

# When The Gospel Grabs Hold

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[ 0 : 00 ] In the original, this text is all one long sentence, 169 words. Spirit of the living God, we believe that you worked with the mind and heart of the Apostle Paul to write these words.

And now we pray that you'd make these words come alive in our experience as never before. For we pray in Jesus' name, amen. Amen. Someone has said, if you want to get to know Jesus, and who would not want to get to know Jesus?

Who would not want to get to know the man who lays his life down for the life of the world? Who would not want to get this person who is resurrected from the dead, who is the conqueror of the power of death and who lives forever and ever?

Given who he is, who would not want to get to know him? Someone has said, if you want to get to know Jesus, then get to know Paul.

If you want to get to know Jesus, get to know Paul. An amazing claim, given the fact that Paul has been so vilified throughout church history.

[ 1 : 13 ] The man has been accused for all manner of ills, from oppressing women, to supporting slavery, to nurturing anti-Semitism. For many people, Paul is so far from Jesus that getting to know Jesus by getting to know Paul is absurd.

One author notes, many people think that Judas was the supreme betrayer of Jesus. Others say Paul has a better right to that title. Judas gave Jesus' body over to death.

Paul, it is claimed, buried his spirit. You might know that Thomas Jefferson argues that Paul was the first corrupter of the doctrine of Jesus.

Bernard Shaw, the introduction of one of his plays, says that Paul imposed the limitations of his own soul on the soul of Jesus.

And then Friedrich Nietzsche called Paul the disangelist. Not evangelist, but disangelist, the bearer of bad news.

[ 2 : 19 ] Now, working through Paul's letter to the Ephesians with you over these past four months, I have to ask, what Paul are Jefferson and Shaw and Nietzsche referring to?

Not the Paul who wrote this letter that is so full of Jesus. Not the Paul who wrote this letter so full of the grace of Jesus.

Jefferson and company simply could not have spent any serious time with Paul and make those conclusions. They're reacting to texts, isolated texts, which they have read out of context.

Paul, an oppressor of women? Not when you read Paul in context. Especially cultural context. Paul, an advocate of slavery?

Give me a break. Not when you read his letter to Philemon. And Paul, anti-Jewish? Not when you read chapters 9, 10, and 11 of Romans or chapter 2 of Ephesians.

[ 3 : 22 ] Working through Paul's letter to the Ephesians with you, I have come to agree with the claim. If you want to get to know Jesus, get to know Paul. For when you really get to know Paul, you realize that no one knows Jesus the way Paul does.

Now, that's quite a statement coming from my lips. For throughout the past 40 years of pastoral ministry, I would have said, if you want to get to know Jesus, get to know John.

The Apostle John had the privilege of sharing the closest relationship with Jesus during Jesus' earthly ministry. John is the one whose head rested on Jesus' heart.

Literally so, at the Last Supper. He rested his head on Jesus' heart. And when you read John, his gospel, or his little letters, or the revelation, you can feel that intimacy oozing from the pages.

But as a result of living in the letter to the Ephesians these past few months with you, I can now add, if you want to get to know Jesus, get to know Paul.

[ 4 : 38 ] As far as we know, Paul never met Jesus during Jesus' earthly ministry. He might have seen or heard Jesus from a distance at one of the three or four Jewish Passovers that Jesus attended 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 an encounter with the risen Jesus.

An encounter that changed Paul's life and that changed the course of history. While on his way to the city of Damascus, on his way to arrest and punish the disciples of Jesus in Damascus, Paul was knocked off his horse by a blazing light.

Who are you? asked Paul from his knees. I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. 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.

[ 5 : 52 ] Paul would declare, For me to live is Christ. I agree with N.T. Wright, one of the leading scholars of our time, when he says, Paul is the greatest interpreter of the mind of Jesus ever to live.

No one knows the mind of the crucified and risen Jesus as Paul does. No one knows the heart of Jesus as Paul does. No one knows the grace of Jesus as Paul does.

No one knows what it means to be grabbed hold of by grace as Paul does. You want to see what it looks like when grace breaks through and takes hold of a human being?

Look at Paul. Yes, look at John and Peter and Mary and Priscilla. But look at Paul. Which is what is going on in the text before us today.

Paul is telling us what grace does in a human life. Three times he refers to grace. Chapter 3, verse 2. God's grace, which was given to me.

[ 7 : 00 ] Verse 7. This grace was given to me. Verse 8. To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given to me. If you want to get to know the grace of Jesus Christ, get to know Paul.

And if you want to know what the grace of Jesus Christ does to us, get to know Paul. Up to this point in his letter, Paul has been developing this alternative reading of reality shaped by grace. He's been describing this new life into which Jesus calls us. A life that is shaped by the surpassing greatness of grace, as Paul puts it. Then in chapter 3, verse 1, he says, For this reason, I, Paul, and appears to be moving in the direction of then praying for the Ephesians and for us in light of the riches of grace.

But he stops and instead shares more of his own experience. He eventually does get to praying in chapter 3, verse 14. But first, he shares more personally what happened to him when grace grabbed hold of his mind and heart.

Now clearly, as you've read the text, you know that the major theme of chapter 3, verses 1 to 13, is the mystery of Christ. He uses this term three times.

[ 8 : 25 ] Verse 3. By revelation there was made known to me the mystery. Verse 4. My insight into the mystery of Christ. Verse 9. The administration of the mystery, which for ages has been hidden in God.

The mystery is that in Christ, in Messiah, in the Jewish Messiah, because of Christ, because of Messiah, because of the Jewish Messiah, we Gentiles get to be included in on what God has been doing in the family of Abraham and Sarah.

But what I want to focus on today in this text is Paul's identity in Messiah Jesus. I want to focus on who he became when grace grabbed hold of him.

And I want to do so because although Paul is a unique individual, and although Paul had a unique call upon his life, who Paul became because of grace is who we also become because of grace.

Who Paul became, we also become, in one way or another. Prisoner. Verse 1. I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles.

[ 9 : 47 ] He will repeat that in chapter 4, verse 1. I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord. Prisoner. Because of grace, Paul became a prisoner. Now he's speaking at a number of different levels.

Historically, Paul is in prison in Rome because grace drove him, a Jew, to bring grace to the Gentiles, to us. In the Damascus Road encounter, Paul was called by Jesus to bring the gospel to the nations.

And in that encounter, Jesus warned Paul that he would find himself in trouble. That's an understatement, if you know the story. In the book of Acts, we see how Paul's act of grace triggered hostility in some of the hearts of some of his fellow Jews.

They wanted to kill him. They hounded him to such a degree that at one point, Paul makes an appeal to Caesar, seeking the protective justice of the empire.

Paul is in Rome, in jail, awaiting trial before Caesar in the hope that Caesar is somehow going to defend him. But Paul speaks of being a prisoner on a theological level.

[11:03] Historically, he's a prisoner of Nero. Theologically, he's a prisoner of Jesus Christ. Not only because Paul believes Jesus is sovereign and would, therefore, not be in prison if Jesus had not somehow allowed it.

Paul sees himself as a prisoner of Jesus because Paul had placed himself fully at the disposal of Jesus and told Jesus he could do anything he wanted to do with him.

Long before he became Caesar's prisoner, he became Jesus' prisoner. Long before he had been taken captive to Nero, he had been taken captive by Jesus.

Grace breaks through and grabs hold of Paul. And for the rest of his life, and I would imagine into eternity, he speaks of himself as a prisoner of Christ Jesus.

Can you say that of yourself? Can I? Can we say that he has us holy, hook, line, and sinker?

[12:12] I am captive to Jesus Christ. All I am and all I have, I place at his disposal. You can do with me whatever you want.

I'm your prisoner. Steward. Verse 2. If indeed you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace which was given to me for your benefit.

Paul sees himself as a steward, as a trustee of what God has given him. In particular, he is the steward of this great mystery. The mystery that the Gentiles are included in on the covenants and on the covenant people.

The mystery was hinted at centuries ago, right from the beginning of Jewish history, in the call upon Abraham and Sarah. God told Abraham that he would become a blessing to all the nations.

God's choice to bless one man and his family was from the beginning all about blessing the whole world. By the first century, this universal scope of God's grace had been lost for all kinds of reasons.

[13:22] But in Jesus, and because of Jesus, this mystery was now revealed. It is now an open secret for all to know that Gentiles are fellow heirs, fellow members of the body, fellow partakers of the promise, as Paul puts it in the text.

But that particular mystery is part of an even greater mystery. Ephesians chapter 1, verse 10. God may know in the mystery of his will, says Paul.

God plans to sum up all things in Christ, things in heaven, and things in earth. Sum up all things in Christ. When we worked with this text a few weeks ago, I pointed out that this verb sum up is literally recapitulate.

It means put the head back on. The great mystery revealed to Paul is that in Jesus, God is putting the head back on the human race, making a new human race which is neither Jewish nor Gentile, but one new humanity centered in the new human.

Paul sees himself as a steward of that mystery, a protector of the mystery, a guardian of the mystery, who then wants to pass on this mystery onto others so they too can know and live in it.

[14:43] Of what have you been made a steward? What has God given to you or made known to you that you are passionate to protect and pass on?

Given to me for you, says Paul. Grace given to me for you. That is always the way it is with grace. Grace is given to us for others.

What has God given to you? What has God shown you that you want to protect and pass on to others? I believe I've been given stewardship for a number of treasures given to me through the study of the word.

I believe I'm to be a steward of Jesus' gospel of the kingdom for what he's showing me about the kingdom, especially during those years in the Philippines, showing me about the nature of the kingdom and how the kingdom comes into the world.

I think I'm a steward of the great I am saints in the gospel of John, of what he has shown me about who he is in the context of various Jewish feasts.

[15:57] I'm a steward of Jesus' prayer recorded in John 17, of what he opened up to me as he opens his heart to his father. I'm a steward of Jesus' teaching on the easy yoke, his yoke, although I'm not a very good steward of that one.

I'm a steward of Jesus making it possible for us to enter into and live in the inner life of the triune God.

That's why you hear me work that into just about every sermon. And I'm a steward of the last book of the Bible, the revelation of Jesus Christ, of what he's shown me about how that book goes together that makes its message clear about who Jesus is in the flow of history.

Of what have you been made a steward what have you been given to protect and pass on to others? Minister.

Grace made Paul a minister. Verse 7, Of which I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace. The word is diakonos, from which we get the word deacon or servant.

[ 17 : 03 ] Grace made Paul a servant. Grace always does. It makes servants grace of the gospel in and for the world.

Now, in Paul's case, grace made him a minister to the Gentiles. This was his reason for being the rest of his life. Specifically, as Paul puts it, to preach to the Gentiles and to us the unfathomable riches of Christ.

Verse 8, Is that not a powerful phrase? The unfathomable riches of Christ, the beyond-searching-out riches of Christ, the untraceable riches of Christ?

God made Paul a minister of those unfathomable riches. So, too, everyone grace grabs hold of. We, too, are to be ministers of this unfathomable riches of Christ.

We want our family and friends and co-workers to know the Jesus of Matthew, the Jesus of Mark, the Jesus of Luke, the Jesus of John, right? We want the world to know the Jesus of the book of Hebrews and the letters of Peter and the letters of James.

[ 18 : 14 ] We want the city to know the Jesus of Isaiah and Jeremiah and Amos and Jonah. We want the whole of humanity to know the Jesus of the revelation, the Lamb slain for the redemption of the world, the King of kings and Lord of lords, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end of all things.

And we want the world to know the Jesus of Paul, servants, ministers, all of us. Grace has made us ministers of the unfathomable riches of Christ to everyone we encounter.

Please, Lord, make it so. And in Paul's case, minister to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. Verse 10. Paul serves so that Gentiles know Christ, but he also serves so that the spiritual powers at work in the world know Christ.

Paul's on a mission to the Gentiles and he's on a mission to the angelic powers that seek to influence cities and nations. Paul says that the manifold wisdom of God, this wisdom that made the world and planned salvation history and brought together this new race of Jews and Gentiles, Paul says that this wisdom has been made known to the spiritual realm through the church.

Verse 10. Through the multiracial, multicultural, multi-gifted church of Jesus Christ, God's multidimensional wisdom is revealed to the powers behind the scenes.

[ 19 : 50 ] You see, much more is going on in being church. So much more than we can know with our unaided intellect. Something cosmic is happening in sharing the unfathomable riches of Christ and then in living in those riches in a community centered in Christ, principalities and powers are hearing the gospel and things begin to change.

Which is why I've said to some of you that even if you don't show up on Sunday morning, if somehow there's another marathon and no one can get here, even if no one shows up on Sunday morning, I'm still going to preach because when anyone preaches the unfathomable riches of Christ, the angelic powers in the heavenly places that exercise influence in the city hear the gospel and something changes.

This, by the way, is part of what was going on on Good Friday in this building when 1,300 people from different churches of the city met to worship the crucified Jesus together.

We were moved by the good news but so were the powers at work in the heavenly places that seek to influence the city and the nation. God makes us ministers, all of us, ministers of the gospel to the human realm and to the angelic realm.

All of us who belong to Jesus, ministers, all of us, bringing the mystery to light to those with whom we live. Least, grace made Paul least of all the saints, grace.

[ 21 : 43 ] Verse 8, to me, the very least of all the saints this grace was given. Literally, it is less than the least of all the saints. Is Paul here suffering from a poor self-image?

I don't think so. Not that we know of. Indeed, given Paul's privileged upbringing and education and his massive intellectual capacities, he probably suffered from the opposite, from an inflated sense of self.

That's why he thought he could wipe the church out on his own. But grace healed Paul. Grace brought Paul to his senses less than the least of the saints, he says. You might know that over the centuries people have observed Paul's progress in grace. In AD 55, he writes to the believers in Corinth, I am the least of the apostles. Then in 62 AD, he writes to the Ephesians, I am the least of the saints. And then in 66 AD, he writes to his good friend Timothy, I am the foremost of sinners. How about that for progress? [ 22 : 45 ] Christ Jesus came into the world the same sinners among whom I am foremost of all. When grace grabs hold, we see ourselves who we are apart from grace.

And then we throw ourselves on grace all the more. Least of all the saints. There might be a little play on words going on here in the text. Paul's name before grace grabbed hold of him was Saul. Saul of Tarsus in honor of Israel's first king, Saul, whose pride was his downfall. Jesus then gave Saul the new name Paul.

Do you know what the name Paul means in Greek? Someone said it. Little. From Saul, big shot, to Paul, little.

in line with the great theme and the great story that God is always choosing and working with the little.

[ 23 : 43 ] King David of the little tribe of Judah, smallest of his brothers, Mount Zion, the smallest of all mountains. The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, says Jesus, smallest of all the seeds, he goes on to add.

Grace helped Paul be small. And then grace used small Paul for a great work of grace. Grace is always doing the same.

Grace does that with us. Bringing us to the place where we understand how God works in the world. Little. Participants in tribulation, verse 13.

I ask you not to lose heart at my tribulations on your behalf for they are your glory. When grace got hold of Paul, he began to experience tribulation.

The word Paul uses has a particular nuance. He's not simply referring to the kinds of troubles we all experience in a broken world. He's referring to the kind of trouble that happens when the kingdom of God breaks into the world.

[ 24 : 53 ] The word literally means pressure, and it's describing the kind of pressure that is generated at the clashing of kingdoms. When one kingdom comes up against another kingdom, there is this pressure, this crushing pressure.

It's unavoidable, and it comes when the kingdom of God comes. Paul experienced it, and so do we. They are your glory, Paul tells the Ephesians.

Paul experiencing tribulation is their glory. What does he mean? I think Paul means that his experience of tribulation is all part of the process by which God was bringing grace to the Ephesians.

The tribulations are there because God is there bringing his rule of justice and mercy. And Paul gladly bore that pressure because he knew that this pressure was somehow bringing redemption to people he loved.

grace enabled him to bear this tribulation, and grace enables us to bear the tribulation. Grace enables us to suffer so that others might enter the kingdom.

[ 26 : 05 ] Grace enables us to give up comfort and to be inconvenienced so that others can enter the kingdom of Jesus Christ. Well, one more thing grace made Paul.

Debtor. Paul became a debtor, a debtor to grace. He is where he is, he's doing what he's doing, he is being who he's being because of grace.

An old hymn says it so well, to grace how great a debtor daily I'm constrained to be. Well, if you want to get to know Jesus, get to know Paul.

And if you want to understand, what the grace of Jesus does in a human life, get to know Paul. Prisoners of Christ Jesus and therefore truly free.

Stewards of the mystery, ministers of the gospel, least of all saints, living in the power of littleness, participating in tribulation so others get in, and growing deeper and deeper into debt to the grace that only grows richer and richer as the years go by.

[ 27 : 25 ] Amen.