

Growing Up in Jesus series ~ A Study of Ephesians

Wk 3: *When Grace Grabs Hold* - (Drawing from Rev. Darrell Johnson's *Ephesians*)
Rev. Scott McGinnis - First Presb. Church of Newton, KS - Mar. 14, 2021

As we get closer to Easter, we start to think more about the first Easter and what it meant for Jesus to die for us. Someone has said: if you want to get to know Jesus. If you want to get to know the One who lays down His life for the life of the world. If you want to get to know the One who conquers the grave, who defeats the power of death, who is alive now and forevermore. If you want to get to know Jesus, get to know Paul.

We're in the middle of our series on Ephesians and so I'd like to take some time to get to know the author, Paul, who is helping us get to know Jesus. Helping us grow up in Jesus our Head. For when you really get to know Paul you realize that no one knows Jesus the way Paul does.

As far as we know, Paul never met Jesus during Jesus' earthly ministry. He might have seen or heard Jesus from a distance during one of the three or four Passovers that Jesus was in Jerusalem. But Paul did not have the opportunity to meet Jesus in the way the original disciples did. Paul was, however, by the grace of God, given one encounter with the risen Jesus, an encounter which changed not only Paul, but the course of history.

While on his way to the city of Damascus, while on his way to arrest and punish followers of Jesus in Damascus,

Paul was knocked off his horse by a blazing light. “*Who are you?*” asks Paul from his knees. “**I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.**” (Acts 9)

What a gift! What grace! Jesus loves His enemy! Jesus seeks out the persecutor and makes him His friend, His disciple, His ambassador. From that day on everything was about Jesus for Paul. “**For me to live is Christ**”, Paul declared.

If you want to get to know the mind of the crucified and risen Jesus, if you want to get to know the heart of Jesus, if you want to get to know the grace of Jesus, Paul’s writing is a good place to start. Theologian N.T. Wright calls Paul, “*the greatest interpreter of the mind of Jesus*” [who ever lived].

You want to see what it looks like when grace breaks through and takes hold of a person? Look at Paul. Yes, look at Jesus’ other followers: John, Peter, Mary, and Priscilla. But especially look at Paul.

Today we’re looking at chapter 3 of Paul’s letter. It’s about a gift: the gift of God’s grace breaking through and taking hold. Paul is telling us what grace does in a human life. Three times he refers to grace:

3:2 – “**God’s grace which was given to me...**”

3:7 – “**This grace was given...**”

3:8 – “**to me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given.**”

If you want to get to know the grace of Jesus, get to know Paul. If you want to get to know what the gift of grace does in a human life, get to know Paul.

Up to this point in his letter Paul has been describing the new life into which Jesus calls us, a life shaped by **“the surpassing riches of His grace”**, as Paul puts it. (2:7) It constitutes a reading of life shaped by the grace of God. How often do we consider how God’s grace has shaped reality? Paul does and writes in 3:1, **“For this reason I, Paul...”** and then he stops and shares more of his own experience of grace. Then in verse 14 he begins to pray for the Ephesians – and us – in light of the riches of grace. But note it’s after he first shares personally of what happened to him when grace grabbed hold of his heart and mind.

Clearly the major theme of the text, of Chapter 3, verses 1-13, is **“the mystery of Christ”**. Three times he mentions it in verses 3, 4, and 9, and the mystery is: because of Jesus we can be included in what God has been doing in the world. It started in Genesis with one family, Abraham and Sarah, continued to Jesus, then through Jesus and because of Jesus the whole world is invited. It’s a whole new view of the world because of God’s grace shown us in Jesus.

How often do we consider how much grace changes everything? It changed everything for Paul, including, it changed Paul’s identity of himself.

I want to look at this change in Paul's identity in Jesus. I want to focus on who he became when the grace of Jesus grabbed hold. And I want to do so because, although Paul is a unique individual, who Paul became because of grace is also who we become because of grace. Grace changes everything for us as well.

1) Verse 1 – “I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles.” He will repeat this in Chapter 4:1 – “I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord.” Prisoner. Because of grace Paul ends up a prisoner!

He is speaking on a number of levels here.

Historically, Paul is in prison in Rome. Paul took the message of grace to the crossroads of the world in Rome and Jesus warned him he'd get into trouble for doing this. (Acts 26:17). Trouble might be putting it mildly. Paul is in Rome in jail awaiting trial before Caesar in hopes that Caesar defends him.

Paul also speaks of being a prisoner on a theological level. He wanted his life to be used for God's good in the world. He speaks of himself, therefore, as **“the prisoner of Christ Jesus”**.

2) Verse 2 – “...stewardship of God's grace...” Paul sees himself as a trustee of what God has given him.

In particular, he is a trustee or steward of the mystery that all people are included in God's covenant through Jesus. All people are invited to the covenant meal of the Lord's Supper. God had told Abraham he would become a blessing to **"all nations"** in Genesis 12. God's choice to bless one man and one family was from the beginning all about blessing the whole world. Paul is a trustee of God's gift of grace for the whole world.

Now by Jesus' day in the first century, the universal scope of God's grace had been lost. In Jesus...because of Jesus...the mystery is fully revealed. Paul writes that Jews and non-Jews are all **"fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise"** (2:6).

But then there's a greater mystery. Ephesians 3, God plans to **"sum up all things in Christ, things in the heavens and all things upon the earth."** The verb "sum up" is literally "recapitulate", to "put the head back on." Paul is saying the great mystery is the Christian faith isn't just something we do on Sundays or at Easter and Christmas, the great mystery revealed to Paul (3:3,5) is that in Jesus God is putting the head back on the human race. Watch the Evening News and see if humanity hasn't at times lost its head, lost its commonsense, lost its marbles. The great mystery revealed to Paul that Ephesians 3 speaks about is that in Jesus God is putting the head back on the world and in Jesus making a new humanity, which is neither Jew nor Gentile, but one new humanity in Jesus the new

Human. Jesus was the first to conquer sin and death and to now fully live and He gifts this upon us.

Paul sees himself as a trustee of that mystery: a protector of the mystery; a guardian of the mystery; one who passes on the mystery so others can know it and live in it. We now know God's good plan to **“sum up all things in Christ, things in the heavens and all things upon the earth.”**

Of what have you been made a trustee? That is how it always is with grace. Given to us for others. What has been given to you, shown to you, that you are to protect and pass on to others?

I believe I have been given stewardship of God's welcome home. Helping people know they've been given a wonderful place in God's house. Of what has He made you a trustee? What gift have you been given to protect and pass on to others?

3) Verse 7: “of which I was made a minister, according to the gift of God's grace...” The word Paul uses for minister is *diakonos* meaning *deacon, servant*. Grace made Paul a servant of the Gospel in the world and for the world.

So, too, everyone grabbed hold of by grace: we too want others to know **“the unfathomable riches of Christ”** as Paul puts it in verse 8. And in Paul's case, minister to the **“rulers and authorities in the heavenly places”** – verse 10. Paul

is on a mission to us and to the angelic powers that seek to influence cities and nations.

Paul says that **“the manifold wisdom of God”**...the wisdom that made the world, planned salvation history, and unites Jews and Gentiles into one new human race...is made known to the spiritual realms **“throughout the church”** – verse 10.

More is going on in being the Church than meets the eye! Something cosmic is happening. Through the multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-gifted church, God’s multi-dimensional wisdom is revealed to the powers behind the scene. The **“principalities and powers”** are hearing the Gospel. And things begin to change.

Verse 10 is a worldview changing verse. **“Ministers of the Gospel”** to **“rulers and authorities in the heavenly places”**. When anyone preaches the Gospel, the angelic powers in the heavenly places are being informed about the true nature of reality. And things begin to change in our city.

Ministers, all of us, bringing the mystery to light for others: in Jesus God is putting the head back on the world and making a new humanity in Jesus free from sin and death.

4) Verse 8 – “To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given.” Literally, **“Less than the least of all saints”**.

Is Paul suffering from a poor self-image? Not that we know of. Indeed, given his privileged upbringing, education and massive intellectual capability, he probably suffered from the opposite...from an inflated sense of self. Hence his attempt to wipe out the early church! But grace healed him.

Over the centuries, people have pointed to Paul's "progress" in grace. In AD 55 in his letter to the Corinthians, he refers to himself as "**least of the apostles**" (1 Corinthians 15:9). Then in AD 62 in his letter to the Ephesians, he refers to himself as "**the very least of all saints**" (3:8). Then in AD 66 in his letters to his dear friend Timothy, he refers to himself the "**foremost of sinners**" (1 Timothy 1:15). "**Christ Jesus came to the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all.**"

When grace grabs hold we see ourselves as we are apart from grace. And we then throw ourselves on grace all the more.

"**Least of all saints**". There may be a play on words going on here. Paul's name before grace got hold of him was Saul, Saul of Tarsus. Saul, in honor of Israel's first king, whose pride was his downfall. Jesus gave Saul the new name Paul. Paul means "*little*": from "*big shot*" Saul to "*little*" Paul. And if that play on words is going on, then it is also in line with a great theme in God's Story: God always choosing and working through "*little*".

King David...of the little tribe of Judah. ..and smallest of his brothers. Mount Zion...smallest of the mountains. The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, says Jesus; "smaller than all other seeds," He adds (Matthew 13:32). Grace helped Paul be small. And then through small Paul grace did a mighty work of grace.

Maybe that informs us when we're looking for God's Kingdom in the powerful of the world. Probably we should be looking for God's Kingdom in the little.

John Eldredge writes of God working in the little in his book *Wild at Heart*.

"Then the Lord intervened" is perhaps the single most common phrase about [God] in Scripture, in one form or another. Look at the stories he writes.

There's the one where the children of Israel are pinned against the Red Sea, no way out, with Pharaoh and his army barreling down on them in murderous fury. Then God shows up.

There's Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who get rescued only after they're thrown into the fiery furnace. Then God shows up.

He lets the mob kill Jesus, bury him ... then he shows up. Do you know why God loves writing such incredible

stories? Because he loves to come through. He loves to show us that he has what it takes.

It's not the nature of God to limit his risks and cover his bases. Far from it. Most of the time, he actually lets the odds stack up against him. Against Goliath, a seasoned soldier and a trained killer, he sends ... a freckle-faced little shepherd kid with a slingshot.

Most commanders going into battle want as many infantry as they can get. God cuts Gideon's army from thirty-two thousand to three hundred. Then he equips the ragtag little band that's left with torches and watering pots. It's not just a battle or two that God takes his chances with, either.

Have you thought about his handling of the gospel? God needs to get a message out to the human race. What's the plan? First, he starts with the most unlikely group ever: a couple of prostitutes, a few fishermen with no better than a second-grade education, a tax collector. Then, he passes the ball to us.

God is doing a mighty work of grace in each of us. Bringing us to the place where we can understand the mystery of God's ways in the world. When you're done looking for God's work in the biggest, look for God's work through the little.

5) Verse 13 – “I ask you not to lose heart at my tribulations on your behalf, for they are for Your glory.” When grace got hold of Paul he began to experience troubles as the Kingdom of God began to break into the world: *“tribulations”*.

The word Paul uses has this particular nuance: it does not refer to the troubles we all experience in a broken world. It refers to the kind of trouble that comes when the Kingdom of God begins to break in.

The word literally means **“pressure”**. And refers to the kind of pressure that is generated at the interface of clashing kingdoms. As one kingdom comes up against another, there is pressure, sometimes crushing pressure. It is unavoidable. And it comes with the coming of the Kingdom of God.

Paul experienced it. And so do we.

“They are your glory,” he tells the Ephesians. Paul’s experience of tribulation is their glory. Meaning that Paul’s experience of tribulations is all part of the process of God bringing the Gospel to life in the world. The tribulations are there because God is there, bringing His rule of justice and mercy. Paul gladly bears the pressure, because he knows the pressure is leading to the redemption of others.

Grace enabled Paul to bear tribulations. Grace enables us to do so too! Grace enables us to choose to suffer that others might get in on the Kingdom of grace. Grace

enables us to give up creature-comforts and be inconvenienced so that others may know the love of God and get to know Jesus.

Get to know Paul and get to know Jesus. Get to know Scott and get to know Jesus. Get to know Rosemary and get to know Jesus. Get to know Mark and get to know Jesus. How can we say that? As soon as I say, "*Get to know me and get to know Jesus,*" I'm instantly thinking how little I am. I'm the least likely person God would want representing Jesus. Get to know Paul and you'll get to know Jesus. Sure, I'll accept that. But get to know Scott McGinnis and you'll get to know Jesus. Yikes!

One more thing. I think this helps.

6) Grace made Paul a **Debtor** to grace. It's the same for us. Paul became a debtor to grace. He is where he is, doing what he is doing, being who he is, all because of grace. As the old hymn puts it: "*to grace how great a debtor daily I'm constrained to be...*"

But this isn't groveling for our place in God's Kingdom, because the grace gets richer and richer. Oh the riches of His grace. Paul has been describing the new life into which Jesus calls us, a life shaped by "**the surpassing riches of His grace.**" This is a good debt to have.

If you want to get to know Jesus, get to know Paul. If you want to understand what the grace of Jesus does, get to know Paul. In Jesus we are:

- Prisoners of Christ Jesus, and therefore truly free.
- Trustees of the mystery of God's love and grace.
- Ministers of the Gospel of grace.
- Least of all saints, living in the power of littleness.

There's hope!

- Participant in tribulation so others get in on the Kingdom of grace.
- And growing deeper and deeper into debt...to the grace that only gets richer and richer.