

The Letter to the Ephesians

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PAUL'S CANVAS in Ephesians is rich and broad. It stretches back to the time before time—"before the foundation of the world" (1:4). It stretches forward to "the ages to come" (2:7) when the full wonder of God's glory will be revealed in His saints, "the dispensation of the fulness of times" (1:10) when He will unify everything in Christ. It takes the three dimensions of our current human experience and transforms them into the four-dimensional "breadth, and length, and depth, and height" (3:18) of God's purpose and "the immeasurable greatness of His power" (1:19, ESV). The language is always lavish, for it is the language of God's great purpose.

The mystery

That purpose, made known to Paul by revelation (3:3), and of which he is a custodian, is the topic of the first three chapters of Ephesians (Panel 1).

Panel 1. The purpose of God

Will	1:1,5,9,11; 5:17; 6:6
Good pleasure	1:5,9
Purpose(d)	1:9,11; 3:11(x2); 6:22
Counsel	1:11
Mystery	1:9; 3:3,4,9; 5:32; 6:19
Terms such as 'chosen' and 'predestined' are also relevant here.	

It is a purpose which can be seen and known in Christ now, but which was not always quite so clear. Like Paul's own conversion experience, in which he was abruptly brought from darkness into the light of the gospel, Christ's coming has revealed "the mystery" which was once hid from the world at large, and even to some extent from His own people. This concept of a recently revealed mystery, then, is important, and it is worth looking at some occurrences of the term:

- "[God has] made known unto us the *mystery* of His will . . . that in the dispensation of the fulness of times He might gather together in one all things in Christ" (1:9,10)
- "By revelation He made known to me the *mystery* . . . that the Gentiles should be fellowheirs,

and of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ by the gospel" (3:3-6)

- "The fellowship of the *mystery*, which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God . . . to the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God" (3:9,10).

Whilst there was much that could be learned about God's purpose and the work of Christ from the Law and the Prophets, those realities either could or would only be perceived in shadowy form by God's people until the reality came and their full beauty could be seen. The advent of Christ, then, has been transformational, not only for Paul and his people (most of them Christ-rejectors, as blind as he had once been), but for the world at large. Now, at last, God's purpose through the ages could be discerned and appreciated for all its wonder.

That is why there is so much vocabulary which relates to God's purpose. That is why there are so many references to the imparting of knowledge, perception, revelation, understanding.¹ Paul is basking in and celebrating the delight of comprehending, in some measure, the wonderful mind and plan of God—of knowing the unknowable.

Past, present and future

All this talk of God's purpose and a mystery revealed leads on to the natural question of what exactly that purpose is. One way of looking at this is to observe Paul's concentration on three aspects: past, present, and future.

When he speaks of **the past**, he speaks of an age when the plan of God was at least partially concealed, although God Himself knew what He would do and whom He would call from the very beginning. Paul speaks of a time when God's purpose was being worked out primarily with His own people, and the gospel was not being

1. Here are some of the references to the ways, means and end results of the process of understanding and cognition: 1:8,9,17,18; 3:3-5,8-10,18,19; 4:13,17,18,21; 6:21,22.

Panel 2. Past, present and future

Past	Present	Future
“Before the foundation of the world” (1:4) “When we were dead in our trespasses” (2:5) “God prepared beforehand” (2:10) “At one time”, “at that time” (2:11,12) “The mystery hidden for ages” (3:9) “Old self . . . former manner of life” (4:22)	“This age” (1:21) “Now” (2:13; 3:5,10; 5:8) “No longer strangers” (2:19) “No longer” (4:28)	“A plan for the fullness of time” (1:10) “The [age] to come” (1:21) “The coming ages” (2:7) “To mature manhood” (4:13) “The day of redemption” (4:30)
(Quotations from the ESV)		

openly preached to the Gentiles. He deals with a dispensation in which a middle wall of partition divided Jew and Gentile, and when the world was besieged by sin and lay in alienation from its God. We all had a way of life in that world; a selfish and sinful way which was not pleasing to God. It was an age of (partial) ignorance and sin.

When he speaks of **the present**, Christ has come and everything has been changed. Christ has made one new man from the old division of Jew and Gentile; now there is but one body, of which he is the head. He has reconciled us to God, and brought us near by the blood of the cross. Now the mystery of God’s purpose has been made known, and the gospel is to go forth without boundaries. Now we sit, not in alienation, but in heavenly places in Christ (1:3,20; 2:6; 3:10).

But God’s purpose does not stop there. It is emphatically **future-focused**. Paul repeatedly uses the concept of an *inheritance* to illustrate that a key element of God’s gift to His people is to be received in the future (1:11,14,18; 5:5). In the ages to come, God will shower far more abundant blessings upon His people than merely those of the present age. The riches of His abundant goodness will be poured forth upon the world He has created. He will gather *all things*—an emphatic and oft-repeated expression in the letter (1:10,11,22 [2×]; 3:9; 4:10,15; 5:13,20; 6:21)—in Christ, summing them, as it were, and enabling them all to find meaning in him (1:10). At last the world will be filled with God’s glory as He had always planned it.

Deep things

These, then, are some of the key elements of God’s purpose through the ages that Paul wishes to highlight. But, though so much has been re-

vealed—and though the Ephesians have come to understand it in measure—Paul’s fervent desire is that they would know yet more. Paul had a great conception of the fact that the truths of God’s purpose are almost unfathomably deep to our limited minds, suffocated as those minds are by so much habitual fleshly thinking.

There is so much to know, but Paul wants to know more, and he wants *them* to know more (1:15-19 and the doxology in chapter 3). The fact that he is probably further down the path of perception of the purposes of God than they are only makes him long that they should see the wonderful vistas that he sees; and that together they might see yet more than this. He strives to open their minds wider to the wonderful ways of God.

Indeed, the purpose and counsel of God is so vast and so wonderful that words and sentences cannot really contain it. Human language and the confines of grammatical structure seem beggared by the wonder of the subject matter. Perhaps this is why Ephesians, in dealing with the subject matter it does, is particularly noted for its long sentences in the original Greek. After his opening salutations in 1:1,2, Paul launches in 1:3-14 into the longest sentence in the New Testament—and probably one of the longest sentences ever written! It is perhaps not so surprising that, when one attempts to encapsulate the plan of God into a single sentence, that sentence finds itself stretching and stretching under the strain! And the long sentences continue, even as Paul continues with his subject. 1:15-23; 2:1-7; 3:1-7; 4:11-16; 6:14-20 are all examples of very long single sentences in the Greek. Scholars may describe this as a stylistic trait, but it seems to me that the subject matter must have something to do with it.

In drawing the consideration of chapters 1–3 to a conclusion, it makes sense to conclude where Paul does—with one of the most beautiful prayers/doxologies that the New Testament contains. Who, having tasted a measure of the wonder of God’s great purpose, would not join with Paul in pouring out their hearts to God and desiring that they, and their brothers and sisters in Christ, would be filled yet more by a deeper understanding of these life-giving things?

Exhortations

There is a fairly clear distinction in Ephesians between the first three chapters of the letter, which we have considered so far, and chapters 4–6, which present practical exhortations for believers. There are many individual exhortations in this section: “walk . . . with all humility and gentleness” (4:1,2, ESV), for instance; or, “speak the truth with [your] neighbour” (v. 25, ESV). Nevertheless, there are a number of thematic groupings, and the chapters break down into four principal chunks relatively easily, as [Panel 3](#) illustrates. These chapters in Ephesians are justly famed for their emphasis and unique contribution to the topics of unity (chapter 4), the roles of husband and wife patterned on the relationship of Christ and the church (chapter 5), and the need to arm oneself with the whole armour of God (chapter 6). Some of the key metaphors Paul employs are those of the body, the temple/building of God, and, of course, the soldier (see [Panel 4](#) overleaf).

One thing which it is very important to note is the way in which these practical points grow out of the very teachings of the first three chapters. Paul does not ‘randomly’ turn to some practical matters of behaviour. The practice flows naturally from the doctrine. This can be seen from the following:

- The fact that we are in a *new era* in which God has further opened His plans to the gaze of man means that we should walk a *new walk*² which corresponds to it. The old ways of darkness must be abandoned as we put on the new man of light. If God’s mystery, hid for ages, has now been revealed, then we too should be striving to reveal the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ in our own lives.
- Similarly, if we, being once *alienated Gentiles*, have been made nigh by the blood of Christ, then we should *renounce Gentile ways* to embrace and manifest the works of the spirit.
- If God has redeemed us and *reconciled* us to Himself, *breaking down the middle wall* of partition between Jew and Greek, then it follows that we too should vigorously pursue the goal of a *unified ecclesia*. Every member is to be valued, for together we must grow so that we may hold the head which is Christ with stability and conviction. This striving for and attaining to *unity* is central to the one-body, one-head and building metaphors which Paul develops. It demands *mutual submission*, as illustrated in the different roles of wife, master, and so forth.

Why write?

So far we have been able to look at the main doctrinal and exhortational trajectories that Paul follows in Ephesians, which has given a good flavour of the letter as a whole. In conclusion, it is probably worth taking a further step back to ask *why* Paul wrote these particular things to them (as opposed to some other things), and what the

2. Paul refers to the importance of one’s *walk* five times in chapters 3-6: 4:1,17; 5:2,8,15.

Panel 3. The exhortations (chs. 4-6)

- 4:1-16** Walk worthily, with humility and unity, to mature manhood.
One body, many members, holding the head and growing together
- 4:17-5:21** Reject the old man and all immorality. Reform and put on the new man.
Imitate God, be kind, walk in love as children of light, rejoice.
- 5:22-6:9** Roles and responsibilities: wives (5:22-24); husbands (vv. 25-33);
children (6:1-3); fathers (v. 4); slaves (vv. 5-8); masters (v. 9)
- 6:10-18a** Finally, be strong!
Put on the whole armour of God

The letter then closes with an exhortation to pray for Paul, and with Paul’s closing plans and benediction.

distinctive role of this letter is within the whole canon of Scripture. We will also take a brief look at Paul's relationship with the Ephesian ecclesia.

The letter is generally dated to Paul's captivity in Rome, when Colossians and Philippians are also thought to have been written. Paul preached in Ephesus during his second missionary journey, and ended up staying there for over two years. Surprisingly, then, the letter is relatively free of greetings or messages to particular individuals, or of allusions to Paul's intimate knowledge of and experiences with them. Further, Paul's statements

in 1:15, "because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love towards all the saints" (ESV), and 3:2, "assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you" (ESV), might read as if Paul *did not* know them so well, and that their relationship was only by hearsay.

It is also probable that the letter was designed to be sent initially to Ephesus and then sent round to ecclesias in the neighbouring areas. This would explain why there are some manuscripts of the letter which omit the words "who are in Ephesus" in 1:1, and also why there are few personal greetings and reminiscences.

It also helps explain the rather general content of the letter. If there had been many new converts in the area and the letter was being sent round a number of ecclesias, perhaps including ones that Paul had not visited, or that had not even been established when he was there, then it would make full sense for him to talk of his stewardship of the gospel and sense of responsibility for them. It would make sense for him to lay out God's purposes with believers past, present and future, and for him to focus on the amazing revelation of the mystery of God's purpose with the Gentiles "to the praise of His glory" (1:12,14, cf. v. 6).

It would be logical, too, for him to emphasise the new walk of the new man which Christ requires, of the way in which this should be worked out in the various roles people have in society (slave, husband, father, etc.), and of the unity that we should seek to develop in Christ as we seek to emulate his character. Whilst Ephesians may be somewhat 'general' in this sense (rather like Romans), the spiritual teaching and exhortation it contains amply justify its status as one of the favourite and most deeply researched of Paul's letters through the ages. Ephesians makes a unique contribution in explaining the grand purpose of God and its unfolding through time, the elevated status of Christ in whom the fullness of the Godhead bodily dwells, and the wonderful relationship and unity between Christ and the church as head-and-body, man-and-wife.

These are deep things, and Paul knows that the fathoming of them requires time and investment. Just as a human body grows and develops from infancy to maturity, so we must grow in knowledge and understanding until we are closer to "the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ" (4:13). There is no higher goal in life, and this is Paul's sincere prayer for himself and for his readers, in whatever age they might live.

Panel 4. Key metaphors

The body and its head

This metaphor emphasises the theme of unity—one body with many necessary parts. Terms like 'members', 'flesh' and 'stature' as well as 'head' and 'body' link with this theme.

The building

As well as talking of walls being broken down, Paul speaks of believers being built together as a habitation of God through the spirit. The idea of edification and upbuilding one another in faith grows from this.

Riches and fullness

The terms 'fill', 'full', and 'fullness' are frequent in Ephesians. All the fullness of the Godhead dwells in Christ, and in turn believers have the prospect of filling themselves with the fullness of God. This is lavish language, and terms like 'measure' and 'riches' might be linked to it as a way of measuring the extent of the grace of God and hope in Christ.

Redemption, reconciliation

Sacrifice of Christ references.

Darkness/light

There are a number of 'opposite pairs' or 'binary oppositions' in Ephesians. 'New/old' is one, 'awake/asleep' is another, but perhaps the clearest is the 'darkness/light' pairing which is found several times.

The soldier

Perhaps the most famous of all the metaphors in Ephesians is that of the soldier clad in the Divine armour, standing firm against all spiritual opposition.