

GOD'S GLAD WELCOME

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Presented at Trinity Community Church, San Rafael, California, on Sunday, August 3, 2008

Our society today expresses a very pragmatic approach to life. As products of the scientific and industrial ages, we try to understand things from a formulaic approach, attempting to render everything in life into recipes (lists of necessary ingredients and procedural steps). "How to" expresses our general quest for understanding. Television shows, magazine articles, books, and Internet sites all address this hunger for knowledge, even if over-simplifying with cliché sound bites.

When we look at the Bible, however, we find that God takes a very different approach. Seldom bothering to explain "how" or "why," He seems to prefer to talk about "what" He has done and what effect it was intended to have in our lives.

This creates no small amount of angst for us, because our persistent "how" and "why" questions are usually met with silence. He leaves us to ferret out our own answers, and to wonder if we really got it right after all. This is not because God is playing games with us or protecting His intellectual superiority. It is simply because our heads are generally so anchored to this sensory world that we are incapable of grasping His divine perspective; it's way over our heads.

At the same time, He doesn't want to keep us in the dark. Our capacity to understand divine truths can increase! Our perspective of life can become more and more like His. His values can become our own, and His purposes can become our purposes.

Paul's Letter to the Ephesians is one such effort to help us grow up spiritually. It unveils the magnificence of Jesus Christ's achievements — all that He accomplished through His death and resurrection — and applies them gloriously to the Church, His followers.

Chapters Four through Six express the practical outworking of the life of the Spirit of Christ — walking in unity, walking in love, walking in transparency, walking in wisdom — in a collage of human relationships: marriage, family, employment, and conflict.

A common tendency is to spend most of our time in the last three chapters of the letter, because they address pragmatic subjects with pragmatic terms and illustrations. Many people tend to skim the first three chapters, because they seem so other-worldly, so religious.

Yet, Paul's teaching in the first three chapters is the soil from which the behaviors of the last three chapters spring. In other words, without the revelation of divine truth in chapters 1-3, there can be no activation of holy relationships in chapters 4-6. I mean this very personally: unless *you* receive the understanding offered in the first half of the letter, you will not be able to live out the relationships urged in the second half of the letter.

You may appreciate and applaud them, and promote them to others, or even judge others for failing to express them consistently, but even memorizing Paul's admonitions cannot produce their character in your life.

Such Christian character is not learned intellectually; it must be birthed spiritually. It is the product of the activity of the Holy Spirit, who reveals Christ to us — who He is and what He has done for us —

stirred by applied faith. That's why Paul begins with heavenly truth. It's not an afterthought or parenthesis. It is the essential foreground of spiritual growth and fruitfulness.

Let's explore together today the third chapter of Ephesians. As we walk through it, see how your own spirit — your inner being — is enlightened and lifted, and how faith leaps toward God and hope swells within you.

A Time of Favor

Ephesians 3:1 *I, Paul, am a prisoner of Christ Jesus because of my preaching to you Gentiles. ² As you already know, God has given me this special ministry of announcing his favor to you Gentiles.*

This is what the Gospel ministry is all about. Some may think it is about announcing people's sinfulness and God's ensuing judgment, but Paul refutes that notion as false. The Message announces God's favor! And Paul keenly felt his responsibility both to proclaim it and to protect it.

Jesus announced His ministry with the words of Isaiah:

Luke 4:18 *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released,
that the blind will see,
that the oppressed will be set free,
¹⁹ and that the time of the Lord's favor has come."*

Isaiah, seeing all the way to the end of the ages, actually wrote:

Isaiah 61:2 *He has sent me to tell those who mourn that the time of the Lord's favor has come, and with it, the day of God's anger against their enemies.*

But Jesus omitted the last phrase, because it was reserved for a time still future. His time — and ours — is for the fulfilling of the former phrase ("the time of the Lord's favor"). That is what we are here to learn.

A Mystery Revealed

Ephesians 3:3 *As I briefly mentioned earlier in this letter, God himself revealed his secret plans to me. ⁴ As you read what I have written, you will understand what I know about this plan regarding Christ. ⁵ God did not reveal it to previous generations, but now he has revealed it by the Holy Spirit to his holy apostles and prophets.*

As we began to read this passage, I prayed that we would experience the Spirit of revelation. That is the Holy Spirit — the Spirit of Truth — whom Jesus said would lead us into all truth. Nothing more than a superficial understanding of these matters can be gained, no matter how many times it is read, without the activity of the Holy Spirit, who pulls back the veil so that we might glimpse God's perspective. This same Spirit has been given to you if you have believed Jesus and made Him the Lord of your life. And He wants to show you great and wonderful things that you have not known.

Joint Heirs

Ephesians 3:6 *And this is the secret plan: The Gentiles have an equal share with the Jews in all the riches inherited by God's children. Both groups have believed the Good News, and both are part of the same body and enjoy together the promise of blessings through Christ Jesus. ⁷ By God's special favor and mighty power, I have been given the wonderful privilege of serving him by spreading this Good News.*

“Equal share”! Some Christians think it is a sign of spirituality to revere the Jewish people more than others and refer to them as “God’s chosen people.” This is a misunderstanding of the Message of Christ. Indeed, the Hebrew people were and are chosen by God for earthly service — preserving the Word of God and bringing the Messiah into the world and bearing witness of His grace in the final age. But it is born-again Christians, whether Jew or Gentile by descent or upbringing, who are now chosen by God for heavenly service. This is the true Church and the spiritual Israel. And it is God’s intent that they should all worship *together*. Jesus isn’t interested in highlighting our cultural distinctions by keeping us separate, but in harmonizing those distinctions in the unity His Spirit provides.

Chosen by Grace

Ephesians 3:8 *Just think! Though I did nothing to deserve it, and though I am the least deserving Christian there is, I was chosen for this special joy of telling the Gentiles about the endless treasures available to them in Christ. ⁹ I was chosen to explain to everyone this plan that God, the Creator of all things, had kept secret from the beginning.*

These words could describe me! I have not earned this privilege. Even today, 36 years later, I am not sufficient for this task. But God said, “Tell them!” I want to tell you... I long to tell you... Woe to me if I do not tell you “about the endless treasures available” to you in Christ.

The treasures you have known, no matter how wonderful or how many, are not the whole story. Nor have the treasures others have gained depleted God’s stock. They are endless! Others can have many, and you, too, can still have many more. There is an unlimited supply for all! This is what Jesus Christ has gained for us. This is how God has favored us. And this is our story to tell.

An Eternal Plan

Ephesians 3:10 *God's purpose was to show (display) his wisdom in all its rich variety to all the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms. They will see this when Jews and Gentiles are joined together in his church. ¹¹ This was his plan from all eternity, and it has now been carried out through Christ Jesus our Lord.*

God does not hide Himself. He loves to reveal His gracious character to people. Through the prophet Jeremiah He said:

NIV Jeremiah 29:13 *“You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. ¹⁴ I will be found by you,” declares the Lord.*

By this amazing Gospel of Grace, God will reveal His wisdom, confounding mere human wisdom. Human wisdom suggests that “Birds of a feather flock together” and it is best for Christians to worship with people most like themselves. But God’s wisdom seeks to display a unity within diversity, to weave something unique of the huge variety of people He has made.

This has been His plan forever. He didn't just think it up (I certainly didn't just think it up!). It has always been His design to unite humanity in Christ. By this miracle, He will demonstrate how gracious and how mighty He is and — to the heights of the heavens — all will be amazed!

You're Welcome!

Ephesians 3:12 *Because of Christ and our faith in him, we can now come fearlessly into God's presence, assured of his glad welcome. ¹³ So please don't despair because of what they are doing to me here. It is for you that I am suffering, so you should feel honored and encouraged.*

Because of what Christ has done (by His death and resurrection), and because we have trusted Him to save us and work in our lives, we have access to God. He has delivered to us the "keys of the Kingdom." We can approach God without fear.

We should approach Him with reverence, but never with terror. The devil — that roaring lion — seeks to strike terror into our hearts, but not the Father. He loves us because we have loved Jesus. He assures us of a "glad welcome."

That is one reason that we emphasize prayer here at Trinity Community Church. Prayer is our pass-key to the Father's presence and to His heart. If He has extended to us a "glad welcome" we should show up and accept His welcome. We should eagerly seek what He has in store for us. Not only on our own, but especially together.

Standing Tall

Ephesians 3:14 *When I think of the wisdom and scope of God's plan, I fall to my knees and pray to the Father, ¹⁵ the Creator of everything in heaven and on earth.*

Someone has wisely said that no man stands so tall as when he kneels to pray to God. We need to bow down in order to look up. When Paul realized how vast was the wisdom and grace of God — through Jesus Christ to include everyone everywhere, regardless of what they have deserved, in a rich faith-tapestry of loving worship and united service — he was stunned. He was ruined! He could only collapse in utter amazement and worship.

Ephesians 3:16 *I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources he will give you mighty inner strength through his Holy Spirit.*

Again, the spiritual resources we require have no limit! No matter how much you have tapped in the past, today promises *all* you will need.

The Holy Spirit will strengthen your *inner* being. This is more important than outward strength. You can easily expend all the outward strength you have before the day is done. But the resources for your inner being are inexhaustible. How much do you need? Do you need more? Do you see someone else who needs more strength on the inside? Let's ask the Father to give it through His Holy Spirit.

Ephesians 3:17 *And I pray that Christ will be more and more at home in your hearts as you trust in him.*

This is where Christ belongs. Not on a shelf, or in a picture frame, or in a book, but in your heart. Is He at home there? When He first arrives it's a big mess, and He doesn't fit well, but *as you trust in Him* your heart becomes more and more His, and He feels more and more "at home" with you and you with Him.

This is our path of spiritual growth: trusting in Him more and more. If you see an opportunity in your life either to trust in Jesus or to trust in yourself or human ingenuity, choose to trust in Jesus and watch how He settles into your heart as His home. Such choices form the root network of your spiritual life.

Before reading the next passage, consider these questions: Have you experienced a gap between you and another person, because of something you have done or something done to you, that seems too wide to bridge? Have you dreamed of a good goal that still seems too distant for you to possibly reach? Have you faced an obstacle that seemed insurmountable? Do you feel as though you have fallen too far for God to bring you back?

Ephesians 3:17 *May your roots go down deep into the soil of God's marvelous love.¹⁸ And may you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love really is.*

Faith choices, sinking deep into the marvelous fact of God's unfailing love in Christ Jesus, lead to understanding (not all at once) of how great His love really is. It will be a growing appreciation, a never-ending discovery of how wide (spanning every conceivable gap, rift, or breach), how long (extending beyond the remotest distance), how high (reaching above any barrier), and how deep (deeper than any fault or failure) God's love for you really is.

Ephesians 3:19 *May you experience the love of Christ, though it is so great you will never fully understand it. Then you will be filled with the fullness of life and power that comes from God.*

The love of Christ is not a concept to be admired, but a grip to be experienced. You will know the love of God by experience before you understand it at all, when you invite Jesus Christ to take the leadership of your life. And after a lifetime of seeking and learning, you will still never fully understand it — it will always offer elements of mystery and surprise and awe.

But in spite of how little you *understand* it, your continuing experience of God's love will bring a fullness and richness to your life, with "power that comes from God." As this power works within you, amazing things will happen, even from the most mundane circumstances.

Ephesians 3:20 *Now glory be to God! By his mighty power at work within us, he is able to accomplish infinitely more than we would ever dare to ask or hope.²¹ May he be given glory in the church and in Christ Jesus forever and ever through endless ages. Amen.*

This is how the Church gives God glory: by trusting Him at all times, and asking Him for things larger than our capacity. By praying about everything, and praising Him in everything... any day and every day.

Thank God that He has extended to us His "glad welcome"!

In conclusion, let me leave you several questions to think about:

- Will you accept His invitation?
- Will you approach Him without fear?
- Will you give Him your heart?
- Will you give Him your needs and worries?
- Will you thank Him for how He loves you?
- Will you praise Him for what He is now doing and what He intends to do in your life?
- Will you receive inner strength from His Spirit?

- Will you show others how He has loved you?
- Will you help make them feel welcome, too?

Perhaps you just want to fall down before Him in prayer and tell Him thanks for His great love.

Perhaps you want to ponder its width and length and height and depth.

Feel free to do so.