

The Story of Agape (Christ's Love)

—Ephesians 3:1-21—

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Ephesians chapter three has for its background thought the final events of the second coming of Christ. It is leading up to the grandest height any converted sinner can attain—to be “filled with all the fullness of God” (vs. 19). That is a preparation for meeting Jesus when He returns in the clouds of heaven.

This is the same as the heights that dominate chapter four—“till we all come . . . to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, . . . but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ” (vss. 13-15). This is stratosphere Christian living! But there it is—it’s in the Bible, it’s possible, and we dare not disregard it.

It has to be and it will be. The climax of human history must take place. All the devils in hell can’t forever delay it. The great controversy between Christ and Satan cannot run on forever; there has to be a resolvment, a final, total victory on one side or the other. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians articulates the issues that make Christ’s victory total:

1. Christ proved that *agape*, the self-sacrificing love that went all the way when Christ died on His cross is a more powerful force than all the sin that Satan can tempt mankind to get into.

2. Adam lost his power of choice, but for “all men” Christ has returned it. His will is that every person be saved; but every person has the freedom to refuse if he wishes. (But it breaks God’s heart when many do!)

3. That choice to save “every man” includes that he become “holy and without blemish before Him in agape.” Here is where the idea of the cleansing of the sanctuary, the final Day of Atonement, comes into focus. It was one day in the ancient Israelite calendar, the day which symbolized final judgment. It meant for those who participated a complete at-one-ment or reconciliation with one another and with God. And no one can be reconciled to God and continue in sin—so the antitypical Day of Atonement means to “be holy and without blame before Him in *agape*.”

Ephesians 3:1-5: “For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles—if indeed you have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which was given to me for you, how that by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I wrote before in a few words, 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.”

We need to pick up a little detail that we must not miss. All along, Paul has quietly been insisting that “all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23), that is, all are “sinners of the Gentiles.”

He's not buying into the idea that the Jews are a righteous race in contrast with sinful Gentiles.

While he is rhapsodizing about God's "mystery" of the Gentiles becoming "fellow heirs and partakers of His promise in Christ," he is just as happy that unbelieving Jews can also learn to believe the gospel. He does not subscribe to the idea that Jews don't need the same thorough new birth that "Gentiles" need. That's what we all need, according to the way Paul is thinking. "The grace of God which was given to [Paul] for you" is the only source of salvation for any of us.

Therefore the bells are ringing for all of us. "In other ages" this glorious good news "was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the [Holy] Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets."

That same gospel is in the Old Testament, but like seeing through cataracts on our eyes it was veiled. Now, since Jesus came, the truth stands sharp and clear. What Paul means is that the gospel has become better good news now than the prophets had ever dreamed that it could be.

And to the Romans: "Now unto him that is of power to stablish you *according to my gospel*, and the preaching of Jesus Christ, *according to the revelation of the mystery*, which was kept secret since the world began, but now is made manifest, and by the scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, made known to all nations for the obedience of faith." Rom. 16:25, 26. There can be no question that the mystery of God is the gospel of God, that the

mystery of Christ is the gospel of Christ; for it is called the "gospel of God" as well as the "gospel of Christ." 1 Peter 4:17; 1 Thess. 2:2, 9; 1 Tim. 1:11. And properly enough so, for Christ is "God with us" (Matt. 1:23), and "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself." 2 Cor. 5:12.

The mystery of God being the gospel, when the angel said that the mystery of God should be finished, he was but saying, according to these scriptures, that *the gospel* should be finished. Paul said that the gospel "is the power of God unto salvation;" therefore to say that the mystery of God—the gospel—should be finished, is but to say that the power of God for the salvation of men will cease to be exercised. Again, the mystery of God is God manifest in the flesh, "Christ in you, the hope of glory." The finishing of that mystery will be God alone manifest, Christ in his completeness revealed, in the flesh in those who believe in him.

So then, according to the explanation given in these scriptures, the angel of Rev. 10:7 says, In the days—the years—of the voice of the seventh angel, when he shall begin to sound, the gospel should be finished, the power of God for the salvation of men shall cease to be exercised; and the work of God in Christ in those who truly believe in him, will be completed unto the measure of the fullness of the stature of Christ, "as he hath declared to his servants the prophets."

Paul does not teach the popular doctrine of self-love known as the philosophy of "self-esteem." But he does teach the Christian ethic of self-respect. He sums it up like this: "I say, through the grace given

to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith" (Rom. 12:3). Our healthy self-respect is "in Christ."

To each human being on earth, God has "dealt" a sense of self-consciousness and confidence in what God has given him/her. If the divine Son of God gave Himself for us (Gal. 1:4), we have to be somebody very important. It all depends on that confidence—that Christ gave Himself for you and that He honors you as being what He bought with His sacrifice.

If He "gave Himself for us," then He must value us according to the price He paid. If you buy some goods in a shop, you make a decision to value those goods on an equivalent level with the price you are paying. That says how highly Christ regards you; now you are to look upon yourself in that light. This precludes arrogance and pride, for you know that you would be nothing of yourself if you did not have the Savior who bought you. But forever after, you hold your head high because you appreciate the price that was paid for you.

Ephesians 3:6, 7: "That the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel, 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."

Now Paul shows us the sense of self-respect he has learned by understanding and believing this truth of his calling. Without any pride, he rejoices in

"the gift of the grace of God given to [himself] by the effective working of [God's] power." With no hesitation he claims as an apostle that "effective working." He will waste no time worrying about whether he is where he should be in the Lord's plan. The normal human pride that so easily mars all of our service for the Lord is absent, because Paul sees himself as a lowly "prisoner of the Lord."

Paul's ability to proclaim the good news of the gospel is a gift of the grace of God. Please do not think that gift is limited to certain professional people who spend decades in literary institutions. Anyone who understands the "mystery" Paul is explaining, who appreciates how good the good news message is, can proclaim it! The Lord gives the utterance.

Jesus promised us that anyone who "believes" in Him will have a well of sparkling, fresh water of life springing up from his inmost soul to refresh anyone with whom he comes in contact (John 7:37-39). It may be evident when you talk with a child; it may be across the back fence to a neighbor; it may be in the questions he asks in Bible class. Life becomes a glorious adventure!

Ephesians 3:8-13: "To me, who am less than the least of all the saints, this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, 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, 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. Therefore I ask that you do not lose heart at my tribulations for you, which is your glory.”

The mystery of God is the gospel. The preaching of the gospel, the unsearchable riches of Christ, is the making known to men what is the fellowship of this mystery. In the preaching of the gospel, God is revealing the riches of the glory of that mystery among the Gentiles, and that is Christ in men, the hope of glory. In former ages this mystery had not been made known unto the sons of men, as it was now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets. And though hidden from ages and generations, when the apostle were sent forth to preach, endured with power from on high, to reveal the mystery of God, that was the breaking off of the veil that had covered this mystery through all these ages; and it was broken off that all nations might see and know and understand and turn to the Lord, and get acquainted with God as he was revealed in Jesus Christ, by having Jesus Christ revealed in themselves.

Talk about “self-respect,” consider this: Paul looks upon himself as “less than the least of all the saints”! However great the hyperbole, Paul is happy with this self-evaluation. It’s no mere exaggeration; he knows that aside from a Savior, he would indeed be less than nothing. He can never forget “the hole of the pit from which [he was] dug” (Isa. 51:1). He

has become a new “David” who remembers the humble “sheepfold” where the Lord found him.

He must constantly marvel that the Lord who redeemed him has given him the “grace” to preach the message. What makes his preaching a blessing to so many people is that he preaches “the unsearchable riches of Christ,” and self is absent. His hearers constantly sense that there is a vast treasure of truth beyond in the reservoir of his mind and heart. It’s deeper than can be fathomed. That’s because the treasure is the truth of *agape*.

Something happened at the cross that is infinite in scope yet finite in its comprehension by the people. They each feel that Paul is preaching to them individually, yet to listen to him is to sense glorious truth just out of reach. They want to come back time and again to hear him. They can feel their souls stretching bigger under his pulpit ministry of grace. All this has to be because the preacher draws from a well where grace abounds much more than all our sin.

Paul takes men’s ears and turns them into eyes so they can see what is this divine-human fellowship. Something thrilling is happening before their eyes—the unfolding of what’s been bound since “the beginning of the ages.” When you get up early and come to hear Paul preach, you are participants in a new creation. It’s exciting; you can’t stay home; teenagers, you know you’ve got to be there. You can’t sleep late Sabbath morning! You don’t want to miss a single sermon of Paul’s. Any Sabbath you may witness the living creation of a new “epistle” like Ephesians!

The church suddenly ceases to be that stodgy place where all is boring, and now it becomes a kind of interplanetary rocket where it carries news that other worlds want to hear—"the wisdom of God" hidden for ages from both the world and the universe, wisdom now revealed in the gospel of Christ. The "messenger" is the church. Unfallen worlds will sit in stunned silence to hear what the church, for which the Son of God gave His blood, will have to say. And you are a part of it!

That being so, why do the people who happen to live next door to the church here on earth now seem to care so little? One reason is that the church has forgotten about her ministry to the universe, and has become engrossed in getting bigger numbers on the rolls here.

Paul is thinking of a great ministry for the church. But can the church speak to these "principalities and powers in the heavenly places"? Or is this a ministry that must await life beyond the first resurrection when we fondly anticipate how the redeemed will fly from world to world on vacation trips? No, Paul answers the question and says it's "now."

Therefore in Christ we now have "boldness and access with confidence through faith in Him." Remember, God's people "in Christ" are now higher than the angels! They are "members" of the "household." They walk in past all the holy angels who are mere "servants," into the presence of the Father, "in Christ."

So don't worry about me, says Paul. I'm nobody, like I said; but I'm suffering all this Roman imprisonment and these trials, "for you."

It gives him a little deeper sense of "fellowship with Christ in His sufferings." That leaves a smile in his heart.

Ephesians 3:14-19: "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, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love [*agape*], may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height—to know the love [*agape*] of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God."

- First, we learn the right way to pray—on our knees.

- Second, we learn the right One to whom we should pray—to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Bible doesn't give us examples of praying to the Holy Spirit. It tells us to "pray in the Holy Spirit" (Jude 20), but the Bible is insistent on directing our prayers to the Father. Our Savior taught us how to pray, "Our Father ..." Children should be taught to come to the Father in Jesus' name; He loves them just as much as Jesus does! They shouldn't be left to fear the Father as being far away, or too distant to care about children. Some children have a negative image of "father-ness," and they need

special help. Here's where the gospel is so needed to be understood.

- Third, we are reminded that the church is one "family in heaven and earth." We would never want to forget or neglect our family ties. When you are baptized, you join the church which is the "body of Christ." But the church is bigger than we could imagine! It includes heavenly beings.

- Fourth, our "inner man," our spiritual life, needs to be "strengthened." The first step is to thank God for Paul's prayer for you; His prayer is on record at the throne of God and will be answered for you if you want it to be. Ephesians is not playing with words; these are serious thoughts.

- Fifth, the pantheistic idea that Christ is present in "every person" is seen to be falsehood, but Christ does dwell in human hearts by faith. Faith is real, but it is more than raising one's hand in a meeting. It is welcoming the Lord into the heart, but again it is more than a formal word; it is letting the mind concentrate on Him like you concentrate on thinking about someone whom you deeply love.

Someone wisely said it is letting the mind follow Jesus in imagination as you read the stories of Jesus in the four Gospels. Every worldly spectacle or sound is laid aside; you give Him attention (you have to, to be courteous!). If you are learning a new language, the first lesson is very simple; be patient as you listen. Now read the Word and ponder. Be careful—there is no electronic transfer of "Christ" into your soul like moving a picture or a document from one computer to another. Watching a video or a movie is not "Christ dwelling in your hearts

through faith." God has said that the Holy Spirit speaks through His word; nothing can supplant the Bible.

- Sixth, you become "rooted and grounded in *agape*," like a giant oak that sends its roots down deep so when the storm rages, it stands.

- Seventh, what Paul is praying for is not that you will give more offerings, or pay more tithe, or even go on more "missionary" journeys. He is not praying for you to do more "works." He is praying that you "comprehend" something; see something; realize something. See what? The grand dimensions, wide as eternity, dimensions of the love known as *agape*.

- Eighth, when truly in a mature way you see and comprehend it, then you are ready for the second coming of Jesus for you are "filled with all the fullness of God." Theologians call this "eschatology," the teaching of last events. Ephesians belongs in the category of Daniel and Revelation but fills in the needed truth of justification by faith.

The leader of the group asked, "What IS faith? What is the definition of faith?" Different ones quoted Hebrews 11:1, "substance of things hoped for," "key to unlock heaven's storehouse," "breath of the soul," etc., etc., all telling what faith DOES, but no one defining what faith IS so we can learn how to obtain it.

"Faith is trusting God!" was the general idea, the same as the popular Evangelical leaders who believe and teach the doctrine of natural immortality. But anyone who believes that the human soul is naturally immortal is unable to

understand what happened on the cross of Christ—thus automatically blinded to what faith IS, certainly so in the light of “the everlasting gospel” of Revelation 14:6, 7. Driving a Model T is better than going by ox-cart; but why can’t we “grow up” out of our infantile understandings (Eph. 4:15)?

The inspired apostle comes close to a definition of faith in these words: “You, being rooted and grounded in love [agape], may be able to comprehend. . . . the width and length and depth and height—to know the love (*agape*) of Christ which passes knowledge.” A thoughtful and reverent-minded author in a magazine article of July 24, 1888 had the idea: “You may say that you believe in Jesus, when you have an appreciation of the cost of salvation. You may make this claim, when you feel that Jesus died for you on the cruel cross of Calvary, when you have an intelligent, understanding faith that His death makes it possible for you to cease from sin, and to perfect a righteous character through the grace of God, bestowed upon you as the purchase of Christ’s blood” (emphasis added).

It hurts to “grow up.” But never will any church succeed in lighting the earth with the glory of “the everlasting gospel” (Rev. 18:1) until we learn to “appreciate the cost of our salvation” purchased at the cross of Christ. That’s beyond contented spiritual infants.

Ephesians 3:20, 21: “Now to Him who is able to do exceeding 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 throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.”

Paul is not saying that the sinful world as we know it will never come to an end; the Bible is too clear in telling us that we are living in the last days, and “the night is far spent, the day is at hand” (Rom. 13:12). The “world without end” will be the “new earth in which righteousness dwells” (2 Peter 3:13).

God delights in telling us that He wants to do much more for us than we have the courage and faith to ask for. Still thinking of the cosmic struggle of the great controversy between Christ and Satan that has engrossed his mind, Paul seems willing to end his letter here with committing the church to God.

But he asks that God will empower his readers so that the church may help conclude the universe-wide struggle by bringing glory to God. The answer to his prayer is in your and my hands—in our willingness to cooperate with Him.