

# Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"



Volume 26, Number 31

August 1, 2010

## Always End with Grace

*The salutation by the hand of me Paul. Remember my bonds. Grace be with you. Amen.*

*Written from Rome to the Colossians by Tychicus and Onesimus. (Colossians 4:18)*

Paul always ends his letters with a prayer for God's grace to be with his readers. Every sermon needs to end with just such a prayerful thought to our hearers.

Often commentaries will make a significant point about Paul's closings in terms of the men who participated with him in the writing of his letters. By the form of these closings, it seems that Paul often used a stenographer. The point is wholly irrelevant. Whether Paul wrote the whole letter himself, or dictated the words to someone who wrote them, the words are still Paul's words, directed and preserved by the Holy Spirit. A far more central point to our study of Paul's letters appears in his consistent prayer for grace to abide with his readers that always punctuates his New Testament letters. By extension, as we read these letters, Paul prayed for us as well. Does that excite you?

Not only does Paul end this letter with the usual reference to grace, but in this case he also ends with a prayer request, "Remember my bonds." Prior to his final arrest that ended in his death, Paul suffered house arrest for an extended period of time. Some of his richest letters fall into this category of "prison epistles," letters that he wrote during this house arrest imprisonment. We might tend to think that Paul was an apostle, so he got up on the right side of the bed every day of his life after Damascus Road, and went to bed memorizing Scripture. However, the man's personal confession tells us that Paul was far more like us than we might think. "...without were fightings, within were fears," (2 Corinthians 7:5b) resonates with our own life struggles, does it not? We need to be more open about our need for the prayers of the Lord's people, and we thus need to speak the words, "Pray for me," to them more freely. A most assuring verses reminds us of this amazing truth, "I have prayed for thee..." (Luke 22:32) Knowing that Jesus prays for us is the ultimate assurance, but we should also seek, and take comfort in the prayers of God's children on our behalf when we face our own bonds.

The Colossians were struggling with, possibly entertaining, the errant ideas of early Gnosticism. Paul refutes this error in his letter. He fully expects that the Colossians will understand his letter, heed his warnings, and reject this encroaching error in their church. God empowers the gospel with significant power to transform people's lives, but He never forces them to transform, nor does He robotically "orchestrate" them to believe and obey the gospel. I

believe we should preach the gospel with the full conviction that it possesses the power to address any and every problem we face in life, and to shine God's light on the proper course for us to take. However, I do not believe God ever coerces His children to obey. Scripture simply does not so teach. If divine, coercive "orchestration" of our obedience were the teaching of Scripture, we would not find a single exhortation in Scripture. God would simply tell us what He intended to cause. Nor would we find the many warnings in Scripture to God's children who refuse to obey the gospel and the teachings of Scripture. Why warn someone whose every behavior has been divinely decreed and orchestrated for God's glory?

Paul thoroughly equips and informs the Colossians of the error of Gnosticism and of their godly course of life, fully expecting that they shall comply with his teachings. I believe every preacher who steps into the pulpit should likewise expect that his hearers shall respond to his preaching with similar obedience. Yet, both in Scripture and in life's experiences, we observe that God's children do not always believe the gospel and obey its exhortations. Often pastors must witness the shipwreck of people's lives who ignored Scripture and their teachings, thinking themselves immune from the ethical teachings of Scripture and God's righteous judgments against His children's disobedience. For example, though a divorce and broken family often involves contributing factors from both husband and wife, typically one or the other jumped ship and catalyzed the breakup of the family. Over my fifty plus years as a pastor, I have grieved often, not just at the loss of the spouse who abandoned the marriage and walked into open sin, but sadly often the loss to the church of the other spouse as well. Having gone through life-threatening illnesses with both my wife and myself, I can tell you from both Scripture and from personal experience, that, when life's crushing weight stamps down on your head, you will no doubt struggle with the urge to walk away and give up, but I can also tell you that those dark seasons, if you stand firm with God, also turn into some of the richest of blessings. God will always prove His faithfulness to His children who lean on Him during their deepest, darkest valleys, and their fiercest trials. I have observed occasions of threat to my career and to my family that made me shudder. In the end the Lord stood by me far closer than I ever stood by Him, but I could never find an exit door from either faith in Him or a conscious need for fellowship with His people.

One of the greatest challenges for a preacher is to warn members who turn away from God. We must do so with firmness and with clear affirmation that God's fearful warnings to His disobedient children are altogether real. We must also do so with the strong reminder to these folks that God's mercy and forgiveness are liberal. However, God's merciful forgiveness only appears in these settings when the erring child repents, and returns to God and to His ways. He does not forgive and bless us if we stubbornly continue in our sins. Scripture never suggests that our blessings come independent of our faithful obedience to God. New birth and our eternal redemption were not secured based on our faith and obedience, but every blessing we enjoy in this world requires that we obey God and love Him more than we love anyone or anything else.

When Paul wrote the words, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God," (Hebrews 10:31) he was not writing to lost, hell-bound sinners. He was writing to children of God who were so discouraged that they were contemplating walking away from their faith. Notice the words of Hebrews 10:30, "...The Lord shall judge his people." Paul has just referred to people being stoned in the Old Testament for certain public sins, warning the Hebrews that a "...much sorer punishment..." awaits children of God who refuse to obey their God. (Hebrews 10:29) Don't say that God never "punishes" His children. This verse clearly says He does. Any children of God who diminish the value of serving God do so with a calloused heart that has lost its sensitivity to the true teachings of Scripture, and they are certain to eventually face God, literally face-to-face, and see His strong disapproval and judgment against their sins. Yes, it is indeed a fearful thing to fall into His hands, not something that we should ever take lightly. How do we preach a balanced gospel to children of God, showing them both the profound depth of mercy and forgiveness that God grants to His repenting and returning sheep, but at the same time just as profoundly warning them of the severity of God's punishment, Scripture's words, not mine, against willful sin?

The story is told of a soldier in the U. S. Civil War who was standing guard duty one night on the perimeter of his camp. He saw a shadowy figure not too far from him. He had his gun raised and was ready to pull the trigger when he heard a voice from that figure singing a precious old hymn. The soldier lowered his gun. He didn't pull the trigger. Years later after the war, in some unusual way the two men met. The man who was approaching the enemy camp told of an overpowering urge to sing praises to His God at that precise moment, not knowing that he was even in danger. How incredibly God watches over us and protects us when we firmly stand beside Him through life's trials. Isn't that the theme of the eleventh chapter of Hebrews? Isn't that the promise of Scripture to God's children?

Those of us who preach need to ever keep prominent in our minds that even the most stern of

gospel rebukes should be punctuated with our personal prayer for God's healing, enriching, protecting grace to be with our hearers. We should examine our hearts everytime we find it necessary to preach the rebukes of the gospel. Do we believe, even as we speak the words, that God's power can accompany those words so as to lead the erring child to repentance and healing? Do we believe that God continues to intervene and to nudge, though not coerce, His children to obedience? We should never preach a sermon of rebuke until we have visited this question and reinforced our hearts and minds regarding God's power to convict, to guide His erring children to repentance, and to heal the disease of sin in our lives. Only then can we preach a gospel of hope and encouragement. I have no problem with the Bible's teachings on the question of what our politically correct culture has chosen to describe as an "alternate lifestyle." However, I also believe with full conviction that God is able to empower and to lead those who have embraced this course into repentance and healing. Thus when I preach God's judgement against the sin, I must also preach His power and healing to those who are willing to turn from that conduct and follow Him? Paul makes this precise point in 1 Corinthians 6:11, "...and such were some of you..." Paul didn't follow this observation with a depressing, "You can't help your lifestyle, so just live with it and pray for God to understand." He rather followed this point with three powerful conclusions, "...but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God." We need to consistently preach against the crippling sin of abortion, but we should never preach such a sermon that does not include strong assurance to the sinner of God's healing, forgiving grace to His repenting children. Praise God! There is not a sin that has invaded and crippled your life that God will not forgive when you turn from the politically correct doublespeak of human perspective, and confess the sin to Him, praying for Him to lead and empower you to repent and turn to Him.

*Let the wicked forsake his way, And the unrighteous man his thoughts: And let him return unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; And to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.*  
(Isaiah 55:7)

Underline and imbed the last clause of this verse in your minds, "...for he will abundantly pardon." God's forgiveness of His repenting children is not sparse and measured. It is rather lavish, abundant. Perhaps you have no personal problem with the two sins mentioned above, but you have your own "besetting sin," one that has an insidious way of pushing past your defenses and troubling you. Take that sin to God and pray for repentance with full assurance of His forgiveness. That point is Isaiah's way of telling his readers what it means to say, "Grace be with you."

Little Zion Primitive Baptist Church  
16434 Woodruff  
Bellflower, California

Worship service each Sunday  
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.  
Pastor