

Ephesians 3:1-7 "Christian Stewardship Of God's Grace"

EPH 2:19-22 "Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. 21 In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. 22 And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit."

The Gentiles are now being viewed as having the same privileges as the Jews, when it came to having access to and fellowship with the Most High God through faith in Jesus Christ. God was forming one new people under the headship of the great Shepherd. And this new people or building, as Paul puts it, would be joined together to rise to become a holy temple in the Lord.

This is what God has designed from the beginning; a people who would be set apart to glorify the living God, that they might be lights in a darkened world to testify to the grace and mercy of the Creator who desires fellowship with His people.

It is precisely for this reason that Paul can come to these Ephesian Christians and encourage them to rejoice that they too have a portion in the Kingdom of God alongside every Jew who would place his faith in the Messiah Jesus.

And so we come to the third chapter.

EPH 3:1-3 "For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles - 2 [if indeed - (NAS)] you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, 3 that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly."

Paul is about to reveal a mystery to them which they were a part of. And he begins by setting the stage concerning his participation in this mystery. Now, keep in mind that he is serving the church in Ephesus while he is in a Roman prison.

This is important to understand because at this time Paul doesn't see his situation as being detrimental to his ministry. It would have been quite appropriate for Paul to have said, 'I Paul, the prisoner of the Roman Government'. Instead, he exclaims that he is the prisoner of Jesus Christ. That's an odd way of looking at your life, and yet it's the only way we can look at it if we truly

understand our mission in this world as servants of our Master and Lord.

It is Jesus Christ who is sovereign over all of our lives and if He chooses to place us in a situation that seems hard it is only because He has a great plan to use us in that situation. You see, Paul realizes that the Romans would never have been able to hold him back had it not been for the Lord allowing Paul to be held captive.

Paul is simply acknowledging, here in the first verse, that it is Jesus Christ Himself who has made him a prisoner in Rome, but more than that, he realizes that he is the slave or prisoner of the Lord to go wherever the Lord desires. And instead of questioning the Lord, which we're all prone to do under adversity, he simply uses it to advance the Kingdom of God in the only way he can, through letters.

What we need to be careful not to do when we're under adversity is to take the attitude that we'll simply turn a negative into a positive. The expression, 'if life throws you a lemon, then make lemonade', or 'if life breaks an egg, make an omelet', may appear like sound theology, but it is not the basis for our ability to bulldoze through an adversity.

In other words, it is not simply taking a positive attitude which will get us through tough times, rather it is an understanding that we are serving an Almighty God who is faithful to love us and lead us with the express purpose of being used by Him.

There are a myriad of motivational speakers who are making a great deal of money trying to show you how to have a positive attitude toward life and then turning that positive attitude into something successful. The problem with relying on that is that you become the final factor as to whether you succeed or not.

Paul, is able to go forward in his situation, not because of a positive attitude in his abilities, but because he is positively sure that His God is faithful to work all things out for the good, to those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. That's not fatalism, it's trust and faith in a big God, who has a plan for each of our lives.

In Paul's case, God's plan was to use Paul among the Gentiles, which is why we read EPH 3:1 "For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles -"

Paul never wavered from his ministry to the Gentiles, nor did he become sidetracked because he ended up in jail. Again, the reason is because God showed him that he was called specifically to serve the Gentile world with the gospel of Jesus Christ. If that meant serving them from jail, then God must certainly know what He is doing. And God most certainly would not allow His word to be stifled simply because one of His servants could not personally deliver such a word from God.

Paul realized that the plan of God was bigger than him, which is why he could state, "Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory." (2TI 2:10)

Paul was content to serve God wherever he happened to be, whether in the good times or the bad. He looked beyond the situation and knew that it was God who was with him and who would give him the strength and the ability to do the work no matter how difficult the circumstance seemed to be. This didn't mean that Paul was excited to be in jail, it simply meant that he could be excited that God could use him even there.

That's where most of us fall short. We find ourselves in a hard situation and we decide that since the circumstance doesn't seem to be conducive for service we conclude that God won't mind if we take a vacation from service until our situation changes. If that would have been Paul's attitude, we would not have most of the New Testament that we have today, since he wrote most of it, often under adverse conditions.

Now obviously, God could and would have raised up another servant to declare His word to us, but you get the point. God doesn't expect us to wait for fair skies before we start serving. If we do then He will most certainly raise someone else up to take our place to carry on the work, and the blessing will go to someone else.

On the other side of the spectrum, when things take an unexpected turn and life doesn't work out as anticipated, we have a tendency to do the expedient thing for self and rely on our own strength to fix things instead of trusting and obeying God through it all.

Being a prisoner of Jesus Christ is not a bad thing, because it's through being enslaved to Christ that we have liberation and freedom from the penalty and power of sin as we are saved from a

master who only had our destruction in mind, unto a Master who only has our eternal good in mind.

Paul goes on to say in our text, EPH 3:2-3 "Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, 3 that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly."

This is an interesting statement because it shows us that Paul realized that he had been entrusted with a great responsibility and truth which he had to handle in a way that brought honor to God. He talks about the "administration of God's grace that was given to me for you..."

The word administration in the Greek is *oikonomia* and it means, the management of a household or of household affairs; specifically, the management, oversight, or administration, of other's property.

You see, Paul realized that he had been given the responsibility to manage this grace, given to him by God, in a way where he used it wisely and distributed it faithfully.

And of course this grace was tied directly to the mystery made known to Paul by revelation; that mystery that both Jew and Gentile were part of the same Israel of God and therefore were to be as one people in the fellowship of Kingdom of God.

This grace belonged to God, and yet it was put in Paul's care to be managed as a wise servant who was to administer it so that it might increase and have the effect God desires.

When we think of grace we have a tendency to view it as it relates to our salvation only. After all, we're saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. And yet, here we see that grace is not limited to our salvation, it also includes our ministry. As one commentator puts it, "the gift always comes as a task. Grace always brings responsibility; it never is merely privilege." (Klyne Snodgrass)

Each one of us are to be managers of grace as we are good stewards of the grace God has given us. This is precisely what Peter says in 1PE 4:10 "Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms."

There in 1Peter it's essentially the identical Greek word; *administering* God's grace, *oikonomos*, to be a steward, a wise

manager. How often can we be seen managing God's grace as we administer it to others? Or do we see ourselves as people who see that job for someone else?

Being an administrator or manager carries a great deal of responsibility doesn't it? And yet this seems to have been lost on the Church today. Is being an administrator or manager only for a select few like the apostle Paul? No, God says each one of us should use whatever gift we possess to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms.

Paul is simply stating to these Ephesian Christians that he is being faithful to that stewardship entrusted to him by Christ. Part of that responsibility entailed receiving grace in the form of revelation. Praise God that our Creator is a God who reveals Himself. Can you imagine wandering through life not having a clue as to where we came from or where we are going?

And yet this is where most of us were outside of Christ. We were wandering aimlessly wondering what it's all about. Now we know, which is why our responsibility to God is all that much more important to understand.

Paul connects this administration of God's grace with "the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly.", as he says in verse 3. God has revealed something to Paul that in ages past was not crystal clear to many people.

Now, when we talk about a biblical mystery we are not inferring that nothing has been revealed, only that the details of it have been clouded over. But what is this mystery Paul refers to? Well, he tells us in the next four verses. And by the way, when Paul alludes to having already talked about this before in verse 3, many believe that he is referring to having written a previous letter about this subject. Therefore, some believe that there is a lost letter of Paul's to these Ephesians, and they conclude we do not have a complete Bible.

The NAS reads, "as I wrote before in brief." The KJV and the NKJV read, "as I wrote before in a few words." This does not necessarily refer to a previous letter, but as the NIV puts it, "as I have already written briefly", meaning, as I just mentioned a moment ago.

That "moment ago" could very well be what he said earlier in this letter found in EPH 1:9-10, "And he made known to us the

mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ,
10 to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment - to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ."

And so now Paul expounds on this mystery.

EPH 3:4-7 "In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, 5 which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. 6 This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus. 7 I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power."

So, here's the mystery. God's plan from eternity was to include the Gentiles with the Jews as being part of the Kingdom of God. You can see how this was a mystery to both Jew and Gentile, since God was working exclusively with a called out nation known as Israel.

It was through Israel that the Messiah would come. It was through Israel one could find salvation in the promises of this Messiah. It was through Israel that God reveals Himself and gives men His law and His will and His purposes.

Israel was called to be a separate people from the nations surrounding her and so it shouldn't surprise anyone that Israel could be seen as being exclusive and the Gentiles being seen as being excluded.

But this is not the case, and this is part of the mystery surrounding the Jews and Gentiles. But it doesn't mean that God didn't reveal anything concerning this mystery. In fact, we see quite clearly that God intended to include all nations in His plan of salvation. When we go to the covenant given to Abram, we see God making certain promises to him and his descendants.

GEN 17:4-6 "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. 5 No longer will you be called Abram [Abram means exalted father]; your name will be Abraham, [Abraham means father of many] for I have made you a father of many nations. 6 I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you."

You see Israel was always meant to shine as a light among the Gentiles that they may see God at work in Israel and seek Him as the One true God and Savior.

MIC 4:1-2 "In the last days the mountain of the LORD'S temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and peoples will stream to it. 2 Many nations will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths." The law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem."

We have other O.T. indications that the Gentiles were an important part of God's plan for salvation.

ISA 11:9-10 "They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. 10 In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his place of rest will be glorious."

MAL 1:11 "My name will be great among the nations, from the rising to the setting of the sun. In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to my name, because my name will be great among the nations," says the LORD Almighty."

And so this mystery, which was mentioned in the O.T., was now coming to fruition in the ministry of Paul. This must have been an exciting time for Paul realizing that these O.T. prophecies were actually coming to pass in his day under his care as he faithfully administered this grace of the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles, who in turn carried on the responsibility of taking this good news to the rest of the world.

And what you and I are privileged to do is to carry on this responsibility to the world as well, as both Jew and Gentile share in the grace as God extends it through us. What had not been made known in other generations was now being made known through God's holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit, as we read in verse 5.

What's interesting about this verse is that this is not referring to the prophets of old. Rather, it is referring to the apostles and the prophets of Paul's day. Both the apostles and those prophets through whom God spoke were making this mystery known.

When we come to Ephesians 4, which mentions the different offices of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers, we'll go into some depth as to what these offices are and how God continues to use most of these offices today.

In any event, this mystery has been revealed and we are to continue to carry on this great truth as we show the world how God is calling all men to Himself. "This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus." (Eph.3:6)

So, the mystery includes a number of things. **1)** It is through the gospel that the Gentiles may know God. **2)** Through faith in Christ the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel. **3)** Both Jews and Gentiles are now one body in Christ. **4)** Both Jews and Gentiles share in the promise in Christ Jesus.

That promise includes all of the benefits of salvation, from forgiveness of the penalty of our sins to eternal fellowship with our God, which starts today. And what Paul had outlined in chapter 2, concerning unity among all of God's people, we are now to carry out in this world, whether Jew or Gentile.

There is now nothing that should separate believers, as far as fellowship is concerned, as we come together under the authority and truth of Christ crucified and risen for our salvation.

However, caution should always go out to be alert to the false teachings that would undermine this Gospel; teachings which may be found even among "believers", which is why Peter can say, "Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour." (1PE 5:8)

There are many false teachers in the Church who must be revealed for who they are and we must not think that unity precludes exposing these people and the false doctrines they promote. But, on the other hand, we shouldn't divide over such things that would be considered cultural or traditional unless of course those traditions or practices are out of accord with the word of God and detrimental to the Gospel.

We must always keep in mind that the way Jesus Christ views the Body is as people who are fellow-heirs, fellow-members, and fellow-partakers of the promises in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

The idea is that we are fellow-members together as though we are one. With Christ "there is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." (GAL 3:28-29)

As Christians we may have different roles in accordance with how God has gifted us within the body of Christ. Yet, all men and women in Christ have access to the same God, with the same Spirit residing in them, with the same privilege of taking this gospel out to the world.

This is what excited Paul. He knew that he didn't deserve such a high privilege. He knew that it was God and God alone who came to him and extended this grace and that now Paul felt compelled to be a grace extender, because of the grace extended to him in Christ.

This is why he says in our text in EPH 3:7 "I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power."

I like the NAS on this verse because it gives a more literal rendering as to where Paul's ministry came from. The NAS reads, "I was made a minister, according to the gift of God's grace given to me according to the working of His power."

It was God who chose Paul, and it was God who made Paul what he was. It was because of this understanding that Paul was as zealous as he was. He knew that this was amazing grace and that he was responsible to take this grace and use it in his ministry to reach out to the world. He simply had an appreciation of his salvation.

Again, I believe this is where so many Christians fall short. I believe that many Christians, especially in the West, almost take their salvation as that which is owed to them and that now that they have it, they'll determine on what basis they'll serve God.

The mystery and the overwhelming awe of this salvation seems to have been thrown to the wind in favor of creating a salvation made in our image to be used according to our wills, instead of understanding, as did Paul, that this grace which has been extended to us is nothing we deserve and as such we should be rejoicing in it each day.

But this rejoicing should be taking the form of service as prisoners of Jesus Christ who have been yoked to a Savior who has a job for us to do. I like the way one commentator puts it when he says, "To receive grace is to be taken into its service. Grace connects, enlists, empowers. It will not allow us to be passive, for it is God's power at work in us." (Klyne Snodgrass)

We have a tendency to define our lives according to what we do for employment or by the circumstance in which we find ourselves. Paul was a man who went through horrendous hardships but those hardships never defined who Paul was. What defined Paul was the Gospel of Jesus Christ. "And so we see that Christ defines him, not his circumstances. If he is a prisoner, he is Christ's prisoner." (Snodgrass)

And that's how we need to view ourselves. We no longer belong to ourselves, we are Christ's. But, what a privilege to be His own possession. What a privilege to know that this grace, which is given to us for our salvation, is also the same grace which Christ uses to give each and every one of us a ministry of service to accomplish His will in our lives and in the lives of others around us.

This is why it's so important for each of us to accomplish our ministries together in the Body, because without each other's gifts I won't be blessed by you and you won't be blessed by me, and ultimately Christ won't be glorified in our lives as we look to Him for the grace to accomplish what He wants to do in each of us.

No one is unimportant in the Christ's Church. Each of us play a vital role. And as we seek Him and desire to do the work He's called each of us to do He will most certainly equip us and use us as we lift up the name of Christ in our ministries within a local Church.

Grace from God may be directed to each of us, but grace is never meant to be self directed once we receive it, it's meant to be directed to other people. What's interesting about ministry is that "we usually think of it as our gift to God, but Paul thought of ministry as God's gift to him." (Snodgrass)

Is that how we think of ministry? Do we view ourselves as possessors of grace as a means to take that grace and thank God for it by seeing it as a privilege to serve God with such a great gift and opportunity?

Our unity comes from God who calls each of us to work as a unified Body, but that will only happen as we work as a Body where all the members are functioning in that body. God has made us a family and I'm confident that He is doing a work here and has every intention of using each one of us to further His Kingdom in our community.

Consider how God would use you here and be available to be a grace extender to each other and to those who are lost. "This gift of grace cannot be separated from the Giver and the Giver is a worker." (Snodgrass)

And praise God He is continuing to work in our lives that we may be effective workers to His glory. Remember, we are Christ's workmanship created for good works, the greatest work being servants who extend grace in truth and love as found in Jesus Christ.

Let's fight the good fight as we depend on the One who says, 'I will go before you in battle.' The battle belongs to the Lord and we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. Let's go forward by faith as we pursue the work God has for us. The fields are white unto harvest and like Paul we've been given the privilege of being planters and reapers. Praise God for His grace, let's continue to offer it to others.