

Prisoners of Grace

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All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the King James Version. Italics for emphasis are ours.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>INTRODUCTION</i>	5
 <i>Chapter 1</i>	7
<i>THE DIVINE SENSITIVITY OF LOVE</i>	
 <i>Chapter 2</i>	11
<i>GRACE IDENTIFICATION AND THE MYSTERY OF CHRIST</i>	
 <i>Chapter 3</i>	15
<i>MINISTERING GRACE BY HIS EFFECTUAL POWER</i>	
 <i>CONCLUSION</i>	23

INTRODUCTION

“For the LORD heareth the poor, and despiseth not his prisoners” (Psalm 69:33).

“I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called” (Ephesians 4:1).

The grace of God is captivating. It does indeed set us free from the law of sin and death because of the price Christ paid on the Cross. Yet, the nearer we draw to the Lord, the nearer He draws to us. And increasingly, as His Word takes over our hearts, we come under His divine influence, being led continually by the Holy Spirit.

For this reason, the apostle Paul, who consistently lived this kind of life, called himself a “prisoner” of Christ to reveal His grace. God’s grace had so captivated him that he was willing to go to any lengths to communicate the mystery of the gospel to the lost. Therefore, when Paul was literally imprisoned by Rome, his work continued from the dungeon where he wrote

numerous letters to the churches he had planted and visited across the Empire.

In this booklet, we will look at several verses from Paul's "prison epistles" and see why he counted it all joy to be a prisoner of Christ to reveal His grace.

"For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.

"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" (2 Timothy 1:7-8).

Chapter One

THE DIVINE SENSITIVITY
OF LOVE

“And I will very gladly spend and be spent for you; though the more abundantly I love you, the less I be loved” (2 Corinthians 12:15).

There is a tremendous difference between emotional pain caused by stress and the pain of a broken heart caused by love. From prison, the apostle Paul expressed this thought: “The more I love the less I am loved.” If you love someone dearly, such as your children or your spouse or one who has been close to you for many years, and they hurt you, it causes great pain. This pain is not the result of stress. Neither is it because of unbelief. It is pain—but it is a unique pain because of love.

When Jesus Christ was on the Cross, He suffered unimaginable pain. Many have said that He died there with a broken heart (Psalm 22). The pain was not so much from bearing our in-

iniquities. Instead, it was pain that comes from Jesus' loving and being misunderstood—the pain of not being loved in return. In one way, because He was God, Jesus did not need to be loved back. But in His humanity, because He had senses and emotions, He certainly wanted to be loved.

The Sting of Rejection

Divine love is unconditional, but it is still love; therefore, it is sensitive. Not hypersensitive because of petty differences, but it is sensitive because it feels the pain of rejection. People are in hell today because God's perfect justice precedes His perfect love. Therefore, divine justice without the benefits of Calvary must be executed against those individuals who reject divine love.

Jeremiah endured tremendous pain when Israel rejected the messages God delivered through him. He exhorted them, knowing the nation was about to be plunged into the fifth cycle of discipline, which included foreign invasion and captivity because of their rebellion. And in Jeremiah 13:17, he said, "But if ye shall not hear it, my soul shall weep in secret places for your pride; and mine eye shall weep sore,

and run down with tears, because the LORD'S flock is carried away captive."

When someone betrays us, should the pain we feel interrupt our relationship with God? No. And that is the beautiful part of trusting God in all seasons. Does the pain turn us even more toward Jesus Christ? Yes. Does the pain go away quickly? Not necessarily. But pain is overcome first by being occupied *with* Christ and then by being occupied *for* Christ. When we are occupied with Christ and for Christ, we will not experience the feelings of pain, because pain doesn't have access to our minds.

God Stands with Us

"At my first answer no man stood with me, but all men forsook me: I pray God that it may not be laid to their charge. Notwithstanding the Lord stood with me, and strengthened me; that by me the preaching might be fully known, and that all the Gentiles might hear: and I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion" (2 Timothy 4:16-17).

When he said, "no man stood with me," Paul was really saying, "This is very unusual. Here I am in prison, and no one is visiting me!" He knew people believed that if they were seen

with Paul, they could end up in prison. Still, in the midst of this, the apostle began writing a beautiful letter to the church at Ephesus.

Chapter Two

GRACE IDENTIFICATION AND THE MYSTERY OF CHRIST

“For this cause I Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ, for you Gentiles” (Ephesians 3:1).

Paul knew that he was not a prisoner to that jail, nor to the government that put him there. If he were asked, he would have said, “I am not their prisoner, for my God is able to deliver me. But I am a prisoner to God, and *not* because of something I did wrong. I am a prisoner for the sake of the Gentiles.”

It is crucial in these days that we understand and have access to precise understanding of the Word of God. For whatever reasons, pain is everywhere. A man or woman who goes through painful trials identifies with others who are in pain. It is identification that often brings tears—tears not due to emotionalism but because of knowing how the one who is hurting feels. Identification causes a preacher to be broken. It causes

a husband to be extremely sensitive to his wife's needs. It causes a wife to study to be quiet instead of reacting to a problem in the home.

Paul was in prison for one reason. He was trying to reach the Gentile nations with the gospel of grace, trying to make sure the Good News reached even you and me. Often he was shackled with chains and tied to stocks. But every time Paul was placed in bonds, he would say, "Lord, this is Your will. I am doing it for the Gentiles, because You love them." What unusual things a child of God will do for others! And all because of God's love in us for others. Perhaps you are the only instrument God can use to show His love in someone else's life.

The Mystery of this Dispensation

"If ye have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given me to you-ward: how that by revelation he made known unto me the mystery, (as I wrote afore in few words; whereby, when you read, ye may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ,)

"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; that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, and of the

same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel" (Ephesians 3:2-6).

The dispensation of grace that Paul referred to is being revealed over a period of time that is still in effect at this moment. It is a time when Christ is building His Church, calling out whosoever will to become part of His Body and, later, His Bride. It is a time when grace is amplified and magnified because the Law ended with Christ (Romans 10:4), and it has been fulfilled (Matthew 5:17). Now the law of righteousness reigns in the hearts of believers, dwelling there by the Holy Spirit through a gift of grace.

Paul said, "If ye have heard of the dispensation of grace, which is given to me toward you...." We *have* heard of it, and we are the objects of this grace! I am so grateful that it is a dispensation of giving us what we don't deserve. And it is given toward us! We are living in the age of it—the age of grace.

What It Means to Identify

What a passage this is! What an impact this can have on the Spirit-taught soul! Every single thing Paul is saying here carries such a dynamic, overwhelming, and precious spiritual penetration. We can identify with Paul in that jail as he

was writing. We may not identify so much with the physical pain of having his feet and body in chains or with the condition of the dungeon where he was imprisoned. Still, we can identify with Paul's heart. Consider this poem by Charles D. Meigs entitled "Others":

*Lord, help me to live from day to day,
In such a self-forgetting way,
That even when I kneel to pray
My prayer shall be for others....*

*Let "self" be crucified and slain
And buried deep—and all in vain
May efforts be to rise again,
Unless to live for others....*

*Others, Lord, yes others,
Let this my motto be.
Help me to live for others
That I may live like thee*

Paul now found himself a prisoner because of his focus on others—the "others" who needed to know the mystery of the gospel of grace.

Chapter Three

MINISTERING GRACE BY HIS EFFECTUAL POWER

“All thy works shall praise thee, O LORD; and thy saints shall bless thee. They shall speak of the glory of thy kingdom, and talk of thy power; to make known to the sons of men his mighty acts, and the glorious majesty of his kingdom” (Psalm 145:10-12).

“The LORD looketh from heaven; he beholdeth all the sons of men” (Psalm 33:13).

The mystery Paul refers to in Ephesians 3 is something that for thousands of years was never known. God picked a man who was killing Christians and intervened in his life with a sign. The Lord came to him in person on the road to Damascus, speaking to him in an audible voice so Paul would have no doubt:

“And [Paul] fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?

“And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks. And he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?” (Acts 9:4-6a).

This is the mystery of faith, the mystery of godliness. It is the incarnation, the hypostatic union of God in Christ: “God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of the angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory” (1 Timothy 3:16). The mystery of the Church Age is “Christ in *you*, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1:27). The mystery is inside of every born-again believer: God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit making a home in us (see John 14:21-23).

Invisible? Yes, He is. But the results of this mystery are very visible. A man changes, a woman changes—everything changes because of this mystery. Faith is a mystery. It is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. (Hebrews 11:1). Faith pleases God and brings a reward.

The Revelation of the Body and the Bride

Thank God that a Pharisee who was determined to help destroy the early Church, a man

who had nothing in his natural state to glory in, was chosen to be a prisoner of Christ to reveal His grace. The Father and the Son said to the Holy Spirit, "Show Paul that we want to form a Body of believers. Then, at the Rapture, we want that Body to be Christ's Bride. The Son will marry that Bride, and forever she will be His wife in the New Jerusalem."

Imagine Paul in prison writing these things. He knew he was writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, using his own vocabulary. Line upon line, God was saying to him, "Put this in a letter. Now write this...." The apostle Paul was made a minister of the glorious gospel by the grace of God.

The Making of Ministers

"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" (Ephesians 3:7).

A minister doesn't just happen. Something has to make a person a minister. Every Christian is a minister in terms of ministering life (2 Corinthians 3:3-6). We are all ministers of the New Covenant. We are all ministers of the Spirit, not of the letter. Even a young child, once he becomes saved, in some little way becomes a minister.

But Paul said he was “made a minister,” referring to his office as a pastor and apostle, “according to the gift of grace.” It wasn’t because he had a tremendous education. It wasn’t because he trained diligently to become an expert in the art of public speaking. Paul was saying, “The standard for me to become a minister was the gift of the grace of God.”

Ephesians 3:7 says it was “unto me by the effectual working of his power.” The Greek word used here for “power” in the original text is *dunamis*. It speaks of an impartation of divine ability. In other words, the power to minister was given to Paul according to *God’s* ability, which is limitless. The Lord’s divine ability gave Paul the gift to preach.

“Unto me, by the effectual working of His power, God gave me His divine ability to preach,” Paul said. “Do I have an impediment in my speech? Yes, I do (see 2 Corinthians 10:10). My speech is said to be contemptible. My education isn’t a problem, but my impediment is.

“Am I a fine physical specimen to look at? No. They mock my bodily appearance. Really, I have nothing going for me. I was once a Pharisee of the Pharisees; but because of my speech impediment, at times, when I have spoken in

public, I have been mocked.”

In the face of all of that, Paul could say, “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” (Ephesians 3:8).

The Small Made Tall

It was unto Paul, who was short and unattractive in physical appearance; unto Paul, whom the Corinthians didn’t ever want to hear speak because his impediment was so bad: Unto Paul was this grace given. This grace took him captive.

Furthermore, he was “less than the least”—*elachistoteros* in the Greek, meaning smaller than the smallest. “If you can imagine whoever might be the least important Christian on earth,” Paul was saying, “I am less than that person. Grace was given unto me, and I am less than the least.”

Now we know why Paul was chosen. He left behind everything and counted it all as dung so he could win Christ. He didn’t hold on to the security of natural things or position. He didn’t cling to temporal values. He did not hold on to a single thing. He considered it all to be as dung—worthless and even despicable.

Paul wasn't always talking about his business and his job. He talked about pressing on for Christ. He never counted the cost of suffering. He considered himself called to suffer for the sake of the Gentiles (see Acts 9:15-16). He never argued his cause nor debated human propositions. And remember, he was writing this in prison.

"I am not better than any other saint," Paul said. "I am less than all of them. Unto me, who am less than all the saints, is this grace given."

Oh, how Paul loved grace.

Enabled by Grace

It was this grace that enabled Paul to preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ. These riches of grace are unsearchable, inexhaustible, unfathomable, past finding out (see Romans 11:33).

Paul, what are you going to preach?

"My message is the unfathomable grace of God toward us—something that I can't search out. It only comes by revelation. I can't get out a history book to explain grace and say, '*This* is why it is beautiful.' Once I delved into the riches of grace, I found that it can't be exhausted. It captured me because it is inexhaustible—an ex-

pression of God's unlimited, unconditional love.

"I flourish in it, always learning it, but never fully comprehending it. It is incomprehensible. Every time I get a little confused, I turn to this grace as a gift. Every time a problem comes up in a relationship, I turn to grace so that I can continue to preach something that is unsearchable."

The Poor Are Made Rich

Christ is rich to those who call upon Him (Romans 10:12). He who is rich was made poor for our sakes, so that we could be made rich (2 Corinthians 8:9). What's more, He wants us to enjoy all of His gifts freely and richly (1 Timothy 6:17).

When you read the phrase "unsearchable riches," consider this: What new thing is God going to reveal to the Body of Christ? We are learning and growing in the grace that through Christ has taken us prisoner.

God has promised that as we keep growing in the grace and knowledge that makes Jesus our Lord in our experience, we will begin to understand the Lord of all grace more and more.

The older we get, the more we will be amazed, and the more we will want to gaze into the mysteries of His grace. But as we do, we will

be relaxed, sharing the joy of God and the happiness of Christ, becoming partakers of all that He is.

CONCLUSION

Why has God taken us captive with these unsearchable riches? “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” (Ephesians 3:9).

It was said of the disciples, “Oh, how they love one another.” What were they revealing? They revealed Christ to each other. Wherever Christians are gathered in godly unity, the world is astonished at our testimony. They will say how they have never seen such oneness, such love among a group of people, that it must be what heaven is like. And whether they are saved or not, everyone longs to experience that intensity of love and oneness (John 17).

The unsearchable riches of Christ cause people to see something different about our lives. Rather than differences and indifference, they see the fellowship of Christ in you and in me.

Christ is formed in us, and His nature is revealed through us, so we can glorify Him with one mouth to the glory of God the Father (Romans 15:6).

It is one thing to have one soul and one heart, but it is quite another thing to have one mouth. Not two mouths—one for Adam and one for the Lord—but one mouth for God, glorifying the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ as prisoners of Christ to reveal His grace.