

God's Grace in the Lives of Gospel Workers By Murray Capill

The more committed you are to something, the more you will sacrifice for it.

Is that not true?

A would-be Olympic swimmer gets up at 4am and swims for 2, 3, 4 hours before school starts.

The workaholic sacrifices family, recreation, days off, out of undue preoccupation with work.

The diligent student foregoes movies and recreation and nights off and parties for the sake of impending exams.

The committed husband turns off his favorite TV program because he sees his dearly beloved standing lonely in the corner looking needy.

And he gladly turns off the footy or whatever it is in order to spend time with her.

The more committed you are to something, the more you sacrifice for it.

Paul, the apostle Paul, was unwaveringly committed to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

He lived it, he breathed it, and he readily sacrificed for it.

And he writes this letter from prison, says that in verse 1 of this passage.

For this reason, I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus.

For the sake of the gospel, Paul endured all sorts of stuff, multiple imprisonments, multiple floggings, shipwreck, slander, persecution, hatred, physical pain, ill health.

He draws attention to that in several of his letters.

Not so that we will feel sorry for him or salute him.

But so that we will realize just how precious he regarded the gospel to be and to show that he regarded it as worthy of any price.

And that's what he's doing here in Ephesians 3.

Actually, this passage that we're going to look at from verses 2 to 13 is an aside.

The whole passage is an aside.

It's a biblical precedent for preachers to get sidetracked and go off on tangents.

And he begins in verse 1 and he gets back to that thought in verse 14.

So, verse 1, was that me? I hope not.

He begins in verse 1 and the verse is left hanging.

For this reason, I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus.

For the sake of you Gentiles, I...

Verse 14, for this reason, he gets back to it, I kneel before the Father.

He's about to say, I pray for you that you'll know the depth and the riches of God's grace and that your hearts will overflow with the love of Christ.

But before he gets there, he has this aside.

He's mentioned again, you Gentiles.

I'm in prison for the sake of you Gentiles.

Do you know why?

Do you understand what's really going on?

That's what his aside, his sidetrack is going to be about.

He's going to speak of his own ministry.

What is setting the agenda in his life?

What's captivated him?

And he's not doing this so that the Ephesians will feel sorry for him or think, oh, what a magnificent man Paul is.

But rather so that they will appreciate the richness and the excellence of the gospel itself.

And I hope that as we look at this aside, that's the point we come to as well.

That we will come this morning to a fresh appreciation that the gospel is worth any sacrifice.

It's worth any cost.

Now to open up this passage, I want to focus on three words.

Three words that appear in the passage and that I think help open up the kind of themes that Paul is dealing with here.

And having looked at these three words, I want to come to some applications about the worthiness of any cost for the sake of the gospel.

The first word is the word administration.

Verse 2, surely, you've heard about the administration of God's grace.

And again, in verse 9, to make plain to everyone the administration of this ministry, this mystery.

Now I don't want you to think too narrowly about the word administration.

Administration can sound as though it has something to do with paperwork and bureaucracy.

Paul was not committed to gospel paperwork.

He was not a gospel bureaucratic, not at all.

Behind that word translated in the NIV administration is really the word stewardship.

And the steward of a house was the manager of that house, the person who oversaw all the running of the house, the resources, the employment of servants and the payments that had to be made.

The whole running and direction of the household was under the rule of the steward.

Paul has been given stewardship of the gospel of grace.

To go back to the word administration, perhaps the best way to think of that word is to think of it in terms of what we mean when we speak of say the Bush administration.

You've heard about the Bush administration many a time.

And when we talk about the Bush administration, we mean George Bush's entire governmental direction, policy, resources, strategy, personnel, everything that carries out his political agenda, the Bush administration.

God has another administration.

It's an administration marked by grace, the administration of God's grace.

And Paul had a key role in that administration.

He was, if you like, secretary of the gospel in the God administration.

And he prized that position more than Condoleezza Rice, prized as being secretary of state, more than Donald Rumsfeld used to prize being secretary of defence.

Paul prized greatly this wonderful place of being secretary of the gospel in the God administration.

God had appointed him to a key role in his great plan of redemption and advance of the gospel.

And really that's what all gospel work is.

It's serving in some capacity in God's administration of grace.

So that's the first word, administration.

The second word is the word mystery.

In verse 3, you've heard about the administration of God's grace that was given me for you.

That is the mystery, the mystery made known to me by revelation.

Again, in verse 4, in reading this then you'll be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ.

Before looking at what the mystery is, we need to understand what Paul means by the word mystery.

It can be a bit of a mystery to us if we're not thinking clearly.

For us the word mystery means some tricky puzzle, some difficult thing to unravel.

You read a mystery book with a complicated plot of all sorts of intrigue and hidden agendas and you're trying in your mind to work out where this whole plot is going.

For Paul the word means something different.

It means a secret hidden in the mind of God and only known to God unless God should reveal it.

A mystery is one of God's secrets but a secret now that God has made known.

Paul says a little later in this passage in verse 9 that the mystery was kept secret for centuries, for hundreds and hundreds of years God didn't let his secret out of the bag.

The Old Testament saints never really knew it.

Abraham, Moses, David, Isaiah, Elijah, they knew things associated with the mystery but they didn't know the mystery.

It's interesting to read the way Peter speaks of that in 1 Peter chapter 1 and verse 10.

Concerning this salvation the prophets who spoke of the grace of God that was to come to you searched intently and with the greatest care trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow.

Those Old Testament saints, they were given revelations but they were searching and peering and trying to see where all this was really heading.

Well it was only after the coming of Christ, only after his death and his resurrection, only after he descended into heaven, only after the Holy Spirit was poured out on the church, only then did God reveal the mystery.

That's why Paul makes some pretty large claims about his place in the administration because it was particularly to him and also to the other apostles that the mystery was revealed.

That's what he speaks of in verses 4 and 5 and reading this then, you'll be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ 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.

What then is the mystery?

Verse 6 tells us, isn't it nice when there's something as plain as verse 6?

The 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.

Paul says in verse 3, I've already written you briefly about it and we've just been looking at some of that.

The mystery was that Gentiles, dogs, the unclean would be engrafted into the tree and would share fully in all the blessings of the covenant people of God so that the promises of Abraham would become promises to them.

The rights and privileges of the people of God would be extended to them and there'd be one body and one people, equal spiritual status, equal privilege.

Now that's not that new for us.

The cat was out of the bag 2,000 years ago.

So you're not sort of sitting there thinking, oh that's amazing.

For us it's not that amazing.

So what? Here's a gathering of Gentiles and we're enjoying exactly what Paul is talking about.

But at the time it was mind-blowing, radical for the Jews to think that the Gentiles would share equally with them, radical for the Gentiles to grasp their privileged position.

Now through faith, children of Abraham, for a Jew to say that, to say that the Gentiles were equal was like being a traitor to Israel.

That's why Peter had this overwhelming thing to come to terms with when he was sent to the house of Cornelius.

God sets up a vision for him and super intends all the details of him going to Cornelius' house so that there's abundant evidence and proof that he's allowed to go to this unclean Gentile.

All things now are clean.

It's also why Paul suffered so much.

The Jews hated him for what he was doing.

But Paul believed what had been revealed to him.

He believed the mystery and so he would now travel land and sea to tell Gentiles, guys, believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you're in.

The whole box and dice, you get the lot.

Just through faith, that's all you have to do.

You don't have to be circumcised.

You don't have to keep the Old Testament laws.

All you have to do is believe faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and you'll be saved and engrafted into the ancient people of God, swept up into God's great redemptive purposes and history, one with them forever and ever.

Amen.

Paul was in prison, verse 1, for the sake of you Gentiles.

But he's not saying that nastily.

He's not pointing the finger.

If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't be in prison.

He says, no, I do this gladly.

Which takes me to the third word, servanthood.

Paul says in verse 7, he'd become a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace.

The word servant there is the Greek word diakonos.

And you'll find three different ways in which the word diakonos is translated in the New Testament.

Sometimes it's translated deacon, sometimes servant, sometimes minister.

Those three words really all mean the same.

And Paul saw that the highest calling in life is to be servant of the greatest thing in the world.

The highest calling in life is to be servant of the greatest thing in the world.

He regarded it as an immense and overwhelming privilege to be a gospel servant, to serve the cause of Christ, to serve the cause of the gospel, to serve the cause of grace.

In fact, he considered himself to be quite unworthy of that privilege.

Verse 8, although I'm less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me.

You see, Paul could look back on phase one of his spiritual journey.

And when Paul looked back on phase one, he felt utterly ashamed of what he'd done.

He'd killed Christians.

He'd vigorously opposed the preaching of the gospel.

He'd watched on when Stephen was martyred.

He'd hated Christ.

And then God had broken into his life.

He's a marvellous Ephesians 2, 1 to 10 story.

But God, rich in mercy, rich in grace, made him alive, opened his eyes, un-stopped his ears, woke him up, and then commissioned him to serve the cause of that very gospel that he'd opposed.

And Paul says, I'm so unworthy of serving in this cause.

But it was just his greatest joy, just the greatest blessing of his life.

Now he had the marvellous task of telling people who Jesus really was.

He'd seen the risen Lord on the road to Damascus.

The Lord had said to him, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?

He didn't think he was persecuting the Lord. He thought he was persecuting stupid Christians.

But the Lord was so identified with his people that he was persecuting the Lord.

Now Paul would travel land and sea, go wherever he could.

He'd pay any price to tell people the Lord lives.

And he's the only hope and you're only saved through faith in him.

He unfolds to them the unsearchable riches of Christ.

What a great phrase in verse 8.

To preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.

People love treasure, don't they?

You tell to a bunch of kids, we're going to have a treasure hunt.

Their little eyes light up.

We have treasure hunts at home for our youngest kids.

And you know you hide things, you hide little Easter eggs and they go hunting for them.

It's so fun finding treasure that when they've found them all we go and hide them again.

And after we've done that two or three times they will continue the game by themselves and they'll hide them for each other because it's just so fun finding treasure.

And big people have their own versions of it.

Divers will plumb the depths of the ocean and scour sunken ships to find buried treasure.

Jesus told a parable of a man who was sowing in his field and he hit something and dug it up and found buried treasure.

What a dream that would be.

You know every one of us who knows Christ has found the very best treasure that you can ever, ever find.

In Christ there are riches unspeakable.

Some of you folks are a bit older and you've walked perhaps with Christ for 30, 40, maybe 50 years or more.

Have you exhausted the riches in Christ?

Have you now fathomed Him and you've got it all sussed?

No.

You can spend a lifetime learning of Jesus and His love and His grace, His power, His justice, His holiness.

You can spend years studying the Word and you come back to a passage that you've read dozens of times and suddenly it seems to come alive to you in a whole new way.

Unsearchable riches.

And one of the greatest privileges we can have on planet earth is to open up riches to other people.

That's the job of parents.

Every parent, every Christian parent is in the job of gospel ministry unfolding riches, spiritual riches to their children.

It's way better than buying them designer clothes or absolutely magnificent toys and buying them the best money education can buy.

Way better is just to give them the free riches of Christ.

It's the best thing you can do for your children.

It's the privilege of Sunday school teachers.

It's the privilege of Bible study leaders.

It's the privilege of elders and preachers and all gospel workers to proclaim the unsearchable riches of Christ.

It's not a privilege reserved for Paul and the fellow apostles because the gospel's been passed on.

The mystery unfolded to them has been revealed to us and we know the old, old story.

And so we do well to ask ourselves what really does drive us on in gospel ministry?

What does drive us on in gospel ministry?

Some people, if we're honest, are driven by the desire to be successful in ministry.

What actually drives them, what motivates them to be passionate in what they do is they want to be successful.

They want numbers. They want their church to grow. They want a good reputation.

Others, I've encountered, aren't too worried about numbers.

In fact, they almost pride themselves on having next to none.

They're driven by a passionate desire for orthodoxy, for orthodoxy's sake.

They want to be right so that they can be right.

Well, it's very important that we are right about the gospel but not as an end in itself.

We want to be right about the gospel so that it's like a sharp sword.

Not a sharp sword that's in a cabinet and you just look at it and say look how sharp it is but a sharp sword that you can wield with which you can fight for God.

I want to be driven in ministry if I can manage to lay aside false motives and impurity.

I want to be driven by the desire that other people will know the riches of Christ.

I'm glad if there are numbers because it means more people are enjoying his riches.

And I want to be orthodox so that they hear the truth.

But what should drive us surely is a passionate desire that more men and women and children will come to know Jesus.

But let me go further than that.

There is a motive even beyond that that is a right motive to be passionate about gospel ministry.

And Paul speaks of it in verse 10.

His intent was that now through the church the manifold wisdom of God should be made known.

Let's just pause there. The best is yet to come but just pause. Don't look any further.

His intent was that through the church, through this one body, through God's gathered people, God's manifold wisdom should be declared.

Not just that people will be blessed by the treasure of Christ but that God's wisdom will be manifest.

It's a lovely word that it uses there for manifold wisdom. It's a sort of rich, multifaceted, multicoloured wisdom.

His great wisdom in the gospel revealed but now notice to whom?

Through the church the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms.

Now I think this is astounding. This lifts us to another plane quite literally.

Five times in the book of Ephesians Paul speaks of the heavenly realms.

In Greek it's just one word which we perhaps best just translate the heavenlies.

Let me take you to the five references. First of all chapter 1 and verse 3.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us in the heavenlies.

We're blessed in the heavenlies with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

Chapter 1 verses 20 and 21 speaks of Christ raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenlies far above all rule and authority, power and dominion in every title that can be given.

Chapter 2 and verse 6.

And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with Him in the heavenlies in Christ Jesus.

The picture thus far is that our blessings are in the heavenlies.

Christ rules in the heavenlies. We are in Christ lifted up and seated in the heavenlies.

Then chapter 6 verse 12.

Our struggle is not against flesh and blood but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenlies.

There is warfare going on. There is battle and the battle is not chiefly on the earthly level.

It's not chiefly down here. It's not other people. It's not flesh and blood.

The real battle is up there in the spiritual realm.

So we get the picture that the heavenlies is not just the place of absolute perfection but it's the spiritual realm above and beyond what we normally see or perhaps even think about.

There Christ is seated. There Christ rules and there there's battle against Him.

Now in the light of that go to this verse in chapter 3 and verse 10.

God's intent is that now through the church here on earth through what we're doing as we advance the gospel and serve the Lord in His administration through the church God's manifold wisdom should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenlies.

Which means that when we're engaged in gospel work, when we're serving the Lord there are ramifications not just on earth but in heaven.

There's stuff going on way above what we see or even think about.

It's the same kind of picture that you have in the book of Job where Job little knows what's going on in the heavenlies.

He's battling stuff on earth but there's stuff going on in heaven.

And Paul is conscious of that. He's conscious that there are two realms, the seen and the unseen.

The now and the then and the then is already a happening realm.

And so it means that we beaver away and we struggle sometimes and we suffer and Paul ends up in prison and you share the gospel with someone and they don't respond.

And there are difficulties because we're not always a perfect church and we get tired and we get weary and it's hard work and you wonder if anything's happening sometimes.

But we only see this realm. We mostly just see other people, flesh and blood.

That's not where the real stuff's happening in one sense.

God is at work in the heavenlies displaying His power and glory, having the victory in the heavenly realms so that there can be eternal significance to the very little stuff that we're struggling with on earth.

Is it any wonder then that Paul says to them in verse 13,

I ask you therefore not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you which are your glory.

But Paul says don't worry about me. Don't be discouraged by my imprisonment.

Don't think that it's hard on me or it's all gone wrong.

He's really saying no, understand that I'm caught up in something absolutely huge and it's an enormous privilege to be part of it.

I'm not really a prisoner of Nero. I'm a prisoner of Christ

and I'm doing His bidding and God is manifesting His wisdom in the heavenly places.

What a perspective.

We mistakenly think that the worst thing that could happen to us is persecution.

I don't think it's true.

It's worse to be lulled to sleep by materialism and individualism.

To be utterly complacent because of our affluence.

To be so comfortable that we forget how great the gospel is and that it's worth any sacrifice.

It's far worse to be saved and live a selfish life and a comfortable life where we're not really advancing the gospel of Jesus at all.

That's the pitiable position to be in.

So I have to ask you friends, do you see your Christian life in these terms that Paul's using?

I know you're not an apostle. I know you're not in the same position as Paul.

But are you not now, by grace, part of God's administration?

And do you not know through revelation the mystery?

And have you not been called to be a servant, a minister of Christ Jesus?

And if so, is it not worth any cost to advance the glorious gospel of Jesus?

The more committed you are to something, the more you'll sacrifice for it.

Phillips Brooks, an older writer, said,

It does not take great men to do great things. It only takes consecrated men.

It does not take great men to do great things. It only takes consecrated men.

I think it was Tozer who said, Man is looking for better methods. God is looking for better men.

If we were all sold out for the cause of Christ, what might the Lord do through us?

Count it no great sacrifice, friends, to suffer in the administration of God's grace.

Count it no great loss when you're made to feel a bit isolated or a bit weird or you're a bit embarrassed.

It's not really a big loss on the big scale of things.

Count it no great loss when you're called to spend considerable time on Christian ministry when you could have been sitting on the couch watching TV.

It's not really a very big sacrifice, is it?

Count it no great loss when you are called upon to give generously and freely to the work of the gospel.

The Bible often sets forward the tithe as a guideline of appropriate giving.

I don't think it's a New Testament command, but if I look in the scriptures for a guideline of what proportional giving means, then it puts 10% as a good starting place.

Well, the Bush or the Howard administration asked for a lot more than that.

Count it no great loss.

Count it no great loss when you have to give up other pursuits or other interests or you have to surrender a long held sin for the sake of the gospel.

Friends, will you count it a privilege to share with others the gospel of grace?

Will you count it a privilege to be in on the secret of what God is doing in this world

and to be part of His administration?

I came across this quote.

The Christian life is best lived dangerously.

Playing it safe won't yield much fruit.

People who risk friendships or jobs or even worse, their own lives for the sake of the gospel get the greatest results.

We want results for the glory of God.

We want our lives to make a difference for the glory of God.

And if this weekend you've come to any fresh appreciation of just how wonderful the gospel of grace is, just how freely you've been saved, just how kind the Lord has been in your life,

if you have any sense of how good the gospel is, go away and count it worthy of any amount of sacrifice that the Lord should call you to.

Live on the hedge so that by God's grace He may use you to manifest His wisdom in the heavenlies.

Let's pray.

Holy Father, forgive us for where we've just played it safe, been saved and then selfish.

Forgive us for where we've treasured our own salvation but done little to advance the gospel.

Forgive us for sleepiness and complacency.

Father, we've been reminded by Paul's testimony that the gospel is so great and so precious that it's worth any cost.

And even if we should lose all, it's worth it.

And through what we do, weak and feeble as it is, you are advancing your purposes and advancing them in a way far beyond what we can even see.

You're doing things in the heavenly realms.

Oh Father, increase our faith and increase our passion and longing and desire to serve you no matter what it costs.

That can be easy words for us to say in the comfort of a conference.

Father, please embolden us as we go back to homes and family and workplace and uni and wherever you have placed us.

May we there be your servants.

And oh God, please receive the glory through the little things that we do.