3:2-6)
- B<sup>1</sup>. The mystery made known to the heavenly rulers (3:7-12)
- A<sup>1</sup>. What I am suffering (3:13)

Or, you could view that “A” pair as an **inclusio** which brackets or **frames** the whole *pericope* (literary unit or section). In between, it has two lengthy parallel halves (**see chart on next page**). This way of viewing it is helpful for seeing that Paul is actually deliberately repeating himself with parallel ideas in every frame except one, where it switches the focus from

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<sup>4</sup> Timothy Gombis, “Ephesians 3:2–13: Pointless Digression, or Epitome of the Triumph of God in Christ?” *Westminster Theological Journal* 66:2 (2004): 313.

**Ephesians 3:1-13 (ESV) in Parallel<sup>5</sup>**

3:1	<i>Inclusio:</i> For this reason, I, Paul, a <b>prisoner</b> of Christ Jesus <b>on behalf of you Gentiles-</b>		
3:2	Assuming that you have heard <b>of the stewardship of God's grace</b>	3:7	Of this gospel I was made a <b>minister</b>
	that was <b>given to me</b>		according to the gift of <b>God's grace,</b>
	<b>for you,</b>	3:8	which was <b>given to me</b> according to the working of His power. (8) To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was <b>given,</b>
3:3	how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, <b>as I have written briefly.</b> (4) <b>When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery</b> of Christ,	3:9	and <b>to bring to light</b> what is the administration of the <b>mystery</b>
3:4	Which <b>was not made known</b> to the sons of men in other generations		<b>hidden</b> in God, who created all things,
3:5	as it has now been <b>revealed</b>	3:10	so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now <b>be made known</b>
	<b>To his holy apostles and prophets</b> by the Spirit.		<b>to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.</b>
3:6	This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in <b>Christ Jesus through the gospel.</b>	3:11	This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in
		3:12	<b>Christ Jesus our Lord,</b> (12) in whom we have boldness and access with confidence <b>through our faith in him.</b>
3:13	<i>Inclusio:</i> So I ask you not to lose heart over <b>what I am suffering for you,</b> which is your glory.		

<sup>5</sup> Adapted from [ljhooge](https://biblicalchiasmus.wordpress.com/2010/11/20/786/), "Ephesians 3:1-13 – Heirs, Members, Partakers," *Biblical Chiasmus* (Nov 20, 2010), <https://biblicalchiasmus.wordpress.com/2010/11/20/786/>.

earthly beings to heavenly ones. This in turn tells you of the interaction between the two realms. We will look at this in detail in a moment.

But why would he want to do this? Why would Paul feel the need to begin a prayer only to interrupt it almost immediately with such a carefully crafted parallel paired digression? The structure of the detour is such that he was not doing this off the cuff. He had thought long and hard about telling the Ephesians about it. This is where we come to **the paradox** and God's thoughts, and in fact this paradox actually **explains the shift from earth to heaven** in a rather remarkable way.

### *Interrupted Prayer of the Prisoner*

Many scholars can't quite figure out why Chapter 3 is even here. One considers it as "**irrelevant to the argument of Ephesians—an unnecessary and distracting detour.**"<sup>6</sup> But **vs. 1** actually tells you exactly why the long digression appears. The verse begins, "**For this reason...**" (**Eph 3:1**). In other words, because of what I have just told you about the **church**

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<sup>6</sup> **Martin Kitchen**, *Ephesians*, New Testament Readings (London: Routledge, 1994), 30, as summarized by Gombis, 313.

being built up into one body—Jews and Gentiles together—into a living temple, because of this “... I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles—” The reason for the digression is in the statement, “a prisoner ... on behalf of you Gentiles.”

Notice how vs. 14 (which starts the next logical unit—the prayer) picks up the same connecting language as the beginning of vs. 1. “For this reason...” What he is doing here in typical Pauline fashion, is finally returning after more than a dozen verses to the point he started but didn’t finish. “For this reason I bow my knees before the Father...” (Eph 1:14). In other words, he is going to pray for them. That’s what he started off telling them about. But he got distracted by something he believed they needed to understand—*Paul was now a prisoner.*

Ephesians is one of four “prison letters” of Paul (the others being Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon). “When Paul wrote this book he was imprisoned at Rome because of a riot in Jerusalem (cf. Acts 21:27–22:22). The riot occurred when the Jews accused Paul of taking Trophimus, an Ephesian convert, into the Temple. The Jews knew him to be a

Gentile and were outraged (cf. 2:14)” [emphasis mine].<sup>7</sup> It might throw you off that he calls himself “a prisoner of Christ Jesus” rather than “a prisoner of Rome” or something like that. As if he were saying, “Jesus Christ holds me as a prisoner against my will.” God forbid.

Paul often refers to himself as Christ’s “slave” or “bond-servant,” because Christ bought him with a price. He uses the language of a slave because of another paradox. He who would be truly free must be a slave to Christ. For Christ’s mastery over us is the only true freedom anyone can have in this fallen world ruled by wicked powers. But he never views himself as Christ’s prisoner against his will, a hostage until he he’s paid his debt to God. The meaning is rather than he is “a prisoner because of what I have done for the sake of Christ Jesus,” or “I am in prison because I serve Jesus Christ.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, he was arrested because he’s a Christian doing things Christians do that often make others angry.

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<sup>7</sup> Robert James Utley, *Paul Bound, the Gospel Unbound: Letters from Prison (Colossians, Ephesians and Philemon, Then Later, Philipians)*, vol. Volume 8, Study Guide Commentary Series (Marshall, TX: Bible Lessons International, 1997), 98.

<sup>8</sup> Robert G. Bratcher and Eugene Albert Nida, *A Handbook on Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1993), 68.

This is where the “on behalf of you Gentiles” probably has very personal significance. It was Trophimus, an *Ephesian* Gentile convert that got Paul in prison in Rome in the first place. Paul was charged with letting Trophimus into the temple, though any Gentile entering faced the death penalty. Though Paul did not take him into the temple (**Acts 21:29**), merely the city, the Jews knew full well that he saw the physical temple as a relic of a broken covenant now made null and void by the new covenant. They hated him because, as we will see, he had been sent by Christ to reach the Gentiles and it was this calling from Jesus himself that was the reason he was now in prison. He served his Master and now he was in prison because of it.

This idea of being a prisoner is put differently in the last verse of the passage. He says, “I am suffering for you” (**Eph 3:13**). But Paul is not trying to garner sympathy, or get them to start a mob to free him, or to raise a bunch of money to bribe someone to get him out. Rather, he is concerned about them, not himself. “So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering” (**13**). He was afraid that they might lose heart in Christ because *he* was now in prison, because he was in prison on account of one of them—Trophimus. Can you

feel the existential power of the problem? Imagine Trophimus (or one of his relatives or close friends) back home in Ephesus now reading this letter. *Paul's in jail facing the possible death penalty because of me? God, how can I bear the weight of such trouble that I have inflicted upon my friend and pastor?*

But it gets even worse. When you realize that Paul has just finished two chapters exalting **Jesus as the Divine Warrior** who has conquered his enemies, the moment he tells them that he is in prison, another deeper and far older question rises to the surface. Timothy Gombis puts it this way. Paul,

Is struck by how incongruous it must appear to his readers that Paul is in prison, when he has just listed the triumphs of Christ over the evil powers, supposedly vindicating the status of Christ as Cosmic Lord. In light of the triumph of God in raising and seating Christ at his right hand—the position of ultimate cosmic power and authority—how is it that Paul is in prison? This sounds like defeat, not triumph. The author must answer this potential objection.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Gombis, Dissertation, 89.

In one sense, this is the age-old question of the problem of evil. “If God is good, why is there evil?” or “If God is all powerful, why doesn’t he stop it?” Clearly, being put in prison and facing the death penalty (to which he ultimately succumbed) when you have done nothing wrong is a great evil. But this question is multiplied greatly after such a lengthy and lofty explanation of how at the present moment King Jesus is exalted far above every name that is named. How could Jesus let this happen to his servant?

This is a problem caused by **extremely bad thinking** and not understanding biblical paradoxes. People are not thinking God’s thoughts after him. When you think *your own thoughts* during such pressing times, all it is going to do is drive you to madness or despair. Thus, someone else writes, “**The thought of his helpless position leads St Paul to unfold its true meaning.**”<sup>10</sup> And what a meaning it is!

One can scarcely begin to see the wonder of it not matter how many times you read it. Here is the paradox he will now unfold: At the same time Paul is suffering utter humiliation as a **prisoner**, he is “**playing a cosmically pivotal role**

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<sup>10</sup> **Brooke Foss Westcott** and John Maurice Schulhof, eds., *Saint Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians: The Greek Text with Notes and Addenda*, Classic Commentaries on the Greek New Testament (London; New York: The Macmillan Company, 1909), 43.

as the administrator of God's grace in salvation."<sup>11</sup> But even in laying this paradox out rather bluntly, you have to read and understand the contours of the detour to truly begin to wrap your mind around what a staggering thing Paul says is happening.

## The Mystery

There is no place in the Scripture more concentrated on the word “mystery” than here in **Ephesians 3:2-13**. Paul has mentioned the word once in the letter so far, in that Great Sentence: “... making known to us the mystery of his will” (**Eph 1:9**), which he said was “to unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth” (**10**). The word “mystery” will appear four times in our passage (**3:3, 4, 6, 9**).

A curious translation of the Greek word mystery (*mysterion*) is the Latin's *sacramentum*. A “sacrament” is literally a “mystery.” Every time Paul uses the Greek term, he is talking about **the gospel** (**Rom 11:25; 16:25; 1 Cor 15:51; Eph 1:9; 3:3-9; 5:32; 6:11; Col 1:26-27; 2:2; 4:3; 3:16**). This is why, for the Reformers, the only sacraments the church can have are sacraments that display for the people in visible

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<sup>11</sup> Gombis, Dissertation, 89.

signage—the gospel. **Baptism** is a sign of the death and resurrection of Jesus (**Rom 6:3-5**). The **Lord’s Supper** is a sign of the new covenant Jesus’ death enacted in his blood (**Luke 22:19-20**) and of the subsequent military victory he gained in his over the powers at the cross (**Col 2:14-15**; cf. **Gen 14:18** and its context), all of which leads the way to eternal life in heaven and the Wedding Supper of the Lamb (**Rev 19:9**).

This gospel, rooted in what Paul has just said about Jews and Gentiles and the church, is what he will now use as the foundation for explaining to them just how important it is that they think about his **present situation in prison as a paradox** rather than a contradiction which would prove that Jesus is not really the King of kings. If you have spiritual eyes to see, behold what he is about to tell you.

What I’m going to do is contrast the almost dozen parallels in the two halves of his detour (*see again the chart above*). These halves are **vv. 2-6** and **7-12**. Let us recall the first verse again and see how it connects to the detour, “**For this reason, I Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles—assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God’s grace that was given to me for you**” (**Eph 3:1-2**). As he is singling out the Gentile Christians of Ephesus, he goes off on his side-trail.

He then returns to this exact same part of the trail in vv. 7-8 when he says, “Of this gospel 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, through I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ...”

In vs. 2, he assumes that they have heard of four things that will have identical parallels in vv. 7-8. Let’s look at the second through fourth because they are easier to spot. First is “God’s grace.” Notice the exact parallels “of God’s grace” (2) and “according to the gift of God’s grace” (7). Vs. 7 simply adds the idea that the grace he has received is a gift, something he’s talked quite a bit about already in his letter.

Second, it is “given.” “That was given to me” (2) is parallel to “which was given to me ... this grace was given” (7, 8). This time he adds two things in the parallel. First, it was given “according to the working of His power” (7). It wasn’t a gift that Paul reached out and grabbed, as is so often portrayed in evangelistic object lessons of non-Christians “accepting” Christ like a man reaches out and takes \$100 that is offered to him. No, the gift came exclusively through the power of God and not his own power. In fact, the second point helps reinforce this. “To me, though I am the very

least of all the saints.” If you know the story of Paul’s conversion, you will understand what he is talking about.

Three times in the book of Acts (chs. 9, 22, 26) the conversation of Saul of Tarsus is recounted. Looking only at ch. 9, we learn that Saul is still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord Jesus (9:1), literally on his way to Damascus to kill some more of them (2-3) when suddenly a light from heaven shone around him (3). Falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” (4). Saul responded and Jesus then told him who he was (5). The risen Savior then gave him a command to enter the city where he would be told what to do (6). Everyone with him was speechless. They heard the voice but saw no one (7). When Saul rose from the ground, he opened his eyes and was blind, so they had to guide him into the city (8). He went three days blind as a bat, neither eating nor drinking (9). Then, a disciple named Ananias, who had himself received the terrifying vision from Christ of having to confront this murdering religious zealot (10-16), met Saul whose sight was then restored (17-18), where upon Saul ate and immediately began preaching of Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God (19-20).

In this incredible story we learn **why Paul considered himself the least** of all the saints. He was directly and personally responsible for the very first outbreak of religious persecution against Christians. He murdered many of them with his own hands and he bore the guilt and shame of this his entire life. It also shows God's power vs. his own. Paul was not seeking Christ, though he did believe he was seeking after God. He was actually persecuting Christ, for the church is his body. Yet, God reached down and struck the man, converting him overnight who was as hateful against Jesus as perhaps any man ever was. Hence, God's grace was given to him.

The third parallel is "**... for you**" (**Eph 3:2**). The parallel in **vs. 8** is, "**to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.**" The "**you**" in vs. 2 is the **Gentiles**. These three parallels help to explain the first one we find in the passage. When It says, "**Assuming that you have heard of the stewardship,**" the parallel is "**Of this gospel I was made a minister.**" **Stewardship** is parallel to **minister**. He was entrusted as a steward to be a minister. Of what?

**The gospel of God's grace to the Gentiles.** This is what Jesus had told Ananias. "**Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and**

the children of Israel” (Acts 9:15). This was his personal calling from the very mouth of the Risen Lord. But notice what Jesus tells Ananias immediately after this. “For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name” (9:16). Suffering for the name. A minister to the Gentiles. He is presently in prison. He is in prison because he was a minister to the Gentiles. These four take us about a third of the way through the parallels.

Eph 3:3-4 add a couple more. First, the *mystery*. “How the mystery was made known to me by revelation ... the mystery of Christ” (3:3). This is parallel in 3:9 with “the administration of the mystery.” This mystery is all about the person and work of Christ, the person Saul immediately proclaims in Damascus as “the Son of God.” This is *not a new mystery*, but a deeply old one, going back to the “sonship” language of Psalm 2 which itself goes back to Deuteronomy 32. The whole point is, Jesus is the God of the OT. And indeed, the whole Gentile aspect of this mystery is that Jesus is now taking the nations, rather than just the nation of Israel, to be his treasured possession by creating a new man, a new temple, his new covenant church, made up of Jew and Gentile alike who are now one in Christ.

The second parallel here is about *his writing*. When he says, “I have written briefly. When you read this, you can perceive my insight...” (Eph 3:3-4a). This is parallel in vs. 9 with “to bring to light what is the administration...” “Written briefly” parallels “bring to light.” When he speaks about having *written briefly*, he is not talking about some long-lost letter, but about the *first two chapters of Ephesians*. In other words, he has just told them these things in a greatly expanded form.

These six parallels serve to make room the few that follow. Those are what he really wants to communicate. Paul is not so much giving some kind of defense of his Apostleship, as some scholars think is the purpose of this whole digression, as he is reminding them of what he has already told them in order to give the proper context to what he really wants to say.

The *seventh parallel* is the mystery *hidden*. In vs. 5, “Which was not made known” parallels the end of vs. 9, “hidden in God.” Each section adds its own information. Vs. 5 says it was not made known “to the sons of men in other generations.” We need to carefully interpret this. The context is *Gentiles*. The language “sons of men” recalls for us

the language of Genesis 4-5 and all the sons of Adam.<sup>12</sup> Here, perhaps the information vs. 9 adds is also parallel. It adds, “God, who created all things.” This takes our minds back to creation where Adam is.

Contrary to some who say, “According to Ephesians 3 ... nothing about the mystery and the new creation, the body of Christ, was ever revealed before,”<sup>13</sup> or these are “truths not included in the Old Testament,”<sup>14</sup> Calvin, taking into consideration the context, is surely right when he says, “The words of Paul must not be understood to mean that there had been no knowledge at all on these subjects [before the coming of Christ]. There had always been some Israelites who recognized that when the Messiah came the grace of God would be proclaimed throughout the whole world, and they looked for the restoration of the entire human race” (Calvin, *Ephesians* 3:5). Obviously, there were hints. Abraham would be the “Father of Many Nations.” But those hints were given to Jews, not to Gentiles. That’s

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<sup>12</sup> While not inspired, the Hebrew translation of this Greek verse in Ephesians curiously uses the word *adam* rather than *ish*, making no mistake that it seems this in a more universal light.

<sup>13</sup> Bob Hill, “The Twelve Dispensations,” *TOL* (March 5, 2002), <http://theologyonline.com/showthread.php?1653-ARCHIVE-The-Twelve-Dispensations-By-Bob-Hill>.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Ice, “Mysteries,” *The Popular Encyclopedia of Bible Prophecy*, ed. Tim LaHaye and Ed Hindson (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2004), 238.

why the context matters. He is talking to Gentiles. But what Gentile had this revelation given to him?

But Chrysostom says something important here too. “Peter, if he had not been guided by the Spirit, would never have gone to the Gentiles” (Chrysostom, *Homily on Ephesians* 6.3.3-6). As Peter in Galatians 2 demonstrates, there were massive cultural and legal barriers put into place intentionally to even keep the Jews from seeing things as they should. So though it was present, it was hidden even to the Jews.

The next parallel contrasts this hiddenness with it now being *revealed*. “As it has now been revealed” (5) parallels “might now be made known” (10). Vs. 10 adds a little information. “So that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known.” What does it mean “through the church?” We will come back to this important point at the end. It is key to the entire passage.

The next parallel becomes the first of the entire list that actually becomes a contrast. It contrasts *two very different groups*. Vs. 5 adds that it has now been revealed “to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.” As we saw last time, the Apostles are the 12 and the prophets are those in the book of Acts who are now being given direct knowledge of these things. I would count *Ananias* as a prime example, for he

was told explicitly about this very truth and in fact it was this very truth that broke the man down so that he actually went out to help a man he knew was there to kill Christians. Theodoret explains what is happening. “It was made known incrementally to the prophets of old, but not fully then as it is now. For they did not see the whole picture but wrote down words about aspects of it ... Remember that in the apostles’ day there were many who had the gift of prophecy. It is in this order that he mentions that the revelation was known to the apostles and then to the prophets” (Theodoret, *Epistle to the Ephesians* 3.5). This has basically just been said at the end of Ephesians 2. But here comes the twist.

## **The Mystery of the Paradox: Suffering and Triumph**

Rather than some kind of word parallel to these “apostles and prophets,” he says in vs. 10, “the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.” Here is a paradox. Something made known to apostles and prophets, men living on earth, makes its way up as information to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

Recall in Chapter 1 how Paul deliberately began his **Divine Warrior Epic** by saying that Christ has **triumphed** and is “**now seated at the right hand in heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come**” (**Eph 1:21**). We saw there that those in mind are particularly **evil, fallen supernatural creatures**. **Artemis** would certainly seem to qualify among them, Artemis whose temple still stands, whose worship is still the focal point of all of Asia Minor, and whose power and fame in the ancient world was surpassed only by Zeus himself. Paul is now returning to these creatures and telling us **a paradox**: That which has now been revealed to his apostles and prophets somehow gets made known to these evil rulers and authorities in heavenly places. What’s going on here and why is this so important to understand?

We can begin to see the explanation come forth as we look at **the last two parallels**. The first is a true parallel: *Christ Jesus*. **Vs. 6** ends, “**the promise in Christ Jesus**.” This parallels the end of **vs. 11**, “**Realized in Christ Jesus our Lord**.” There is a lot we leave out in just looking at the parallel in these two verses, though.

In **vs. 6**, he returns to the mystery and explains what he means explicitly. “This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus.” Again, this is really what he ended ch. 2 talking about, though it isn’t until this chapter that he speaks of it as a mystery *per se*. **Vs. 11** adds that “This was according to the eternal purpose he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord” (11).

An “**eternal plan**” means that God designed this from before the foundation of the world to be the case. He didn’t not know that this would happen. It wasn’t “**Plan B**.”<sup>15</sup> It is exactly what he had planned all along and the history of redemption was simply how he chose to unfold that plan to us. Though Christ is there in the OT, it is specifically

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<sup>15</sup> “Plan B” is a common Reformed way of speaking about the Dispensational understanding that Jesus first offered to Israel a physical kingdom, but they rejected it. Because they rejected it, God went with “Plan B,” and at this moment began offering the gospel to Gentiles in a church that has essentially no connections to that of the OT nation of Israel. This brought about the great “parenthesis” or the “mystery” known as the church age, which lasts from Pentecost until the pretribulational Rapture of the church.

I did a little digging and could not find a single Dispensationalist referring to a “Plan B.” I found a couple (especially Thomas Ice) who dogmatically denied that any Dispensationalist has ever taught this, and formally speaking, until I can find proof, I would have to agree with him. However, this issue is more complicated than simply finding a proof-text with a quotation. The idea of a “Plan B” does seem to be a fair way, at least in some respects, of talking about something that is brand new, a complete and total mystery to everyone. Perhaps one of the issues with using the language is that it might imply that God does not know the future, which almost all Dispensationalists believe that he does. Therefore, some find the language offensive. I would like to see more clarity brought to this point by both sides, so that we might between be able to speak to what is actually being affirmed.

through his incarnation and death as a human being that the plan is brought to its mysterious realization that Paul talks about here with Jews and Gentiles now forming one body. That is what Paul is talking about now.

It is the context of the mystery that Paul then draws forth his **last parallel**, which is the second of two complementary rather than synonymous ideas. It is “*the gospel*.” He finishes **vs. 6**, “**in Christ Jesus through the gospel**.” It is through the gospel that this mystery is made known. As the Lutheran Reformer Erasmus Sarcerius (1501-1559) says, “The gospel is not known to nature, reason, human wisdom, the flesh, blood, the world, philosophers, the natural light, the higher or the lower senses by themselves. Therefore there is a huge difference between the natural knowledge of God that the apostle talks about in Romans 1:19–21 and the knowledge of God that the gospel teaches us and that is the only real knowledge we have of him. Annotations on Ephesians” (Erasmus Sarcerius, *Annotations on Ephesians*). The gospel is made known, first to us, and then—somehow—to the heavenly powers. And it is this gospel that actually solves the paradox that comes because Christ is in heaven. We are almost ready to see how, but not quite.

The parallel in vs. 12 to “the gospel” is “through our faith in [Christ].” Faith parallels gospel. It isn’t that faith is the gospel. Rather, it is that *through* faith we receive the good news of Jesus. We believe what we are being told. Who needs faith to believe what they can see with their eyes? This strikes at the heart of the paradox that Paul is in prison and how it can be that he can have just written to them all about Christ’s conquering military victories. The eyes are seeing something very different than faith would see.

It is at this point I want to return to the words “So that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in heavenly places” (Eph 3:10). I want to focus on the first of these words, “through the church the manifold wisdom of God” is made known. What does this mean? This is a razor’s edge of interpretive truth but getting it right might just change the way you view the world.

Some believe that this is teaching that the church preaches to the powers, though it is admitted that such an idea is not intelligible because how that would occur is not

explained.<sup>16</sup> No, the church is not preaching to the powers. “It is not from the abstract scheme of salvation, from the theory or theology of the Church that they get this education, but through the living Church herself.”<sup>17</sup> “The very existence of the church, the one body of Christ composed of Jews and Gentiles, reveals God’s wisdom to the powers.”<sup>18</sup> “It is by actually seeing the church in existence that ‘everyone’—primarily the cosmic powers—is made to be enlightened as to the manner in which God is working out his plan of salvation.”<sup>19</sup>

Return to the idea of God “creating all things” (vs. 9). Just as he spoke the universe into existence, so now he is creating the church into being through the proclamation of Paul. Hence, we are a “new creation” (Eph 2:10, 15).

This distinguishes God from all other deities, including Artemis or Zeus. Gombis explains, “In the face of the powers and authorities who are powerless to create, and whose

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<sup>16</sup> Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 89-96.

<sup>17</sup> George G. Findlay, “The Epistle to the Ephesians,” in *The Expositor’s Bible: Ephesians to Revelation*, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll, vol. 6, Expositor’s Bible (Hartford, CT: S.S. Scranton Co., 1903), 46.

<sup>18</sup> Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 197.

<sup>19</sup> Gombis, Dissertation, 96.

rule over this present evil age is characterized by destruction, division and leading humanity astray into idolatry, God's power is demonstrated by his ability to create the 'New Humanity' (Eph 4:24), and to set it in the midst of enemy territory, thus confounding the evil powers."<sup>20</sup>

The "enlightenment" of vs. 9 that comes with the administration of the mystery which makes even heavenly powers see the truth, does not refer to Paul's ministry of proclamation as a thing in itself, as if he is saying, "Look, I'm an Apostle, this proves to the powers that Jesus is reigning." Rather, it is through his proclamation and the church being born out of nothing in Ephesus "that the entire cosmos is enlightened"<sup>21</sup> as to the truth that Jesus has in fact triumphed. He is doing something they can't do.

Ironically or paradoxically, he is doing it even as Paul is in prison. In fact, you might say that Paul is in prison, suffering for Jesus, so that Jesus would demonstrate his power while he is in prison, so that he might prove to the powers and rulers of the air that he is King and they are defeated. In other words, the suffering of Paul does not prove that Jesus is impotent, but just the opposite. It proves that Jesus is

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

Lord, in a **paradoxical** way, because it is through weakness that God shows his power and shames the wise of this age.

No one and nothing else in all the universe does anything even remotely like what Paul is teaching us here. Through the very existence of the church, God's wisdom is being displayed to the whole universe. Paul is not here charging us with evangelism. Preaching doesn't appear anywhere in this passage. Do not turn this into a duty here. He is,

Claiming that the manner in which God has made known his multi-faceted and many-splendored wisdom to the evil powers is by confounding them and their rule over this age in his creation of the church. The powers have ordered the present evil age in such a way as to exacerbate the divisions within humanity created by the Law (2:11-12). God confounds the powers, however, by creating in Christ one unified, multi-racial body consisting of formerly divided groups of people. And it is the existence of the church as such a body set within the hostile environment of the present evil age that proclaims to them the wisdom of God.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 97-98.

You see? It is **not the tearing down** of present heavenly authorities' rule and binding them in Tartarus that is here the display of Christ's Victories. It is his *leaving them in power*, continuing to control the sons of wrath and blind the eyes of unbelievers, while in their very midst creating a church like this that he proves it. This is **Jesus going into enemy turf** and not freeing the country, but freeing people within it in such a way that even while they stay **entrenched behind enemy lines**, they are considered free. Here, in the very stronghold of Artemis, for example, where she reigns supreme, she is helpless and impotent to stop Jesus from infiltrating her territory, saving people from her evil reign, giving them life, changing their desires and affections, giving them a new citizenship, new family, and planting a new temple right in front of hers, without anyone even having to move out of their houses to do it. Artemis is powerless to stop it, and every time she sees the church acting in **love** and pressing on in **unity**, without divisions, proclaiming Christ in her backyard, well, the manifold wisdom of God is made known to the rulers and authorities in heavenly places.

Their days are numbered. But their reign has not yet come to an end. An overrealized eschatology that brings the “not yet” to the “here and now” can lead to as much losing

of heart in the soul of a Christian as one that doesn't believe he has done anything at all. God doesn't need to throw them into the lake of fire yet to prove to them that Jesus is victorious over them. In fact, that would ruin his fun. His ways are not our ways.

Thus, the digression, hence the detour. Paul sees how vital it is that you think **rightly about suffering** in this life, especially the suffering of a Christian for the sake of their Lord. When you do, a world of new understanding dawns upon you. You begin to think God's thoughts after him, instead of your own thoughts which seek either freedom from such oppression or despair that God is not sovereign.

You begin to **see the church very differently**. Suddenly, this is not some home to entertain "seekers." That doesn't tell the powers anything, for seekers are still their slaves. They love churches with no converts. Rather, she is the very billboard of the Gospel that God through Christ has conquered his enemies, because those in the church are one in Christ. It is our **unity**, both objective and subjective, where we treat one another as one in Christ with no divisions, no racism, no party spirit that confounds them. It is also tells you why they try so very hard to get the church tear itself

apart. Doctrines and actions that create wedges in the body are from demons.

You begin to see the [gospel as an otherworldly power](#) that transforms, and the sacraments as an otherworldly weapon that heartens Christians who struggle with doubt. Christ has conquered and he has done it in a way that was not only unexpected, but unthinkable—foolishness to Greeks; a stumbling block to Jews.

Therefore, head to the table with sure confidence that whatever befalls your destiny in the future, Jesus is the Divine Warrior who has conquered all of his foes. Suffering for Christ is not a sign of defeat, but through the gospel a demonstration of his victory. So go forth from this place heartened that such suffering is for your glory.

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