

## **GOD'S POWER COMES BY GRACE**

Ephesians 3:1-13

We don't normally think in terms of everything in our lives – material possessions, relationships with others, what we know, where we live – everything was given to us by God and all these things and relationships have purposes related to the objectives of the Kingdom of God. If someone were to ask you, “why do you have a car?” you would probably respond with an answer related to **your** need to get from one place to another, to expand your area of influence, to save time so you can do other things, etc. Most people never consider that God provided the means for them to have a car and the reason He did that was so that they could use it to advance the Kingdom of God. We just normally do not think in such terms.

Does this mean that the answers you gave regarding the reasons you have a car are wrong? No, all these are legitimate reasons. We could expand the scope of our understanding by asking “why are you going from one place to another?” We might think in terms of the immediate situation such as I needed to buy some groceries. Or we could ask “Why do you need to save time?” The simple answer might be so that we could watch our favorite TV program.

As Christians we should have an awareness (either consciously or subconsciously) of what God has saved us to be and to do. If we take this to an ultimate extreme, we would be diagnosed as obsessive, compulsive in our behavior and thought processes. On the other hand, if we go to the other extreme of completely ignoring the calling of God on our lives, then we would be diagnosed as worldly or secular. Clearly, a balance is needed so that we will be aware of opportunities to advance the Kingdom of God and His purposes in everything we do, all that we have, and all our relationships. When we do this, then the trip to the grocery store to pick up a loaf of bread becomes an opportunity to help the person along side of the road whose car quit running or to encourage the checkout worker in the supermarket. We can do this only if we realize a higher purpose for everything that God has provided for us.

The Apostle Paul was keenly aware of such a higher purpose in his life. He was saved by God and called to a specific emphasis related to God's purposes. As we examine how this calling was enabled by God in Paul's life, we can begin to see how God, in His grace, has enabled us to be about what He intended for our lives when He chose us in Christ Jesus.

### Recognizing God's Grace (3:1-2)

<sup>1</sup> For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles— <sup>2</sup> if indeed you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace which was given to me for you; Ephesians 3:1-2 (NASB95)

“This reason” is a reference to the significant truth that God is working to bring about cosmic reconciliation or to restore unity in the universe and that unity will be in God the Son, Jesus Christ. Specifically, God is eliminating barriers that prevent people from coming together to be as one, and eliminating barriers that prevent people from coming together to be at one with Himself. The purpose for all this coming and joining together was to build a dwelling place for God. For this reason Paul prayed for the churches that they would be strengthened with power and ability in the inner man so that God's purposes would be accomplished in the church. He eventually states this in the letter starting in verse 14 of this chapter. Notice that the first four words of verse 14 are identical with the first four words of verse one. Paul used the intervening verses to tell them about God's call on his life.

Some commentators have noted that this letter was likely intended to be circulated to all the church in the area. Paul had spent a considerable amount of time at Ephesus and they knew him well, but the other churches in Asia Minor were not that familiar with him. Think about it:

How would you react if you were to receive a letter from someone who is in prison? It depends. If you realized that the person was in prison because of what he had been doing to help you, then you would likely be very interested.

If Paul had not been devoted to bringing the Gospel message to the Gentile, then he would not have wound up in a Roman prison. The reason he was driven to do the work he did was because he recognized that God had called him and entrusted him with this work of letting the Gentile world know about and experience the grace of God.

How does what happened to Paul apply to you and me? Has God saved us and called us and entrusted us with a work that is to be done that will accomplish the objectives and purposes of the Kingdom of God? Well, if you believe Ephesians 2:8-10, then we have to agree that God saved us for a purpose. God saved Paul for a purpose and was very specific in the focus of that calling. If we haven't discovered the specific focus in God's call on our lives, then we need to be simply going about what we already know we should be doing. We find a general call in the Great Commission and in the statement of Jesus in John 14 that we should be doing the same kind of work that Jesus did and He sent the Holy Spirit to be in us and with us so that we would be empowered to do what we are called to do. Do you remember what Jesus told his earthly parents when they found Him in the Temple talking with the teachers of the law? He said, "don't you know that I must be about My Father's business?" That is probably a good question that we should ask ourselves. Are we involved in our Father's business?

#### Receiving God's Revelation (3:3-6)

<sup>3</sup> that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief. <sup>4</sup> By referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, <sup>5</sup> which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit; <sup>6</sup> *to be specific*, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel, Ephesians 3:3-6 (NASB95)

How did Paul figure out what God wanted him to do? That is a trick question. He did not "figure it out." God gave him a message through Ananias. We see this in chapter nine of Acts. How did Paul figure out what God's overall plan was with regard to the Gentiles to whom he was being sent? Another trick question. Paul did not figure it out, but it was revealed to him by the Holy Spirit. Paul called this a mystery. We normally think of a mystery as something that is convoluted or complicated and is difficult to understand. What Paul meant was that the plan that was revealed to him was a mystery simply because it was hidden. It is pretty simple and straightforward. Once the "mystery" was brought into the light, then it is one of those "aha moments."

When we hear what Paul was calling "the mystery of Christ" we tend to think, that is very obvious. Why is that so difficult to see? If I told you that God's salvation in Christ Jesus was for all people (Jews and Gentiles), then you would think "Well, that's obvious." The point is that before this truth (that is so plain and simple that a child can understand it) was revealed to Paul, people did not have any inkling of this marvelous truth. Why? Because it was hidden and it needed to be revealed.

Paul wrote that this mystery (which people did not previously know about) was revealed to God's holy prophets and apostles in their spirits by the Holy Spirit of God. Some have pointed to Paul's reference to the "holy prophets and apostles" as proof that some Christians are "saints" and others are not. In the Roman Catholic traditions, the reference to saints has an entirely different meaning than the context in which Paul used the term. Paul had also written about this mystery being revealed in his letter to the church at Colosse. In Colossians 1:26 we

find

“the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints.”

Here we see that the mystery is revealed or made manifest to all the saints and not just to the prophets and apostles to whom Paul referred in his letter to the Ephesians.

The specifics of the mystery related to being fellow heirs, fellow members of Christ’s Body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ.

What are implications of being an heir? We can gain some insight into what this means by looking at Paul’s comment on this in Romans 8:17 where he wrote the following:

“and if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ;”

Let’s look at the sequence in verse 17 of “children > heirs > heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.” Going from *children* to *heirs* is the maturation process. Being *heirs of God* can have a double meaning. First, the obvious thing is that we inherit *that which belongs to God*. The second possible meaning is that we “inherit God.” Of course, this is not to imply that we “own” God, but that we receive His nature. Being *joint heirs with Christ* speaks of the idea of inheriting that which belongs to God - specifically His glory (abundance, wealth, treasure, and hence honor). Being joint heirs with Him also speaks of the extent and shared character of our inheritance. Christ being the first born receives a double portion (that is, He has the preeminence) and he has the responsibility of apportioning the inheritance among the other heirs. Paul’s emphasis in the Ephesians letter was that this benefit is provided for Gentile believers as well as believers who are physically descended from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Being members of Christ’s body is normally used in reference to members of the church. Just as a physical body is to grow and mature and develop skills, so we as members of the Body of Christ are to be engaged in what God is doing in the church to build up the body. We also know that, just as a physical body has parts that have specific functions, we also have specific callings or functions within the church so that the church can properly operate. Paul’s point here is that we are fellow members with others of diverse backgrounds but the commonality of being in Christ trumps all other differences.

What does it mean to be “partakers of the promise of Christ Jesus through the gospel?” The use of the singular “promise” rather a plural “promises” would cause us to look for the most significant promise that Christ gave to His disciples before His death. He told them that if He went away that He would send the Holy Spirit to be with them and in them. He repeated this promise before His ascension by telling them to wait in Jerusalem for the coming of the Holy Spirit. Whether you are Jew or Gentile, every Christian is a partaker in the “gift of the Spirit.” As Paul related in Romans chapter 8 and verse nine “but ye are not in the flesh but in the spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if any man hath not the spirit of Christ, he is none of his.”

Speaking of the “gospel” or the good news of what God was accomplishing, Paul saw his place in the overall scheme of things and recognized that God had enabled him to do what God had called him to do.

### Responding Through God’s Power (3:7-10)

<sup>7</sup> of which 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. <sup>8</sup> To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, <sup>9</sup> and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things; <sup>10</sup> so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly *places*. Ephesians 3:7-10 (NASB95)

The role of having a responsibility of stewardship of the good news was literally thrust upon Paul during his Damascus Road experience. The gift of God’s grace is not a reference to

the saving grace of God but to the specific gift of understanding of the Scripture as they related to Christ and the revelation of the mystery of what God was accomplishing in the overall scheme of things. The working of God's power in the life of Paul was a reference to the various Spiritual gifts that were provided to him to actually accomplish the work to which God had called him.

Paul's personal reaction to such a call on his life could have resulted in great spiritual pride. Such a response would have limited his ministry. Instead Paul was humbled that God would place such a responsibility on him. Paul realized how wrong he had been in his persecution of the followers of Jesus and his remorse over this misdirected zeal caused him to think that he was the least deserving of God's mercy.

The beauty of God's grace is that it is not based on our deserving but upon His character. It is almost ironic that God would choose the worst opponent of the Gospel and transform him into the best proponent of what he had opposed. If the truth of the gospel can save someone like Saul of Tarsus, then it can surely save others who are not so adamantly committed against the truth.

God used Paul to proclaim to the Gentile world what could not be discovered about Christ by human effort. To think that we can discover God through human intellect is as ridiculous as the people who were going to build a tower so they could reach heaven. These riches or the wealth of Christ would be in the perfections of his nature, in the works of his hands (the creation), and in his kingdom and dominion over all.

Paul was privileged to shed light on God's plan to bring all things together in Christ and how He would use the church to demonstrate to the physical and spiritual worlds what he was doing.

### Rejoicing with Reason (3:11-13)

<sup>11</sup> This was in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, <sup>12</sup> in whom we have boldness and confident access through faith in Him. <sup>13</sup> Therefore I ask you not to lose heart at my tribulations on your behalf, for they are your glory. Ephesians 3:11-13 (NASB95)

Paul was writing about the whole plan of salvation, which reveals the wisdom of God in what He predetermined and set in motion before the foundation of the world. The center piece of this plan was that Christ, the Redeemer, in his incarnation, would suffer and die for all those who would be saved.

Paul was part of the proclamation of this plan which would result in souls being converted when they believe and put their trust in the grace of God and become part of the revelation of the mystery of God bringing everything in heaven and earth together in Christ. It was because of his faithfulness in proclaiming this plan and the revealed mystery that he was in prison and was undergoing tribulation. It was also because of his faithfulness in proclaiming the plan that many were being saved. Paul considered the tribulation to be a small price to pay for the outcome of souls being saved for all eternity. This is the same pattern we see in what Christ did when He suffered and died so that we could have access to God's salvation.