

THROUGH THE BIBLE STUDY

EPHESIANS 3-4

Paul is in a Roman prison... *chains dangle from his wrists as he writes of his freedom in Christ... he's outfitted in prison stripes as he pens about the righteousness he wears... a string of Roman numerals are stitched across his shirt, while he records the innumerable blessings that are his in Christ Jesus...*

Rather than see himself *in prison*, Paul chooses to see himself *in Christ*. And this is the choice we all make: *do we get lost in our physical surroundings or do we stay focused on our spiritual blessings?*

In your heart of hearts, where do you abide? Are you *in pain* or *in Christ*?... *In hock* or *in Christ*?... *In somebody's hot seat* or *in Christ*?.. *In fear* or *in Christ*?

Chapter 3:1, **“For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus...”** Again, Paul *belongs* to Jesus! He could've said he was *the prisoner of Rome, or Caesar, or the Jews...* but he's **“*the prisoner of Christ Jesus...*”**

A Christian is never **“a victim of circumstance.”**

God is sovereign. Nothing is able to get to me or you, but that it doesn't first pass through Him!

If you belong to Jesus, He has a plan for you. And don't interpret disappointment as a derailment of that plan. Wherever you are - no matter the situation - He has purposes for you! Paul was a **“*prisoner of Christ.*”**

And why was Paul in prison? He tells us, “for you Gentiles.” He was there for us. He stood up for pig-eating, bacon-loving, pork-chop munching Gentiles.

In the face of Jewish prejudice and legalism, Paul preached *grace for every race!* God isn't just for the well bred. His blessings come apart from Jewish Law.

Paul put God and all His goodness within the reach of the outcast. Today, every time I savor a BLT or some pulled pork, I realize the debt of gratitude I owe Paul.

Paul spent two years in Ephesus. It's funny that in verse 2, he asks if they've heard of his ministry...

“If indeed you have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which was given to me for you...” Of course they had heard... Perhaps, Paul is asking them, *did you really understand the implications of grace?*

And if he were writing us, he'd ask, “Do we?”

When you think of a “*dispensation of grace*”, think of a “*distributorship.*” The Jews knew of God's grace, so God sent Paul to distribute salvation to the gentiles.

God is an entrepreneur! He's not afraid of branching out and opening up new channels of distribution for His amazing grace. He wants us to move into all segments of the market - *every age, race, language, culture.*

I guess when it comes to marketing and distribution no one has been better at it than McDonalds. Did you know one of the busiest McDonalds sits near the Kremlin in Moscow - it serves 40,000 people a day?

At one time, a new McDonalds opened up somewhere in the world every four hours. Today, there are over 36,000 McDonalds stores in 101 countries.

As Christians, we should be as effective distributing the Gospel as McDonalds is with Big Macs... *Perhaps your office has never had a strong witness for Jesus...*

The same could be said for your tennis team, or neighborhood, or hunting club. God has given you the distribution rights in that new market. **Get busy.** It's said, "There's enough Bread of Life to supply the whole world, but are there enough volunteers to distribute it?"

Paul continues talking about his "*dispensation of grace*" - "how that by revelation He (i.e. Christ) made known to me the mystery (as I have briefly written already, by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ), which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets: that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel..." Notice Paul refers to the Gospel of God's grace as "*a mystery.*"

Whenever we hear the word "*mystery*", we think of an Agatha Christie novel or a Sherlock Holmes movie... a suspense-filled, smoking gun, who-done-it thriller.

But that's not what Paul means when he uses this term. A biblical mystery is simply a truth that's known only to God - a sacred secret. And the great mystery in the OT was how would God save the Gentiles?

There were OT prophecies that predicted the Gentiles salvation, but it remained unclear to everyone but God as to how it would happen. The privilege of explaining this mystery was finally given to Paul.

It was *through Christ* that God would bring together Jews and non-Jews as one new people group, *the Church*. When Paul first preached the Gospel of Jesus to Gentiles, he was resolving an age-old mystery.

I'm afraid one of the reasons folks today take the Gospel and God's grace for granted is we no longer see it as a mystery. When we first heard it and grasped its implications, it was an unexpected discovery.

We were overwhelmed by the lavishness of God's generosity... surprised by a love we didn't deserve...

But lose the wonder and amazement and what was once an *unexpected discovery* soon becomes a *worn-out doctrine*. If the Gospel of God's grace has gotten boring to you, it's time to see it again as a mystery.

Take your marriage for example. After a couple of decades you're both familiar territory, and thus, to keep love fresh you have to create some mystique.

You have to approach each other from a different angle. **He should splurge on a swanky hotel - she should buy some new lingerie - risk dining at a new restaurant, somewhere other than McDonalds.**

Realize your spouse is an ever-changing person. There are dimensions of their personality yet to be discovered. New wrinkles you've yet explore (*literally*).

Here's my point, **the way to beat boredom is by reintroducing into the relationship some mystery!**

And the same is true in our relationship with God.

Earl Weaver, the former manager of the Baltimore Orioles, once said, **"It's what you learn after you know it all that counts."** That's so true, especially with the Bible! There's always more there than you realized.

So forget the fact that you've read the Bible all your life. Pick it up a fresh and look for something new. It's there! Focus on reading the passage before you as if you'd never read it before. *And let God surprise you!*

Paul is speaking of the Gospel, verse 7, **"of which I became a minister according to the gift of the grace of God given to me by the effective working of His power.**

To me, who am less than the least of all the saints, this grace was given..." For Paul, sharing the Gospel was not a duty. It was an honor he didn't deserve.

The Apostle Paul was Christianity's greatest minister, yet he considered himself **"less than the least of the saints..."** Before he dispensed grace, he had received grace. And now, God calls him to share its secrets!

For me, there's only one thing more fun than keeping a secret and that's sharing it with someone. In fact, I'm the person in my family most prone to blow a secret.

Paul had the honor of traveling all over the world letting the cat out of the bag - telling Gentiles of God's grace. He was having a ball! And we can join the fun!

Notice, how Paul describes his ministry, “That I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ...” He refers to the riches of Christ as “unsearchable” or “untraceable.” It’s not man who finds God. It’s God who initiates. He reveals Himself. Left to ourselves - without God’s Word - we’d be in the dark.

Verse 9, it was Paul's privilege to preach “and to make all see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ; to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places...” God's “manifold” or “multi-faceted” wisdom is revealed in His church.

Even the angels - “*the principalities and powers in the heavenly places*” - are learning what God is up to in the world by looking at us, *the Church*. How Jesus forgives, saves, blesses, and unites is a lesson to the angels. It blows their minds to see Him do it in us!

This is why a healthy church is so vital! We’re the prism through which the inhabitants of both this world and the spirit world beholds God’s “*manifold wisdom.*”

Verse 11, “According to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through faith in Him.” Here’s another blessing in Christ - access to God. This, the OT saints knew nothing about.

No one but the High Priest - and only once a year - was

allowed into God's presence. But in Christ, we can boldly approach God's throne. Spiritually, we can spend all our time seated in heavenly places in Christ.

“Therefore I ask that you do not lose heart at my tribulations for you, which is your glory.” Paul doesn't want his imprisonment to discourage the Ephesians.

That's why he's praying for them. Verse 14, “For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory...” And his first request is that they may “be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man...” Notice Paul doesn't pray for their outer man, but for their inner man - their spirit.

When we pray for a friend, we usually focus on their external status, and that's ok. But we need to direct our prayers toward the inner man and their spiritual health.

The outer man is destined to wither and die. *There is no fountain of youth.* But the inner person is like a rechargeable battery. We just need to plug into God, and we can be re-energized. That's how Paul prays!

And he adds, “that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith...” Paul wants us to allow Jesus to “dwell,” or literally *to make Himself at home in our hearts!*

Jesus is King! Thus, wherever He moves in He starts redecorating, and removing old fixtures, and installing new stuff. Wherever He dwells, He's King of the castle.

Paul prays that the Ephesians will give the Lord full control of their hearts - that they'll trust Him enough to make the

changes He thinks are best for their lives.

And verse 17, “that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height - to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”

Paul asks God to enlarge their spiritual capacity and help them grasp the full volume of His love for them!

Any chocolate lovers here? Once, a guy jumped into a vat of sweet, delicious chocolate. He prayed, “Lord, make my capacity equal to my opportunity.” God's love is an ocean. Take in all you want. Our only limitation is our appetite! Be “filled with all the fullness of God.”

Paul closes His prayer with a praise! Verse 20, “Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”

Imagine, God is not only able to meet every need we bring to him, He's able to do “above all that we ask or think?” **His grace is always greater than our needs!**

Never forget, God can do “exceedingly abundantly.”

Paul begins Chapter 4 - and again he mentions his incarceration - “I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord...”

I've heard it said, “Jesus promised three things to His disciples: **First**, they would be *ridiculously happy*. **Second**, they would be *completely fearless*. And **third**, they would be

in constant trouble..." That was Paul. He was *blessed in Christ and troubled in this world.*

I've been to the cave Paul occupied in the heart of Rome. The Mamertine prison is a small, subterranean holding cell. And I envision him pacing back and forth...

He's worried, but not about his imprisonment. It's not where he walks that concerns him, it's how he walks...

Paul writes to the Ephesians, "(I) beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called..."

In Ephesians 1-3, the emphasis is on *where we sit... in heavenly places in Christ...* But now that we're somebody in Christ Jesus we should live like it! And in Chapter 4, Paul's emphasis shifts to *how we walk.*

We should walk worthy of our calling. Membership in God's family is not only a privilege, but a responsibility.

As a pint-sized princess growing up in Buckingham Palace, little Victoria was sheltered from the fact she was next in line to be England's monarch. Her handlers didn't want to spoil the future Queen. But one day, Victoria saw the genealogical records of the royal family and noticed she was next in line to the throne.

Initially, Victoria was overcome with emotion. But once she had gained her composure the future Queen looked at her tutor, and said, "Then I must be good."

This is the reaction Paul hopes hits us. In Christ, we also have a high calling. *President, or prime minister, or premier - pale in comparison to being a Christian.*

In light of our calling, we too “must be good.”

And the first observation Paul makes about our *high calling* is that it requires a *lowly walk*. In verse 2, Paul says we should walk “with all lowliness” or *humility*.

Doug Barfield was a former football coach for the Auburn Tigers. He kept a plaque on his desk which read, “There are no limits to how much can be accomplished if no one cares who gets the credit.”

The same is true at church. Let’s walk in humility.

And also “gentleness.” When you look around at the people here today, imagine them with stickers stuck all over their bodies that read, “fragile, handle with care.”

We need to be sensitive, tender with one another.

Let’s also walk “with longsuffering...” or *patience*.

Here’s another way to walk, “bearing with one another in love.” We need to put up with each other’s quirks and idiosyncrasies, and we all have them, *don’t we? Be honest!* It’s been said, “Christian discipleship is teaching the intolerant to tolerate the intolerable.”

Since people get down, let’s walk lowly and help lift them up. *Since they’re fragile*, let’s be gentle. *Since they take time*, let’s have patience. And *since everyone is just a little bit weird*, let’s bear with each other in love.

Verse 3, “endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” Realize *the unity of the Spirit* is a gift from God. It’s a spiritual affinity that exists among all true believers. But understand what it is not...

The unity of the Spirit is not **the unity of faith**. We won't all agree on every detail of doctrine... Neither is it **the unity of format**. We can enjoy different worship styles and music... And it's not **the unity of friendship**. We can have spiritual unity and not all be close friends.

The unity of the Spirit doesn't abolish our differences, but it creates a bond, a commonality, that's greater than those differences. We can't manufacture this kind of unity. It's the work of the Holy Spirit. But once we receive it, we can **"endeavor to keep"** it.

The word **"endeavor"** means **"to aggressively and actively do whatever it takes to preserve our unity."**

The Spirit creates a **"bond of peace"** between us, but it'll get broken if we don't protect it. *Misunderstandings, hurt feelings, jealousies* threaten the unity of the Spirit.

A visitor to an insane asylum was astonished to see only three guards in charge of hundreds of dangerous patients. The visitor asked one of the guards, **"Aren't you afraid these people will overpower you and escape?"** He replied, **"No, lunatics never unite."**

God has created a wonderful family at CCSM. You can sense the unity of the Spirit. But it's up to us to walk in lowliness, gentleness, patience, and tolerance toward one another. Differences will arise, but we need to work through them and endeavor to stay together.

And there're several other reasons we should be so concerned about unity... Verse 4, **"There is one body..."**

When God looks down on our community, He sees all the

true believers in all the churches as “*one body!*”

“*And one Spirit...*” The same Spirit who dwells in you, dwells in me! “*Just as you were called in one hope of your calling...*” In other words, there’s only one **heaven**.

There's not a *Baptist* heaven, or *Methodist* heaven, or *Presbyterian* heaven, or *Calvary Chapel* heaven.

There's “*only one hope of our calling...*” And “*one Lord...*” We all say, “**Yes, Sir**” to the same person. His name is Jesus! Our goal is please and glorify Jesus!

And “*one faith...*” There’s one true body of belief. **Theology isn’t arbitrary or ambiguous. Somebody is right and somebody is wrong.** There’s only “*one faith.*”

And there’s “*one baptism...*” When a person comes to Christ, they’re baptized into the Body of Christ, not just a particular church. Thus, it’s arrogance and bigoted for one church not to accept another’s baptism.

There's only “*one baptism.*” And finally, “*one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.*” On the night before His crucifixion, **Jesus prayed not only for our orthodoxy, but for our unity.** He *prayed for it* that night, then Jesus *paid for it* the next day. The least we can do is endeavor to keep it intact!

“*But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift.*” God floods us with grace.

“*Therefore He says: "When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, and gave gifts to men."*” And part of His grace toward us are spiritual gifts. Jesus is like a conquering

general who's taken his foe captive.

But He's done so to adorn them with amazing gifts.

Verse 9, (Now this, "He ascended" what does it mean but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.) Here's Jesus' itinerary between His death and resurrection - what His Spirit did in those 3 days...

He first "*descended into the lower parts of the earth.*"

Lower than the valley - lower than the crust - lower than the mantle - lower than the core... lower spiritually, takes you to Hades. And Luke 16 describes this place.

Hades was a duplex. It was divided into two sides - a good side and bad side - separated by a huge gulf. Those who died believing God's promises went to Paradise. Unbelievers went to the place of torment.

In the OT, before the work of Christ on the cross the door into the presence of God was closed. The blood sacrifices covered man's sin, but didn't erase them.

Hades served as the *holding tank for heaven*, until Jesus, the Lamb of God, came and offered the sacrifice to end all sacrifices - sin's permanent solution.

As soon as Jesus conquered sin, He descended to Hades, and gathered up all the OT believers who had trusted in God's salvation. They became His captives.

General Jesus then led these captives into the halls of heaven... And to His followers left on earth, He has given gifts - spiritual gifts - to build up His church.

Today, when a believer dies, he no longer goes to the Hades - he or she follows Jesus straight into God's presence. As Paul said to the Corinthians, "To be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord."

And Jesus is still giving spiritual gifts. Four of these spiritual gifts are people with unique spiritual callings...

"And He Himself gave some to be apostles..." The original twelve had a unique calling, but there were other apostles. The word means, "sent out one."

I believe a missionary who crosses cultures with the Gospel - or breaks new ground and plants churches where there were none - can be called an apostle.

There are "some prophets..." These are people God uses to give special instruction at special times.

Paul also mentions, "some evangelists..." This is a person effective at leading sinners to Jesus. We're all called to be a witness, but some are evangelists.

"And some pastors and teachers..." The word "pastor" is Latin for "shepherd." And pastor is a spiritual shepherd who nurtures and cares for God's flock.

Shepherds retrieve strays, and mend bruises, and protect the sheep from wild animals, and find suitable pasture. His most important job is to feed the sheep.

Which means a pastor must also be a gifted teacher. That's why "pastors and teachers" go hand in hand.

And the ultimate purpose of these gifts is "for the equipping

of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ..." The pastor's job isn't to do all the witnessing, and visiting, and counseling.

My job is to equip you to minister to the people around you. God wants *ever member a minister*.

I grew up in a church where every week the pastor preached a sermon on salvation. The problem was that 95% of the congregation was already saved. He ended up speaking to the 5% while ignoring the vast majority.

And as a result, no one grew - no one became bolder, stronger, more equipped to impact people for Jesus.

But what if a pastor feeds His flock the meat of God's Word and builds up their faith - then eventually, rather than one person preaching on Sundays at church, you end up with hundreds of people preaching the Gospel throughout the week in hundreds of different places.

This is our goal at Calvary. We believe healthy sheep reproduce. Thus, we want you to grow in your faith so you'll bring Jesus to the world in which you live!

It's the pastor's job to equip the saints, verse 13, "till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God..." Notice how Paul phrases this, "till we all come to the unity of the faith."

Realize when it comes to the unity of the faith, I'm not moving toward you - and you're not moving toward me.

We're all coming toward God. Evidently, none of us have arrived. No one has flawless doctrine or a monopoly on the truth - we are all growing, and learning, and moving toward

“the unity of the faith.”

Into “a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ...” Here's the goal of Christian growth - to be as fully like Jesus as we possibly can.

“That we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting...” And this describes today's church.

When believers aren't taught the Bible, they don't know what to believe, so they end up vulnerable to every smooth-sounding doctrine that blows through.

This is why we teach the Bible verse by verse - in a systematic way - so you can truly learn this book.

In contrast to teaching that's described as *“trickery... cunning craftiness... deceitful plotting...”*, Paul tells us in verse 15, *“but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head - Christ...”*

When a person teaches *the truth of God in the love of God*, believers grow and become more like Jesus.

Paul mentions Christ who is the head of the church, *“from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.”*

What is Jesus up to today? He's a bodybuilder.

He's building up His body - one believer at a time. We all have a place and everyone's growth is crucial!

Verse 17 continues to tell us how to walk worthy, “This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk.”

Several years ago, Skidmore College did research that showed how people walk reflect their personality.

A waddle means *independence*. A drag shows *frustration*. A stride indicates *confidence*. Tiptoes is a sign of *insecurity*. And a shuffle belongs to the *lazy*.

You can tell a lot by how a person walks. *And Paul would agree*. Both unbelievers and Christians have a distinctive way they walk and carry themselves.

And Paul begins by describing how the pagans walk.

In verse 17, “in the futility of their mind...” or “*empty-headed*.” They don't think about the consequences of their actions. And here's why, “having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God...” *Without Christ*, they're cut off from God's light. They live their lives in a spiritual darkness.

And how do people get cut off from God... “Because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart...” They don't have to become ignorant - they're born ignorant of God and His truth.

Only when we're born again does the light come on.

He continues to speak of the person separated from God, “who, being past feeling, have given themselves over to lewdness, to work all uncleanness with greediness.” When you constantly resist God, you deaden your conscience and

grow numb to truth and morality. You'll try anything to end your emptiness.

I like how CS Lewis once described the world without Christ. He called it, "A land where it's winter all year long, but never Christmas." It's a dark and lonely place.

In contrast, verse 20 tells us *to dress for success - spiritual success that is...* "But you have not so learned Christ, if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus: that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness." If you're running a race, you want to dress for it... *light-weight clothes and sturdy shoes*. And if you're running a spiritual race, it's also necessary that you wear the appropriate attire.

Paul tells us to **put off** and **put on**.

He says strip-off any selfish attitudes, and stop rehearsing old thoughts. Ditch sinful behaviors. **Put off** the junk that characterized your life before you came to Jesus... And **put on** a new attitude! Renew your thoughts and harmonize them with God's Word. Learn to see yourself and all of life from God's perspective.

You should put off and put on!

And here's what this looks like... The next few verses list examples of the changes you'll certainly make...

"Therefore, putting away lying, "Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor," for we are members of one another."

Christians should be truth-tellers.

Verse 26, "**Be angry, and do not sin...**" It's not always wrong to be angry. There's a lot in this world that should rile your anger - just don't let anger lead to sin.

I read where the average person drives 20 mph faster when he or she is angry. Anger is a powerful force. Get control of it, before it takes control of you.

And "**do not let the sun go down on your wrath...**"

Keep short accounts. If you have a conflict with a friend or spouse deal with it as quickly as possible.

Verse 27, "**nor give place to the devil.**" In other words, **don't give the devil an opportunity** to tempt you.

Often I hear people say, "I've got a terrible problem with pornography. Every time I log onto the internet I stumble..." or "Every time I enter a bar I get drunk."

Come on, man! If you're serious about walking with God; then stop walking headfirst into temptation.

"**Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need.**" Here's the effect Jesus has on a person. He doesn't just stop him from stealing, but He encourages him to be generous.

"**Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers.**" When I speak in another area of the country, it doesn't take my audience long to identify me as a Southerner - *it's the Southern accent.*

And likewise a Christian should be identified by what comes out of his or her mouth!... And not just that we refrain from gossip or profanity, but that grace colors our speech **Do your words build up or tear down?**

Verse 30, **“And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.”**

Quenching the Spirit avoids doing what the Holy Spirit prompts you to do. Whereas, **grieving the Spirit** is the opposite - it's doing what God told you not to do.

Chapter 4 closes, “Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another...” And there would be no problem if the verse ended here. *O we should forgive!*

But look at Paul’s qualifier... “just as God in Christ forgave you.” That ups the ante! We should forgive one another as fully and freely as Jesus has forgiven us.

Two husbands were talking one day. One says to his buddy, “when my wife is mad she gets historical.” His friend corrects him, “you mean hysterical”. He said, “No, I mean historical. She dredges up the past.”

Hey, Jesus forgive and forgets. He holds no grudges. Let’s forgive each other as Christ has forgiven us.

And if you’ve never been forgiven by Jesus, understand how easy it is... you need to ask...