

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDUCTIVE STUDY OF PAUL'S LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS – CHAPTER THREE

In chapter one, Paul introduced the three key words of this letter, grace, mercy and peace. Then in the second chapter he explained them one by one. Mercy means that we have received the forgiveness for our spiritual deadness which we did not deserve, through the cross of Christ. Grace rebuilds a new life in the wreckage of the old one, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Peace is the end of the war with God and therefore the war with each other, and allows all of us to become part of God's one home on earth.

Having explained the difference and the similarity between salvation for Jew and Gentile and the effect of the gospel on bringing them together into the one church of Jesus Christ, Paul now wanted to say more about his ministry to the Gentiles. He had had a remarkable opportunity among Gentiles from Antioch to Rome and had played a key role in keeping the church together as one, rather than seeing two separate churches develop, as could so easily have happened. He was a prisoner of the Emperor in Rome, awaiting trial but he chose to see himself as a prisoner of Jesus Christ who truly controlled his destiny. It had been his determination as a Jewish Christian to reach out to Gentiles which had led to his arrest.(Acts 21:28; 22:21) God had broken through in Paul's understanding more than in any other first century Christian to reveal the secret of the grace of God in such a way that he would make superb sense to both Jew and Gentile.(3:1-3)

Paul described his message as a mystery. Like any good mystery story, the secret is finally out on almost the last page, yet the clues have been there for the discerning right from the beginning of the book. First the Old Testament prophets and now the New Testament apostles have been given pieces of the jigsaw. The Holy Spirit has been the storyteller. Good mysteries are in the end beautifully simple. Here it is! Gentiles are just as able as Jews to receive all that God has promised through Jesus Christ! But how could that be possible? Because God's grace in Christ is fabulously rich beyond measure or comprehension. It is so big that it is more than adequate for absolutely everyone, not because of our record, but despite it. Paul never ceased to be overwhelmed by the privilege he had been given, despite his record of fighting so viciously against God, to be the first to spell out the mystery to the Gentiles. Not only was he allowed to reveal the secret which had been kept since creation to the Gentiles, but he even became the first to spell it out to 'the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places'. Near the end of this book it becomes clear that the rulers Paul was talking about were not senior angels but the Devil and his forces.(6:12) God had even kept the secret of grace from Satan who otherwise would have tried to twist and counterfeit it.(3:4-10)

In the light of such a brilliant plan, why would we hesitate to expect the best from God when all that He asks of us is faith which says 'thank you' for the gift of Jesus Christ? The tougher the pressure, the greater the reason to trust Him, instead of worrying. This is the mystery in action. Paul knew from vast experience what it felt like to be humanly hopeless but eternally optimistic.(3:11-13)

In concluding this chapter, Paul returned to his prayer in chapter one when he longed for spiritual wisdom and insight for the Ephesians to understand God's plan, provision and power, and then set about being part of the answer to his prayer by spelling out the mystery of grace to his readers. His prayer now was that all they discovered of grace would actually be translated into action by letting Jesus Christ live in them, showing all that God is through them. He knew that when Christ is allowed to live in us by faith, we start a journey of exploration of the love of God. We seek the boundaries of His love beside, behind, before, below and above us and discover that there are no boundaries! The love of God is beyond knowledge. How much will we let Him love us and love others through us? 'Fill' is the word for sail. No sail can contain the entire wind but only be moved by that tiny part of the wind to which it is actually exposed.(3:14-19)

Discovering the meaning of grace, mercy and peace is exciting but our understanding is only a small beginning of what God will do. We can ask big things of God, but He will do bigger things. When His power in us is let loose the possibilities are limitless. Very clearly all the credit belongs to Him, in everyone, everywhere, everytime.(3:20,21)

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION ON CHAPTER FOUR

1. What was the first practical outworking of grace which Paul wanted his readers to discover? What essential attitude of heart is needed for this to happen? In what ways are we to be one?(4:1-6)
2. What had to happen to Jesus Christ for the grace of God to reach us? What light does this passage cast on the nature, source and variety of spiritual gifts? What is their purpose? What is the end result of spiritual gifts being used? How does this help with the process of maintaining oneness? What insight does this section give us into why division occurs among us as Christians? What picture of the Christian church did Paul use here to keep us reminded of why oneness in the church is vital?(4:7-16)
3. What was the second way in which Paul wanted grace to show in the Ephesians and us? What is the key change which is needed for this to happen? What explanation did he give for the way we lived before we met Jesus? What illustration did Paul use to teach about the exchange which needs to take place throughout our Christian lives? What will the new life look like?(4:17-24)
4. What six practical examples did Paul give of this new behaviour? Put each of them into a modern situation. What effect does each of these examples have on oneness between Christians? Who is hurt most by our old behaviour? How did Paul link change in these ways back to his explanation of grace in the previous three chapters?(4:25-32)