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GRATEFUL FOR THE GOSPEL

Ephesians 3:1-7

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Ephesians Lesson 19

Grateful for the Gospel
Ephesians 3:1-7

The Thanksgiving holiday reminds us that we often take God's gifts for granted, rather than giving thanks. God gives us many common blessings, such as the gift of sight to enjoy a beautiful sunrise or sunset. He gives us the gift of sound, so that we can enjoy the laughter of children or conversation with friends or a favorite song. He gives us the gift of taste, so that we can enjoy good food. We enjoy many material blessings in this country—our homes, cars, and many gadgets that make life more comfortable. Traveling to some of the poorer areas of the world helps you to see how life *could* be, had you not been blessed to be born in America! So we should be thankful!

But the greatest gift that God gives us is the gospel—the good news that Jesus Christ came into this world to save us from our sins. If He has opened the eyes of your heart to trust in Jesus Christ as the One who bore your eternal punishment on the cross, then even if you are going through terrible suffering, you have reason to rejoice and be thankful! And if God has saved you, He also has given you some way that He wants you to serve Him. The fact that former selfish, rebellious sinners could be redeemed and now put into service for the King of kings should fill our hearts with joyful gratitude to Him. This is what the apostle Paul both says and exemplifies in our text:

We can be joyfully grateful even in our trials,
if we remember God's gift of salvation
and the gracious privilege of serving Him.

These verses are a bit difficult, so track with me as I try to explain them. In 2:11-22, Paul has outlined the unprecedented blessings that God has now poured out on the Gentiles. For 2,000 years from Abraham to the time of Christ, God's blessings were mostly restricted to the Jews. The Gentiles were excluded from the nation of Israel, were strangers to God's covenants of the promise, and thus they had no hope and were without God in the world (2:12).

Then comes that glorious contrast (2:13), “But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.” Paul shows how through the gospel, Christ now has reconciled the Jews and Gentiles to one another and He has reconciled both groups in one body to God through the cross. As a result, the Gentiles are no longer strangers and aliens, but they are fellow citizens of God’s new people, they are members of His household, and together with the Jews, they are being built into a holy temple where God now dwells (2:19-22).

In light of these wonderful truths, Paul is about to pray for the Ephesians, that God would make these truths a reality in their experience. He will pray (3:17) that Christ will dwell in their hearts by faith, in line with what he has said about them being built into the dwelling of God (2:22). In line with the unity of Jews and Gentiles in Christ, he will pray (3:17) that they may be rooted and grounded in love.

But, before he gets to his prayer, something diverts Paul’s attention. Perhaps he heard his chains clank and it brought him back to his present situation, of being a prisoner. Paul’s persistent enemies, the Judaizers, were no doubt plaguing the Ephesian church, arguing that the Gentiles needed to be circumcised and follow the Law of Moses to be saved. One of their arguments was to discredit Paul. If he *really* is God’s apostle, then why is he in prison?

So Paul begins (3:1), “For this reason [because of the reconciliation of the Jews and Gentiles to one another and to God], I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—” but then, instead of launching into his prayer, he interrupts himself. He will come back to the prayer in 3:14, but he goes into a digression to show the Ephesians that his imprisonment in Rome should not cause them to doubt God or to question Paul’s apostleship. Rather than losing heart because of his sufferings, they should see that his tribulations on their behalf were actually for their glory (3:13). So in this digression, he reminds them again of God’s great gift of the gospel and of the gracious privilege of being able to serve and to suffer for Christ’s sake. Rather than grumbling about his imprisonment, Paul overflows with joyful gratitude to God. He not only tells us, but also shows us, how to have this same joyful gratitude in the midst of our trials.

1. All believers will suffer, but in our sufferings we need to maintain God's perspective.

The teaching that God promises health and wealth to all of His children is heresy. But, although most of us don't buy into that error, we often think that if we walk obediently with the Lord, He will reward us with protection from trials. Or, when trials come, some teach that it is okay to get angry with God. The assumption behind this is, "I don't deserve this kind of treatment!" I once saw a booklet from the ministry that publishes "Our Daily Bread" titled, "Forgiving God"! That's a blasphemous title, because it implies that God did something wrong! It was about a woman who had lost her four-year-old, and how she had to learn to forgive God for this tragedy! But, if Job (the most righteous man on earth) did not need to forgive God for taking *all ten* of his children in one accident, then neither do we need to forgive God, no matter how difficult our trials. He never treats us unjustly or sends trials into our lives without a loving purpose on His part.

Paul was suffering unjustly from a human perspective. He had not done anything wrong. He was suffering because he had gone to a lot of personal bother to do something good. He had raised a gift from the Gentile churches and had personally taken it to Jerusalem to help alleviate the suffering of the Jewish people. Behind his actions, no doubt, was his strong desire to see the Jewish and Gentile wings of the church united in love. But when he got there, some Jews saw him in the temple and started a riot by falsely accusing him of bringing some Gentiles beyond the barrier in the temple. The riot led to Paul's imprisonment, which had been going on now for about five years. During those years, Paul easily could have grown bitter towards the Jews who had falsely accused him, and even toward God, who had allowed this to happen.

Also, Paul was not suffering because he denied the truth, but rather because he boldly proclaimed the truth. You can dodge a lot of hassles as a preacher if you tiptoe around difficult doctrines and just preach "nice" messages that make everyone feel good. But God had revealed certain truths to Paul, and he lived to please God, who examines the heart, not to please people (1 Thess. 2:4). It would have been much easier for Paul just to make peace with the Judaizers, saying, "We don't agree, but unity is more important

than truth." But, instead, he always stood firmly for the truth of the gospel of grace, even if it meant hardship and persecution.

When Paul says (3:2), "if indeed you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace which was given to me for you," he is not implying that some of the Ephesians had not heard. Probably Paul was using irony (H. C. G. Moule, *Ephesians Studies* [Christian Literature Crusade], p. 110). His ministry to the Gentiles had been well known for many years and was at the heart of why he was in prison. So here, he is using understatement to say, "If perhaps you have heard a few things about my ministry to the Gentiles...!" They were Christians *because of* his ministry to the Gentiles!

Note one further thing about Paul's perspective on his sufferings: Although he did not deserve to be in prison, he was joyfully grateful because *he understood and submitted to God's sovereignty over his sufferings*. He calls himself (3:1), "the prisoner of Christ Jesus." If Paul had seen himself as the prisoner of the Jews, he would have been bitter at the Jews. If he had seen himself as the prisoner of the Roman government, he would have been angry about the miscarriage of justice. But, he saw himself as the prisoner of Christ Jesus. Paul knew that the Lord only acted toward him with grace and kindness. And so, he could rejoice even in his sufferings.

There is an error today called "open theism" that teaches that God is not sovereign over the tragic things that happen. He is just as upset as you are, but He can't do anything about it. They are trying to get God off the hook for all of the evil and suffering in the world. But, it is fundamentally unbiblical. In the Bible, God makes it clear that He is sovereign over everything, including our trials (Exod. 4:11; Isa. 45:7; Amos 3:6). Also, by denying God's sovereignty over our trials, the open theists take away the only source of comfort in our trials, namely, that "God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28).

So here is Paul, suffering for no wrong that he had done. But there is not a hint of self-pity or complaint on his part, because his focus was on Christ Jesus as his sovereign Lord, and also on helping the Ephesians understand God's purpose in Paul's imprisonment. But, there is more:

2. We can be joyfully grateful in our trials if we remember that we are beneficiaries of God's gracious salvation.

Paul never ceased to be thankful for God's grace that had been shown to him in the gospel. Though he was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a violent aggressor, yet he was shown mercy, and God's grace was more than abundant for the chief of sinners (1 Tim. 1:13-15). If you think about where you used to be as a sinner, and where you would be today if God had not broken into your life with His grace, it will cause you to overflow with gratitude. Note four things about God's grace in the gospel:

- A. God's grace in the gospel is a precious, undeserved gift.

Paul was so moved by God's grace in saving him that he just can't stop repeating himself. In 3:2 he writes, "if indeed you have heard of the stewardship of *God's grace which was given to me* for you..." Then, again in 3:7, he says, "of which I was made a minister [servant], according to *the gift of God's grace which was given to me* according to the working of His power." He continues (3:8), "To me, the very least of all saints, *this grace was given*, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ." He just couldn't get over it! Neither should we!

No one has ever come to Christ by his own intelligence, will power, or good works. If you are a Christian, it is not because you thought through all of the options and due to your superior intelligence and high moral standards, you decided to follow Jesus. Rather, the Bible indicts us all (Rom. 3:10-18):

As it is written, "There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one. Their throat is an open grave, with their tongues they keep deceiving, the poison of asps is under their lips; whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness; their feet are swift to shed blood, destruction and misery are in their paths, and the path of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes."

If you're thinking, "Well, that may describe others, but it doesn't describe me," then you do *not* understand God's grace in the gospel. Jesus did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to

repentance (Luke 5:32). You have to feel how lost and helpless you are before you will cry out to Jesus, "Save me, Lord, or I perish!" Salvation is totally a precious, undeserved gift of God's grace.

B. God's grace in the gospel cannot be grasped by human reason, but God must reveal it to us.

Paul writes (3:3-6), "that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief. By referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, 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; 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...."

To understand Paul's flow of thought we need to understand what he means by *mystery*. He uses this word 21 out of the 27 times in the New Testament, and with different shades of meaning in different contexts. But the basic meaning is that it refers to God's revelation or disclosure of something that formerly was hidden. Such information cannot be attained by human reason or wisdom, but only when God reveals it by His Spirit (1 Cor. 2:7-10).

In Ephesians, Paul first refers to the mystery in 1:9, where it refers to God's revealing His eternal purpose to sum up all things in Christ. So the key idea in the mystery centers on God's eternal plan of bringing all things together in the person of Jesus Christ. When Paul says (3:3) that he *wrote before* about this in brief, he is referring back to 1:9 (see, also, Col. 1:25-27).

But, this one supreme mystery has a number of applications (Peter O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* [Eerdmans/Apollos], p. 110). Thus in our text, Paul refers to the general sense of the mystery of Christ (3:4), but then specifies the application of that mystery to the now revealed truth that "the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel" (3:6). Paul had written about that aspect of the mystery in 2:11-22. So, to sum up (O'Brien, p. 236, citing John Stott), "The mystery or open secret of Christ is 'the complete union of Jews and Gentiles with each other through the union of both with Christ.'"

When Paul says that this aspect of the mystery had not been made known in other generations as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets, he means that God has revealed new truth with regard to the church. The Old Testament often spoke of God's blessing on the Gentiles, but it was always through the Jews. But now, (Gal. 3:14) "in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we would receive the promise of the Spirit through faith." In other words, the newly revealed truth that Paul and the New Testament ("holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit") proclaim is that the Gentiles are equal with the Jews in the church. They are (3:6) "fellow heirs and fellow members of the body and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel."

The point to apply is that the truth about the centrality of Jesus Christ and the gospel is not something that anyone can arrive at by human logic, intuition, or study. It's not like math, where if you work at it, eventually you can get it. Rather, to understand God's truth, especially the truth of the gospel, He must open your eyes (see, Matt. 13:11-13). So, if you do not understand the good news about Jesus Christ and what He did on the cross, cry out to God for understanding and search the New Testament as if you were looking for buried treasure until you find Him!

- C. God's grace in the gospel comes to us by the working of His power.

Paul mentions (3:7) that the gift of God's grace "was given to me by the working of His power." God's mighty power transformed a violent racist like Paul into the apostle who now loved the very people he had hated, the Gentiles! Maybe, like the Ephesians, you were into the occult and all manner of evil. But, God's mighty power transformed these people who engaged in sexual immorality at the pagan Temple of Diana into a holy temple in the Lord (2:21).

Not all conversions are as dramatic as Paul's or the Ephesians were, but all conversions require the same working of God's mighty power. Maybe, like me, you were raised in a Christian home and were at church every time the door was open. You still need to be saved from your self-righteousness, pride, hypocrisy, lust, greed, and other sins by God's mighty power. Beware of cultural Christi-

anity, where you assume that you're a Christian because you live in a Christian country and attend a Christian church! You are not a Christian unless you know the life-transforming power of God in your heart!

D. God's grace in the gospel is a special privilege that we now enjoy.

To overflow with joyful gratitude, even in your trials, keep in mind that you enjoy God's revealed grace in a way that millions in history never have. Paul says that the mystery of Christ was not made known in other generations as it now is made known! But even now, there are hundreds of millions of people around the globe who live in spiritual darkness in countries where the gospel is hardly known.

But, we have these transforming truths revealed to us in the New Testament as a precious treasure! If it was revealed to you that somewhere in your back yard, a strongbox with a million dollars was buried, you'd be out there this afternoon with pick and shovel, and you wouldn't stop digging until you found it! Well, you've got something far greater than money—you've got "the unfathomable riches of Christ" (3:8), hidden in your Bible! Start digging!

So, we can be joyfully grateful even in our trials if we remember God's gift of salvation, revealed in Jesus Christ. Finally,

3. We can be joyfully grateful in our trials if we remember that we have graciously been given the privilege of serving God.

Being an apostle was not Paul's career choice! Rather, it was given to him as a sacred stewardship of God's grace. When he says that he "was made a minister" (3:7), it is a passive verb, meaning that he didn't choose it. Rather, God acted on Paul. On the day of Paul's conversion, the Lord told Paul (Acts 22:10), "Get up and go on into Damascus, and there you will be told of all that has been appointed for you to do." He was drafted!

"Minister" (Eph. 3:7) is not a stained glass word, referring to a member of the clergy. That concept is foreign to the New Testament. Rather, it is the Greek word, *diakonos*, meaning, *servant*. It referred to one who waited tables. As such, a servant obeyed his

master. He was not free to do his own thing, but he did what his master commanded.

Although none of us are apostles and although you may not be in so-called “full time ministry,” if you know Christ, you are His servant. Even if He calls you to suffer for His name’s sake, from your prison cell you can joyfully serve Him if you remember what a great privilege it is to be a steward of His amazing grace.

Conclusion

Before his conversion, John Wesley, who was very religious outwardly, but lacked the inward reality of God’s grace, had a conversation with a poor porter at his college that deeply impressed him. Wesley discovered that the man had only one coat and that he had not had any food that day, but only water. And yet his heart was full of gratitude to God. Wesley said, “You thank God when you have nothing to wear, nothing to eat, and no bed to lie upon. What else do you thank him for?”

“I thank him,” answered the porter, “that He has given me my life and being, and a heart to love Him, and a desire to serve Him.” (In *The Inextinguishable Blaze*, by A. Skevington Wood [Eerdmans, 1968], p. 100.) That porter knew the reality of God’s saving grace. Like him, we can be joyfully thankful even in our trials if we remember God’s gift of salvation and the gracious privilege of serving Him.

Application Questions

1. Some teach that it is okay to be angry at God when we suffer and that we should be honest in expressing our feelings. Why is this at odds with Scripture?
2. How can a person who grew up in a Christian home get a deeper appreciation of God’s abundant grace in salvation?
3. Who is more difficult to reach with the gospel: a thorough pagan or a self-righteous churchgoer? Why?
4. Why is it important for every believer to see himself as a steward or servant of Christ? How does this attitude help us?

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