

Homiletics Analysis: Ephesians 3

Content & Intent

This Text — Content:

Ephesians 3 divides naturally into two movements. The first (vv. 1–13) is Paul’s exposition of his own apostolic stewardship: the mystery of Christ, previously hidden but now revealed, that Gentiles are fellow heirs, fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus (v. 6). Paul presents himself as the least of all saints, yet entrusted with this specific commission — to make plain the administration of a mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known even to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places (vv. 9–10). The doxological aside of verses 13 (“do not lose heart”) bridges Paul’s self-description to the second movement.

The second movement (vv. 14–21) is one of the most concentrated intercessory prayers in all of Scripture. Paul bows before the Father — from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name — and prays in cascading petition: that the Ephesians would be strengthened in the inner person through the Spirit; that Christ would dwell in their hearts through faith; that they would be rooted and grounded in love; that they would have power to comprehend the incomprehensible dimensions of Christ’s love; and that they would be filled to all the fullness of God. The prayer closes in a doxology (vv. 20–21) that names God as the one who is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think, according to the power at work within us — grounding the extravagance of the petition in the limitlessness of God’s ability.

This Text — Intent:

God’s intent through Ephesians 3 is to secure the reader’s confidence in two inseparable realities: the cosmic scope of the church’s calling and the inexhaustible sufficiency of Christ’s love to fulfill it. The chapter is not primarily informational — it is doxological and intercessory in its very structure. Paul moves from theological declaration to prayer to doxology, pulling the reader along the same trajectory. God is seeking to produce in the reader a form of awe-grounded courage: a refusal to be small-souled about the church’s identity and calling, and a willingness to reach toward a comprehension of Christ’s love that exceeds comprehension. The “do not lose heart” of verse 13 and the “far more abundantly than all we ask or think” of verse 20 are the chapter’s twin anchors — together they say: *the stakes are higher than you think, and God is more than sufficient for them.*

Subject Sentence: The mystery of the gospel has been revealed — and its fullness exceeds all asking.

Primary Claim: God is calling the church to inhabit the full cosmic scope of her identity in Christ — not timidly, not small-souled, but grounded in a love too large to fully measure and a power too great to exhaust.

Interpretive Evaluation

The “mystery” of verse 3–6 — revelatory content or ecclesial structure?

Some traditions, particularly within Dispensationalism, read “the mystery” of verses 3–6 as referring specifically and exclusively to the previously undisclosed creation of the church as a distinct entity separate from Israel — the “body of Christ” as a new organism with no Old Testament anticipation. On this reading, the mystery is not merely the inclusion of Gentiles but the unprecedented nature of the church itself, which (on strict dispensational accounts) has no genuine Old Testament foreshadowing. This reading imports a significant theological presupposition — the sharp Israel/Church distinction — that the text itself does not establish. Paul describes the mystery as “fellow heirs, fellow members of the body, fellow partakers of the promise *in Christ Jesus through the gospel*” (v. 6). The content of the mystery is covenantal inclusion, not ecclesial novelty. The Reformed reading — supported by Ephesians 2:11–22 and the broader canonical testimony — understands “mystery” in its Pauline sense (*mystērion*): something that was present but veiled in the Old Testament, now fully disclosed in Christ. The hiddenness was partial, not total (cf. Genesis 12:3; Isaiah 49:6; Psalm 87). The Reformed reading is preferred here because it accounts for both the genuine newness of the revelation and its continuity with the Old Testament covenant, without requiring a prior commitment to a sharp Israel/Church distinction the text does not make.

Paul’s self-designation as “least of all saints” — rhetorical humility or genuine spiritual conviction?

A surface reading might treat Paul’s self-designation in verse 8 (“the least of all saints”) as conventional epistolary humility — a rhetorical move rather than a theological claim. Some popular exposition presses this language purely as a model for Christian leadership posture, reading it as “be humble like Paul.” This misses the load-bearing weight of the phrase in context. Paul is not performing humility — he is grounding the grace-basis of his apostolic commission. The point is that the entrusting of this mystery to *Paul of all people* is itself the demonstration of grace’s excess. The application is not primarily “be humble” (Clowney’s anti-moralism principle applies directly here) but rather: *if grace is sufficient for Paul, it is sufficient for you*. The Reformed reading insists that Paul’s self-description functions theologically, not merely as a character model.

The prayer of verses 14–21 — petitionary template or theological declaration?

Charismatic and Pentecostal traditions have sometimes read the Ephesians 3 prayer primarily as a template for Spirit-empowered prayer, focusing on the “strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man” (v. 16) as the paradigmatic form of Spirit-filling. This is not wrong as far as it goes — the prayer is explicitly intercessory and explicitly names the Spirit’s role. The qualification is that reducing the prayer to a Spirit-filling template misses its primary function: Paul is praying for a *comprehension* of love (v. 18–19) that will issue in fullness of God (v. 19). The Spirit’s strengthening is instrumental to an end — knowing Christ’s love more fully — and that end is the prayer’s center of gravity. The Reformed reading embraces the full pneumatological weight of the prayer while insisting it remains tethered to its christological core: it is Christ’s love that is being prayed into.

Verse 20 — “far more abundantly than all we ask or think”

This verse is frequently extracted from context and used as a general assurance that God will grant personal requests beyond expectation — a prosperity-adjacent reading in popular preaching. The contextual force is entirely different. The “far more abundantly” is tethered to the petitions of verses 16–19: the power to comprehend the incomprehensible love of Christ and be filled to the fullness of God. The extravagance of verse 20 is measured against the extravagance of the preceding prayer — not against the mundane or personal requests the reader may bring. The Reformed reading insists: the “more than you can ask or think” is *already* grounded in the most astonishing petition imaginable (to be filled to all the fullness of God), and it is that specific excess that the doxology celebrates.

Key Canonical Support

- **Genesis 12:1–3** — The Abrahamic covenant’s promise that “all the families of the earth” shall be blessed provides the Old Testament ground for the mystery Paul declares; the Gentile inclusion is not an afterthought but the fulfillment of the covenant’s original scope.
- **Isaiah 49:5–6** — The Servant of the LORD is given “as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth” — the prophetic anticipation of the mystery’s disclosure, confirming it was hidden but not absent in the Old Testament.
- **Romans 11:33–36** — Paul’s doxology at the close of the Roman letter (“O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!”) parallels the Ephesians 3 doxology in structure and function, grounding both in the mystery of God’s saving purposes now disclosed across Jew and Gentile alike.
- **Colossians 1:26–27** — Direct parallel to the “mystery hidden for ages” language of Ephesians 3; adds the christological content explicitly: “Christ in you, the hope of glory” — tethering the mystery to personal union with Christ.

- **John 17:20–23** — Christ’s own high-priestly prayer anticipates the comprehension-of-love petition of Ephesians 3:17–19; the unity of believers and the Father’s love made complete in them corresponds directly to Paul’s prayer that the Ephesians would “know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge.”

Aim: To produce in the reader an awe-grounded refusal to live small in light of the church’s cosmic calling and the inexhaustible love that sustains it.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
3:1	Paul identifies himself as “the prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles” — begins what appears to be a prayer but interrupts himself for the parenthetical explanation that follows	The “for this reason” connects back to Eph 2:11–22; the prayer is completed in v. 14 with the same phrase
3:2–3	Assumes the Ephesians have heard of the “stewardship of God’s grace” given to Paul — the mystery made known to him by revelation	Establishes the apostolic basis for what follows; Paul’s revelation is grounded in divine initiative, not personal discovery
3:4–5	The mystery of Christ was not made known to previous generations as it has now been revealed to apostles and prophets by the Spirit	“Previous generations” does not mean absent in OT but veiled — the progressive disclosure of covenant purposes
3:6	The content of the mystery: Gentiles are <i>fellow heirs</i> , <i>fellow members of the body</i> , <i>fellow partakers of the promise</i> in Christ Jesus through the gospel	The triple <i>syn-</i> compounds (Greek) are emphatic — full co-participation, not secondary status or conditional inclusion
3:7–8	Paul’s commission to preach this mystery came by God’s grace; he is “the least of all saints” yet given this specific gift — to preach to	Grace grounds and shapes the commission; Paul’s unworthiness is not rhetorical — it establishes the grace-basis of the

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	the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ	ministry
3:9–10	The purpose: to bring to light the administration of the mystery hidden for ages in God — so that <i>through the church</i> the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to rulers and authorities in heavenly places	The church as the vehicle of cosmic revelation — one of the most striking ecclesiological statements in Scripture
3:11–12	This was according to the eternal purpose realized in Christ Jesus our Lord — in whom we have boldness and confident access through faith in him	The cosmic disclosure is not accidental — it is the execution of the eternal plan; “boldness and access” is the application hinge
3:13	Paul urges them not to lose heart over his sufferings — his tribulations are their glory	The pastoral anchor: the suffering that attends the mystery’s proclamation is not evidence against the mystery’s truth
3:14–15	The prayer resumes: Paul bows before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named	The posture (bowing) signals the prayer’s weight; “every family named” establishes God’s universal fatherhood over all creation
3:16	Petition 1: That he would grant them to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in the inner person	“Inner person” — the seat of spiritual life; “power” is <i>dynamis</i> , the operative ability to receive what follows
3:17a	Petition 2: That Christ may dwell (<i>katoikēsai</i>) in their hearts through faith	<i>Katoikēsai</i> — permanent, settled indwelling, not visitation; “through faith” is the means, not the precondition
3:17b–18	Being rooted and grounded in love — so that they may have strength to	The fourfold spatial metaphor does not refer to four distinct dimensions of

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	comprehend the breadth and length and height and depth	love but expresses totality — love in its inexhaustible fullness
3:19	Petition 3: To know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge — that they may be filled to all the fullness of God	The climactic petition: the goal is not mere knowledge but participatory fullness — <i>filled to all the fullness of God</i>
3:20–21	Doxology: God is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think, according to the power at work within us — glory to him in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations	The doxology closes the chapter and the prayer; the “more than we ask” is calibrated to the preceding cosmic petition, not to ordinary requests

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	3:1–6	The Mystery Disclosed: Gentile Co-Participation in the Body of Christ
2	3:7–13	The Mystery Entrusted: Paul’s Commission and the Church’s Cosmic Role
3	3:14–19	The Mystery Inhabited: Prayer for Comprehension of Christ’s Love
4	3:20–21	The Mystery Celebrated: Doxology to the God of Inexhaustible Sufficiency

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The mystery of the gospel has been revealed — and its fullness exceeds all asking.

Primary Claim: God is calling the church to inhabit the full cosmic scope of her identity in Christ — not timidly, not small-souled, but grounded in a love too large to fully measure and a power too great to exhaust.

Applications (Five)

1. Reframe your understanding of the church from a local gathering to a cosmic instrument. (*Mind/belief*) The church you attend on Sunday morning is, according to Ephesians 3:10, the vehicle through which the manifold wisdom of God is being displayed to rulers and authorities in heavenly places. This is not metaphor or aspiration — it is Paul’s statement of what the church presently is. If your operating understanding of the church is primarily organizational, sociological, or therapeutic, the text is calling you to renovate that understanding from the ground up. The church does not exist primarily to meet your needs or to serve its community — it exists to be the display case of the mystery of God’s reconciling grace in a cosmos that is watching.

2. Let the triple co-participation of verse 6 settle your identity in Christ.

(*Affections/worship*) Paul uses three compound words in verse 6 — *fellow heirs*, *fellow members*, *fellow partakers* — each prefixed with *syn-* (together with) to establish that Gentile inclusion in Christ is not partial, conditional, or secondary. If you have been living with a sense of spiritual marginality — as if your access to God is somehow probationary, or as if others are more fully in than you — this text calls you to grieve that diminished self-understanding and receive what the Spirit has actually declared. You are not a guest in the household of God. You are a co-heir. Let the warmth of that word reach your affections, not just your theology.

3. Pray for what Paul prayed for — specifically, not generically. (*Will/behavior*) The petitions of Ephesians 3:16–19 are among the most specific intercessory prayers in the New Testament, and they are almost never the actual content of Christian prayer. If your prayer life runs primarily on requests for health, safety, provision, and resolution of circumstances, the text is rebuking the smallness of that agenda — not by dismissing those concerns but by placing them in the shadow of the petition that God is actually most concerned to answer: that you would be strengthened in the inner person, that Christ would dwell deeply and permanently in your heart, and that you would know a love that exceeds knowing. Make Ephesians 3:16–19 the template for your prayer for yourself and for those you love. Pray it word by word. Let the petitions educate your desires.

4. Do not lose heart over suffering in the work of the gospel. (*Affections/worship*) Paul’s aside in verse 13 — “I ask you not to lose heart over my sufferings for you, which are your glory” — is not a throwaway pastoral note. It is the application of the cosmic framework he has just established: the tribulations that attend the gospel’s advance are not evidence that the gospel has failed or that God has miscalculated. They are the cost of the mystery’s proclamation in a world that resists the wisdom of God. If you have grown discouraged in gospel ministry — in prayer, in witness, in local church faithfulness — the chapter is naming that discouragement and calling you to set it against the eternal purpose being executed through the church (v. 11). The suffering is calibrated to the stakes, and the stakes are cosmic.

5. Calibrate your confidence in prayer to the God of verse 20, not to your own asking.

(*Mind/belief*) The doxology of verses 20–21 is easily sentimentalized as a general assurance that God exceeds expectations. Its actual force is more specific and more demanding: the God who is able to do “far more abundantly than all we ask or think” has just been asked — by Paul, on your behalf — to fill you to all the fullness of God. That is the measure against which “far more abundantly” is set. If you have domesticated your confidence in God to the scale of your personal requests, the text is expanding the frame. God’s sufficiency is measured not by your prayers but by His own unlimited capacity — and His capacity is being deployed toward an end far more glorious than your current petitions have imagined.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Ephesians 3 teaches that God’s eternal purpose — conceived before creation, progressively disclosed through covenant, and now fully revealed in Christ — is nothing less than the unification of all peoples in the body of Christ as the display of His manifold wisdom to the watching cosmos. The chapter presses two inseparable truths: that this mystery is now fully disclosed (there is nothing hidden that will not be revealed in Christ), and that it is not yet fully *inhabited* by the church (hence the prayer of vv. 14–19). The theological content that emerges is a portrait of a God whose purposes are simultaneously cosmic in scope and intimate in application — the same God who governs rulers and authorities in heavenly places is the one who strengthens individual believers in the inner person through His Spirit. The doxology of verses 20–21 establishes that God’s ability to accomplish His purposes is not constrained by the smallness of human asking or imagining — He acts “according to the power at work within us,” which is the same power that raised Christ from the dead (cf. Eph. 1:19–20).

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Ephesians 3 is a chapter of extraordinary significance for Reformed ecclesiology and soteriology. The disclosure of the mystery — that Gentiles are full co-participants in the covenant promise, not second-class members of a distinct program — is the exegetical ground for the Reformed rejection of any two-track soteriology that divides the people of God along ethnic, national, or dispensational lines. One covenant, one body, one promise, one fullness: this is the shape of the mystery Paul declares. Furthermore, Paul’s self-description in verse 8 is a compressed theology of grace: the grace that saved “the least of all saints” is the same grace that commissioned him, and this movement from unworthy recipient to entrusted steward is the Reformed gospel’s inner logic. The prayer of verses 14–19 displays the Reformed understanding of the Spirit’s role in sanctification — not as a second blessing superimposed on justification, but as the ongoing strengthening of the inner person that enables deeper comprehension of the love

that secured justification. Grace does not merely save and release; it saves and then grounds, roots, and fills. The doxology's insistence that glory belongs to God "in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations" is a Reformed charter for the local congregation: the church is not incidental to God's purposes but is the specific location where His glory is being displayed and where the "eternal purpose" (v. 11) is being executed in time.

Main Takeaway

The mystery that was hidden for ages has been fully disclosed: you — whatever your background, your history, your sense of spiritual unworthiness — are a full co-heir of the promise, a fellow member of the body, a co-partaker of Christ. That is not the ceiling of what God intends for you; it is the floor. The prayer of this chapter reaches toward something more: that you would be so deeply rooted in the love of Christ that you begin to comprehend, in your own experience, the dimensions of a love too large to measure — and be filled, progressively and without terminus, to all the fullness of God. Do not live small. The God who governs heavenly rulers and authorities has set His purposes on you, and He is able to do far more than you have yet asked or imagined.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Preaching verse 20 as a blank-check prosperity promise.** "God will do more than you ask" is one of the most commonly decontextualized verses in the New Testament. Extracted from its context, it becomes a promise that God will exceed personal expectations — a divine upgrade guarantee. In context, the "more than you ask or think" is calibrated to the most extravagant petition imaginable: to be filled to *all the fullness of God*. The pitfall is not invoking verse 20 but using it as a general assurance without tethering it to the specific cosmic and christological petitions that precede it. Restore the contextual measurement: *even the petition to be filled to all the fullness of God falls short of what God is able to do*.
- **Reducing the "mystery" to an information unit rather than a doxological claim.** Verses 3–6 are exegetically rich and technically significant, and there is a real danger of turning the "mystery" exposition into a doctrinal lecture on revelation and hiddenness that never lands on the reader with weight. The point of the mystery's disclosure is not merely that we now know something — it is that we now stand inside a reality that is cosmically significant and demands a response. The mystery is meant to produce awe, identity-formation, and courage — not just doctrinal clarity.
- **Moralizing Paul's self-designation as a model of humility.** "The least of all saints" (v. 8) is consistently preached as a character model: *be humble like Paul*. This is not

the function of the phrase in context. Paul is making a theological argument about grace — the greater the unworthiness of the vessel, the more evident the grace of the commission. The application is grace-grounded confidence, not posture-management. Preaching “be humble” from verse 8 commits exactly the error Clowney’s anti-moralism principle exists to prevent.

- **Treating the prayer of verses 14–19 as primarily a Spirit-filling template.** The pneumatological dimension of the prayer is real, but subordinate. The Spirit’s strengthening (v. 16) is instrumental toward an end: comprehension of Christ’s love (vv. 18–19). If the sermon’s climax is “be filled with the Spirit” without pressing through to the christological goal — to *know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge* — the prayer’s center of gravity has been missed.
- **Ignoring verse 13 (“do not lose heart”) and its pastoral function.** This verse is often treated as a minor transitional aside. In fact, it is the most practically urgent sentence in the chapter for congregations in actual ministry — it applies everything Paul has said about the mystery and the church’s cosmic role to the experience of discouragement, suffering, and apparent failure. A sermon that handles verses 1–12 and 14–21 beautifully but skips past verse 13 has missed the pastoral load-bearing point of the chapter’s structure.
- **Missing the ecclesiology of verse 10 — the church as cosmic display.** Verse 10 contains one of the most remarkable ecclesiological statements in the New Testament: “so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.” Most preaching treats the church as instrumental to the mission (the church *does* things in the world). This verse says something structurally different: the church *is* something in the cosmos — it is the display case of the mystery. Failing to press this point leaves the congregation with a functional ecclesiology but no doxological one.