

THE SOVEREIGN GOD AND THE MYSTERY OF HIS WILL: A STUDY OF EPHESIANS

(LESSON THIRTY-THREE)

“PERMANENT ACCESS”

EPHESIANS 3:1-13

1 For this cause I Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles,

2 If ye have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given me to you-ward:

3 How that by revelation he made known unto me the mystery; (as I wrote afore in few words,

4 Whereby, when ye read, ye may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ)

5 Which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit;

6 That the Gentiles should be fellowheirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel:

7 Whereof I was made a minister, according to the gift of the grace of God given unto me by the effectual working of his power.

8 Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ;

9 And to make all men see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God, who created all things by Jesus Christ:

10 To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God,

11 According to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord.

12 In whom we have boldness and access with confidence by the faith of him.

13 Wherefore I desire that ye faint not at my tribulations for you, which is your glory.

In chapter **2** of his letter to the Christians living in Ephesus, the Apostle Paul expounded on the grace of God as expressed in the salvation of sinners and the uniting of the Jews and the Gentiles in one body-the Church. He was so overwhelmed by the extent of God's grace that he burst forth into prayer at the beginning of chapter **3**. However, he interrupted his prayer shortly after it begun, and digressed to speak about the "*mystery of Christ,*" and to give a description of his ministry. He resumes his prayer in verse **14**, and concludes in verse **21**.

The "*mystery of Christ*" is that through His death on the Cross, Our Lord not only purchased eternal life for those who come to God by Him, but He also created a new people, a Church composed of both Jews and Gentiles who are heirs of God's promises and beneficiaries of God's grace. The "*mystery of Christ*" had not been made known to persons in previous generations, but God had revealed it to the Apostles and Prophets of the New Testament era.

God had given Paul a "*dispensation,*" or a special responsibility of administering the grace of God to the Body of Christ in general, and to

the Gentiles in particular. In communicating the “*mystery of Christ*” to the Gentiles, Paul expressed it in terms of the unsearchable riches of God’s grace. Paul had a passionate desire to make this revelation known to all people and to have them share in the fellowship of this mystery.

In our previous **Lesson**, we learned that it is by, or through, the agency of the Church that “*the manifold wisdom of God*” is being made known unto “*the principalities and powers in heavenly places.*” God is “educating” the angels by means of the church! As the angels carefully watch the outworking of God’s plan of salvation in the lives of the saints, they are learning about the love and the mercy and the grace of God.

We also noted that it is the responsibility of the Church to demonstrate the wisdom in God’s mysterious plan to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places by the way we live our lives, and particularly the way that we treat each other. We must always be conscious of this responsibility. When we fail to live in love and unity with our fellow-believers, we are not only sending a negative message to unsaved men and women but we are sending a negative message to the angels.

The noted British New Testament scholar **F. F. Bruce**, in his commentary on the book of **Ephesians** stated that, “The church... appears to be God’s pilot scheme for the reconciled universe of the future, the mystery of God’s will to be administered in the fullness of the times, when the things in heaven and the things on earth are to be brought together in Christ.” He added that the church, created by God’s reconciling of the Jews and Gentiles into one body, is His agency to help bring about the final reconciliation.

The overall point that Paul is making is that it is God’s purpose to make His wisdom known through the Church. Paul desired for the Gentile believers in Ephesus to understand the importance of the church in God’s eternal purpose, so that they will give it the proper priority in their lives. Brothers and sisters, it is critical for us to understand this also. We need to realize how privileged we are that God has chosen us to be the

agents of carrying out His eternal purpose through the Church. The Church is God's vehicle for making known His manifold wisdom, not only on earth, but also to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. It is therefore vital for us to appreciate that the way we live our lives has eternal significance.

In verse 11, Paul explains that the "*mystery of Christ,*" and all the ramifications accompanying its revelation, including the fact that the Gentile believers are now united with the Jewish believers in one body, and that through, the agency of the Church "*the manifold wisdom of God*" is being made known unto "*the principalities and powers in heavenly places,*" was all "*according to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord.*"

The meaning of this verse here appears to be that God had, from eternity, formed a plan for the salvation of people which had reference to the Lord Jesus. Paul is telling us that the great truth concerning the Church is not a divine afterthought. It is a part of God's eternal purpose in Christ. This eternal plan is now being effected by the proclamation of the gospel.

It should be obvious that if God has any plan, it must be eternal. He has no purposes or plans which he did not always have. To ignore this truth is to sin against the God who planned it, executed it through Jesus Christ and applies it to those who saved through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. All God's purposes and plans are as eternal as He is, and all of them are executed in and through Jesus Christ.

The unfolding drama of the Apostle Paul's life is an example that the "*mystery of Christ,*" is not a divine afterthought, but a part of God's eternal purpose in Christ.

His zeal in persecuting the Church, clearly indicates that Paul had no idea that these people who worshiped a crucified Jew, could ever be a part of God's plan to exalt Israel and save the world. Paul could hardly have conceived that he would be one of the chief agents through whom

the Lord would save the nations. But the transformation of Saul, the zealous persecutor of Christians, into Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, had always been part of God's plan to extend the gospel to all people.

Paul speaks of this in **Galatians 1:13-16**:

13 For ye have heard of my conversation in time past in the Jews' religion, how that beyond measure I persecuted the church of God, and wasted it:

14 And profited in the Jews' religion above many my equals in mine own nation, being more exceedingly zealous of the traditions of my fathers.

15 But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb, and called me by his grace,

16 To reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the heathen; immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood.

In verse **12**, Paul claims that God “*separated*” him from his “*mother's womb*.” The word separated is a translation of a Greek word which means “to mark off from a boundary or line.”

The idea that Paul is conveying, is that God set him apart and devoted him to a special purpose from before his birth, and before he had any impulses or principles of his own. Paul is saying that he was set apart or devoted by God to the apostleship before he was born.

When he encountered the Lord Jesus on the Damascus Road, everything in his life changed. From that moment on, he was a commissioned apostle of this crucified Messiah, the same One whom he had been persecuting. This revelation and commission gave Paul new insight into the Scriptures, enabling him to see that God had purposed from eternity to save His people, both Jews and Gentiles through the humiliation and death of Jesus Christ. The work of Christ that saves His people from God's wrath and provides a way for the Gentiles to be accepted before

God, on the same basis as the Jews is according to His eternal purpose and plan.

Paul had come to appreciate that his own election and calling by which God separated him unto the work of the Gospel formed a part of this eternal purpose and plan.

Brothers and sisters, this is not only true of Paul. It is true of every one of us! Every person who has been saved by the grace of God is a part of God's eternal purpose and plan to extend the gospel. We were all elected and called for this very purpose, as the following passages of scripture clearly indicate:

2 Timothy 1:8-9

“Be not thou therefore ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me his prisoner: but be thou partaker of the afflictions of the gospel according to the power of God; Who hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began.”

1 Peter 2:9-10

“But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light; Which in time past were not a people, but are now the people of God: which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy.”

When we understand this truth, it will give us great confidence and faith. Paul informs us of this in verse **12**. He says that in Jesus Christ, “we have boldness and access with confidence by the faith of him.” When you know what God is accomplishing in the world through the Church, and that you are a member of the Church that He is using to accomplish it, you can be sure that He is working in you and for you. All of His

divine resources are available to those who sincerely want to do His will and help Him accomplish His purposes on earth.

Paul says that “*we have boldness and access with confidence by the faith of him.*” **David Martyn Lloyd-Jones** the Welsh Protestant minister and medical doctor, made the following statement concerning the word “*access*” as it is used in the New Testament: “Of all the blessings of Christian salvation none is greater than this, that we have access to God in prayer.” What does the Apostle mean when he speaks of us having access?

The word “*access*” is found only three times in the New Testament, **Romans 5:2**, **Ephesians 2:18**, and here in **Ephesians 3:12**. It is a translation of the Greek word **prosagógé**, (**pros-ag-ogue-ay**’), which means “a bringing to, right of admission, introduction.” **Thayer’s Greek Lexicon** indicates that the word is used to describe that friendly relation with God whereby we are acceptable to him and have the assurance that He is favourably disposed toward us. “*Access*” describes the new relationship that is shared between the believing sinner and God. We are now acceptable to Him because of the atoning work of Jesus Christ and we have the assurance that He is favourably disposed toward us.

We may define the word “*access*,” as it is used by Paul in his epistles, as “freedom of approach to the Father, in the confidence that we have found never-ending favour with Him.” Access has to do with the special status of those who can enter the innermost dwelling place of God, at any time, with confidence.

As we noted earlier, one meaning of the Greek word translated “*access*” is “introduction.” The idea is the same as we have in the word “present” which we use about persons who are being formally introduced to a monarch or a president. This idea will help us to understand the word “*access*” as it is used by Paul.

An ordinary person has no automatic access to the Queen of England, for example. There is a certain protocol that must be observed in order

for that to become a possibility. One must be formally “presented at Court” in order to have access to the Queen. This is the idea that Paul has in mind. Once, when we were “in sin,” we had no right of admission, no freedom of approach to God. We had no access. We could not come into His presence because we had not been “presented at Court” and we knew no one who could introduce us. But now, as a result of being justified by faith, our Lord Jesus Christ has caused us to be “presented at Court” and He has introduced us to the Father. We now have “*access.*”

The Lord Jesus Christ had to introduce us to God. It was impossible for us to go to Him as we were. We were radically corrupt, wretched and vile. According to **Isaiah 64:6**, we were all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses were as filthy rags. We had nothing to commend us and we had no right to approach God in our own name. But one day, Jesus Christ, the One who had a right of access, having dealt with our sins, “presented us at Court” and introduced us to the Father.

In **Ephesians 3:12**, Paul speaks about access in the context of prayer. In fact, the idea of access to God is always discussed in the context of prayer. Paul says that “in Christ,” “*we have boldness and access with confidence by the faith of him.*” Brothers and sisters, every child of God has access to Him and can approach Him with boldness and confidence. We can come to Him directly at any time, in any place and know that we have access. We do not have to use mediators to provide us with access to God, because the one true Mediator, the Lord Jesus Christ, has opened the door to heaven and given us access to the Father once and forever.

I want to stress the point that we have been given access to the Father forever. In **Romans 5:1-2**, Paul writes, “*Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.*” The words, “*by whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand,*” in verse **2**, are in a construction in the Greek which emphasize that our access to God is

something that has happened to us once and for all. The word “*have*” in this verse, is in the perfect tense in Greek. The translation therefore reads, “We have permanent access by faith into this unmerited favour in which we have been permanently placed.” It is not possible for a justified person to ever find themselves in a position where their access to God is barred.

Brothers and sisters, justification by faith is **not** a process. It is something that happens once and forever. We must not confuse justification with sanctification. Sanctification **is** a process. In the process of sanctification, we “*grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ,*” according to **2 Peter 3:18**. We become progressively sanctified but we do not become progressively justified.

Again, we say that justification is one act, and it is once forever. It is an act in which God Himself, the only Judge of the Supreme Court of Heaven, has declared that “in Christ,” He regards us as if we had never sinned at all.” He pronounces that we are absolutely righteous in His sight. The greatest need that we have is the need of righteousness. It is this lack of righteousness that is supplied by Jesus Christ on our behalf. Our sins are forgiven, we are clothed in the righteousness of Jesus Christ and when God looks at us, He sees us that way. Justification by faith means justification by the righteousness or merit of Christ alone, not by our merit or by our good works. Justification is one concrete act. And what Paul is telling us is that the moment God declares us to be righteous in His sight, at that very same moment we are granted access into the grace in which we stand.

We have entered into a permanent position of grace, we have been “presented at Court,” we have been introduced to the Sovereign of the universe and He looks upon us with favour. He not only accepts us, but He does so with great delight and He is ever ready to bless us.

Brothers and sisters, our access to God is effective. This is what Paul is trying to explain to us in **Ephesians 3:12**. The **New English**

Translation renders the verse as follows: *“in whom we have boldness and confident access to God by way of Christ’s faithfulness.”* Paul is emphasizing that through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, we have boldness and confident access to God. This is the amazing reality of our position and it is vital for our spiritual development that we not only give intellectual assent to this truth, but that we embrace it with our hearts.

Are we living our lives in the light of the truth that we have permanent access to the Father? Instead of being on the outside, destitute, clothed in the rags of our sin, afraid of the wrath of God, we are inside, wealthy, clothed in the righteousness of Jesus Christ, enjoying the favour of God. O how we need to be persuaded of this in the inner-man!

The way to measure whether we truly believe that we have unhindered, unlimited, gracious access to God and are taking advantage of our access, is to examine ourselves when we pray. Are we praying with confidence? Do we *“come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need?”* Are we praying with assurance? Do we believe **1 John 5:14-15**, *“And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us: And if we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him?”* Are we praying with the understanding that God cares for us? Do we cast *“all your care upon him,”* knowing that *“he careth”* for us.

Are we certain of our access, or do we spend most of our time wondering if we are worthy enough to be accepted at court? Do we stay away because we are listening to the voice of Satan the accuser as he heaps condemnation upon us? Have we believed his lie that we have sinned too presumptuously and too consistently for God to still grant us access? Have we forgotten that our justification has permanent results? Have we forgotten what is written in **Romans 8:33-35**, *“Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God’s elect? It is God that justifieth. Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen*

*again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us?” Paul is reminding us in **Ephesians 3:12** that in Jesus Christ “we have boldness and confident access to God by way of Christ’s faithfulness.”*

Paul is saying to us in effect: “Come on believers! Remember that as a result of your being justified by faith, Jesus Christ has caused you to be “presented at Court” and He has introduced you to the Father. You have now gained ‘access.’ You are no longer on the outside. You are on the inside. Do not bring the memories of your life on the outside with you when you enter the throne room. In fact, do not even bring yesterday’s memories with you. Understand that your access is permanent. Remember that the throne you are approaching is a “*throne of grace*” and that your Father bids you to come that you “*may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.*” Do not come timidly; come boldly!”

Brothers and sisters, we are very privileged to be able to approach God with boldness and confidence. The truth is that many of us would not be comfortable in the presence of a powerful world leader. But even the weakest believer can enter directly into God’s presence because of what the Lord Jesus has done. We know that when we come to our heavenly Father in prayer, He will welcome us with open arms because we are His children through our union with His Son Jesus Christ. We have no need to be afraid of God any more. Let us therefore pray with the assurance that comes with the understanding that we have access and that God is more ready to hear our prayers than we are to pray them.

It was in light of all the privileges that we have “*in Christ,*” including access to the Father in prayer, that Paul encourages the saints in verse **13**. He writes, “*Wherefore I desire that ye faint not at my tribulations for you, which is your glory.*”

This verse concludes Paul’s long sentence which he had commenced in verse **2**, after he had interrupted the prayer he had begun in verse **1**. In verse **2**, he had informed the believers that a “*dispensation of the grace*

of God” had been given to him in respect of the Gentiles. God had given to him the responsibility of administering the grace of God to the Body of Christ and particularly to the Gentiles.

The believers in Ephesus, and particularly the Gentiles, were understandably dispirited when they learned about Paul’s imprisonment in Rome. It was natural that they should be distressed, for all his sufferings were endured on their behalf. Perhaps they were in danger of becoming disheartened with a system of religion which, in their minds, exposed its most devoted servants to such peril. In this verse he tells them not to be troubled and disheartened. He was indeed suffering; but he was reconciled to it, and they should be also, since it was promoting their welfare. If they truly understood that God had made Paul a steward of the “*mystery of Christ,*” then they should not be discouraged because of his sufferings for them. His sufferings were for their gain and their glory.

If Paul had not dispensed to the Gentiles the administration of God’s grace, then the Jews would not have been hostile to him and he would not have been imprisoned. His preaching brought salvation to the Gentiles, but it incurred the wrath of many Jews on him. However, many others became members of the Body of Christ, and this was their glory.

Paul desired for the believers to appreciate that he was being persecuted because of the honour and dignity of the ministry that Christ had given to him. His imprisonment and the tribulation he was now suffering was the result of him being “*the prisoner of Jesus Christ*” for the Gentiles. His suffering for them was of such nobleness as to reflect glory on them.

A reading of **Philippians 3:7-11**, may help us to understand and appreciate Paul’s perspective on his sufferings:

7 But these assets I have come to regard as liabilities because of Christ.

8 More than that, I now regard all things as liabilities compared to the far greater value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things—indeed, I regard them as dung!—that I may gain Christ,

9 and be found in him, not because I have my own righteousness derived from the law, but because I have the righteousness that comes by way of Christ’s faithfulness—a righteousness from God that is in fact based on Christ’s faithfulness.

10 My aim is to know him, to experience the power of his resurrection, to share in his sufferings, and to be like him in his death,

11 and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.
(New English Translation)

Brothers and sisters, knowing Jesus Christ involves experiencing “*the fellowship of his sufferings.*” I am aware that this concept is repulsive to many post-modern Christians. We are desirous of reigning with Christ, but we are not willing to suffer with Him. We long to wear a crown of glory, but we despise the crown of thorns. We want to share in His glory, but we never ask to share His grief or pain. For many of us, absolutely nothing in our Church culture has prepared us to suffer for Christ’s sake. The Church culture that we have been exposed to has cultivated within us a “feel good” mentality, and we have become so attuned to our feelings that we hardly know how to function when we are not “feeling what we like and liking what we feel.” The truth is brothers and sisters, that many of us are so emotionally driven and obsessed with tradition that we lack theological soundness and moral correctness. The shallow, superficial, unbiblical, feelings oriented songs that we often sing only compound the problem.

It is critically important for us at **The Grace Workshop Ministries**, to dig deep into the Word of God, and embrace intense Christianity. It is time for us to grow up and learn to walk by faith and not by sight. We

have been drinking milk for too long. It is time for us to start eating solid food. It is time for us to go on to perfection.

“Let us stop going over the same old ground again and again, always teaching those first lessons about Christ. Let us go on instead to other things and become mature in our understanding, as strong Christians ought to be.”

“Let us leave behind the elementary teaching about Christ and go forward to adult understanding.”

Warren Wiersbe was an American theologian and a prolific writer of Christian literature and theological works. From **1984-1990**, he served as the general director of Back to the Bible radio broadcasting network. In his commentary on Ephesians 3, he made the following remarks: “The reason many churches are weak and ineffective is because they do not understand what they have in Christ. And the cause of this is often spiritual leaders who are not good ‘stewards of the mystery.’ Because they do not ‘rightly divide the Word of truth’ . . . , they confuse their people concerning their spiritual position in Christ, and they rob their people of the spiritual wealth in Christ.”

This is exactly the reason why we are endeavouring to teach God’s Word in a systematic way. It is my earnest prayer and hope that God will bless our feeble efforts and raise up an assembly that understand their spiritual position in Christ and the resources that are available to them because of their position in Christ. And that these resources will be used to enrich our lives and the lives of all with whom we come in contact for the glory of God.