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A Bible Study

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Building Strong Believers

HOW NOT TO BE A SPIRITUAL WHIMP!

BY RICHARD JORDAN

Paul's purpose in penning his treatise to the Romans is stated quite clearly at the outset:

"For I long to see you, that I may impart unto you some spiritual gift, TO THE END YE MAY BE ESTABLISHED;

"That is, that I may be comforted together with you by THE MUTUAL FAITH both of you and me" (Rom.1:11, 12).

The book of Romans is *establishment truth*, written to ground its readers in "*the mutual faith*." This, of course, is not merely a reference to a desire to get them saved for the epistle is addressed to those who already were saints (v.7). Rather Paul's desire was that they be firmly fixed and settled in the same understanding of the grace of God to us in Christ which he had.

Paul envisioned *strong* believers. Saints who would not be "tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine." Saints who would not succumb to "the slight of men and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive." Saints who could *endure hardness*. Saints who were *spiritually tough and resilient*. He knew this did not "just happen," but that it was the result of being established in sound doctrine.

After masterfully setting forth "the faith" he desired the saints to mutually share with him, he concludes with a further statement concerning establishment truth:

"Now to 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:

"To God only wise, be glory through Jesus Christ for ever. Amen" (Rom. 16:25-27).

This concluding benediction has often been overlooked both as to its purpose and content. It is, in fact, a concise statement of Paul's *design* for the establishment of believers in "the faith."

If the Body of Christ is to be edified by "perfected saints" doing "the work of the ministry," as Eph. 4:12 suggests, it is vitally important that we be--and that our ministries produce--perfected saints. How better to do this than to allow the one who gave us this charge to also instruct us as to how to produce perfected, established and matured saints for the work! Hence Paul's explanation of how believers are established is basic to doing the work of ministry his way.

Look again at these verses. It is God Himself who alone has the capacity to establish--to stabilize and make strong--the believer. And how does He do so? Paul clearly sets forth a three-fold process:

"Now to Him that is of power to stablish you ACCORDING TO

MY GOSPEL, And

(We are aware some suggest that "and" should be translated as "even," but this is wholly without merit. While it is true that the Greek kai can have the sensitive use of "even" this is not the normal usage and there is not the slightest reason to abandon the normal junctive use in this passage. Hence we are not aware of any modern translation that does so--to say nothing of the KJV)

THE PREACHING OF JESUS CHRIST

ACCORDING TO THE REVELATION OF THE MYSTERY... and

(This "and" is not, *kai* but *dia te*, lit., "through also.")

THE SCRIPTURES OF THE PROPHETS...."

(That this is both a legitimate and proper translation is evidenced by any first year Greek grammar book. Paul wrote€ as an apostle, not as a prophet and the attempt to make this a reference to Paul's epistles by translating it "prophetic scriptures" is little more than meaningless. After all, how much of Paul's writings are really "prophetic" in nature?)

The three-fold pattern is clearly defined:

1. *My Gospel*: This is the *foundation* of God's purpose. Knowing the details of the gospel of grace committed to Paul gives an orientation to God's *grace* which equips us to live on planet earth for His glory.

2. *The preaching of Jesus Christ according to the revelation of the mystery*: This is the *fullness* of God's purpose. Understanding God's previously *unrevealed* intend to form a new agency, the Body of Christ, gives us an orientation to God's *goal* which grounds us in the ultimate plan of God.

3. *The Scriptures of the prophets*; This is the future of God's purpose. While the first two comprise the scope of the special message committed to Paul, the "scriptures of the prophets" encompass all of Scripture--in light, of course, of Paul's revelation. Understanding how the programs of prophecy and mystery relate into one great overriding purpose provides an orientation to God's *glory* as we see these programs come to fruition.

This a *progressive* pattern designed to set forth "*the form of sound words*" committed to our trust (I Tim. 1:13). And it is this *form*--this pattern of divine thinking--which produces the "*godly edifying*" that results in spiritual maturity. Let's look at it briefly.

"MYGOSPEL"

This is a reference to the special message committed to his trust by the risen Christ. Notice the two basic issues which lay the foundation for stability:

"MY gospel" - -Dispensational Distinctions. Failure to recognize the distinctive nature of Paul's apostleship and message brings endless confusion as to where we stand in the program of God. Such confusion is foolish, however, for Paul plainly declares:

"For I SPEAK TO YOU GENTILES, INASMUCH AS I AM THE APOSTLE OF THE GENTILES, I magnify mine office" (Rom. 11:13).

Paul is our Apostle--in contrast with Peter and the Twelve who were Israel's apostles (Matt.19:28, Gal. 2:8). Thus *Poul's* gospel is our gospel—in contrast to that proclaimed by Peter and the Twelve before him (Gal. 1:11, 12; 2:6-9). This is all the more important when we remember Paul's solemn pronouncement that one day soon "God shall judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ *according to my gospel*" (Rom. 2:16).

"My GOSPEL"--Doctrinal Orientation. It is not enough to simply know *who* our Apostle is--we must know *what he has said* to us. We must be oriented to the grace of God as revealed through Paul. It has too often been assumed that an understanding of the distinctive ministry of Paul made one a "grace believer." This simply is not the case: We must go on to an understanding of the grace and love of God to us in Christ if we are to be genuine grace believers.

That Paul's gospel deals with salvation in Christ through His work on the cross is clear from I Cor. 15: 1-4. To Paul was delivered the capstone of divine revelation concerning the cross-work of Christ. In Romans Paul lays *four foundation principles* of grace:

Justification by grace (Rom. 1-5): The *finality of the cross* is set forth here as nowhere else in Scripture. The justice of God is demonstrated to be free to give eternal life to anyone having perfect righteousness (1:18-3:20). Since we lack this righteousness, God Himself has thoroughly dealt with our sins and provided the needed righteousness through the cross of Christ. He is thus free to give both righteousness and eternal life to everyone who "believes in Jesus" (3: 21-4: 25). This new "*grace wherein we stand*" provides complete security, both during present tribulations as well as into eternity future(5:1-11).

Living under grace (5: 12-8:39): The *reality of the resurrection life* through our total identification with Christ is next set before us. Because we are no longer "in Adam"

but now are "*in Christ*" (5:12-21) we are to live consistent with our *position in Christ* (6), the current *program of grace* (7), and the power of the *Holy Spirit* (8).

These chapters provide the largely untapped keys for the believer's life in time: Rom. 6 identifies the *step* that deals with the principle of sin and provides the answer to its *power*. Rom. 7 denotes the *struggle* with the *principle of the law* and shows the answer to its *bondage*. Rom. 8 sets forth the *walk* based on the principle of "*life in Christ Jesus*" as motivated by the Spirit of life.

Dispensation of Grace (9-11): The *fall and future of Israel* are examined so that no one will think Israel's program is still in effect today or that it has been done away with permanently. The present interruption of prophecy and its future resumption are clearly explained.

Serving by Grace (12-16): The *fruits of our Sonship* status in Christ are practically demonstrated. Practical instructions in grace-age-living give the believer a model for decision making by the "renewed mind" grace produces.

Thus Romans gives the *foundation* for the grace-life. It gives members of the Body of Christ an understanding of how we have been equipped and motivated to live on a daily basis in the details of our lives by God's grace and for His glory.

THE MYSTERY PROGRAM

The next step in the edification process is built upon the previous. Once we understand *who* we are in Christ and how that new identity has equipped us with amazing divine assets, we are ready to move on to the advanced issues of just *why* God is forming the Body of Christ. This is the special focus of "*the preaching of Jesus Christ according to the revelation of the mystery.*"

This *unprophesied* program is, of course, in stark contrast with the long prophesied program preached prior to Paul. A simple comparison of Acts 3:21 with Rom. 16:25 sets this forth conclusively: In Acts 3:21 Peter is preaching that "which God hath *spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began.*" The message of Rom. 16:25, on the other hand, "*was kept secret since the world began.*" If words mean anything, these are two *different* messages.

Prior to the ministry of the Apostle Paul, Jesus Christ was presented as the prophet, priest and king of the nation Israel (Deut. 18:15, Psa. 110:4, Jer.23:5, 6)--all in accord with what God "spake by the mouth of His holy prophets, which have been since the world began" (Luke1:70, Acts 3:21). When we come to the ministry of the Apostle Paul, however, Christ is presented in a *new way*--as the head of the Body of Christ. This unprophesied purpose of God is completely different from the way Israel and the prophets had viewed Christ.

This unprophesied program was first revealed to and through the Apostle Paul. He declares:

"For this cause I Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles,

"If ye have head of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given me to you-ward:

"How that BY REVELATION HE MADE KNOW UNTO ME THE MYSTERY; (as I wrote afore in few words...)

..WHICH IN OTHER AGES WAS NOT MADE KNOW unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit:

"That the Gentiles should be fellowheirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel" (Eph. 3:1-6).

It is vital that believers get the "big picture." Notice that Paul assumes the Ephesians had already grasp "*the gospel*"--he assumes their prior grounding in Romans-truth, just as Romans assumes the believer will proceed on to the further truths set forth in Ephesians. These are not two different messages but rather two aspects of *one* message: foundational truth and advanced truth built on that foundation.

After being grounded in our equipping in Christ to function as member of the Body of Christ on planet earth (Roman's foundational truth), Paul now moves on to explain the place for this new agency in the plan of God. This is the special purpose of Ephesians. There we learn of our:

Calling (1-3): The *wealth* associated with our calling as members of the body of Christ is detailed so that we might "*abound in wisdom and, prudence.*" "*The hope of*

His calling--what He has called the Body of Christ to accomplish; *"the glory of inheritance in the saints"*--how Christ will take possession of a redeemed universe through the saints; *"the greatness of His power us-ward"*- sharing in Christ's authority as head of all things; these are the advanced truths which set forth *goal* of God's present purpose.

Conduct (4:1-6:9): The worthy *walk* to be manifest in our *conduct* as members of the Body of Christ is dealt with in clear and practical terms.

Conflict (6:10-6:24): The *warfare* brought about because of our *conflict* with the Satanic policy of evil designed to thwart God's purpose for the Body of Christ is explained and the believer's armor is identified.

These advanced truths erect a superstructure of divine edification in the believer's soul and provide a spiritual edifice of sound doctrine which gives a sense of our place in the overall purpose of God. With this "big picture" in hand, we are able to move on to the final step in Paul's pattern for our perfection:

THE SCRIPTURES OF THE PROPHETS

As the first step orients us to the *grace* of God and the second to the *goal* of forming the Body of Christ, this final crowning step in the edification process orients us to the *glory* of God to be manifest in the ages to come.

Just as the great doctrinal books of Romans and Ephesians match the first two, the letters to the Thessalonians fit the third.

I Thess. details the events surrounding the closing of the dispensation of grace and the exodus of the Body of Christ from planet earth. The Rapture is mentioned at the closing of each chapter and we learn details concerning its pre-tribulation scheduling (1:10), the judgment seat of Christ to follow our meeting the Lord (2 : 19, 20), our subsequent presentation to the Father by Christ (3:13), the actual details surrounding our catching, up to meet the Lord in the air (4:13-18) as well as the faithfulness of God to see these events to completion (5:23,24).

In like manner II Thess. focuses on the revelation of Christ at His prophesied "second coming" and its distinction from His unprophesied coming. Again, this prophesied coming is detailed in two of the three chapters with one of the Bibles completest descriptions of the rise and career of the Anti-Christ given in 2:3-12. II Thess. is clear that the only thing holding back these prophesied events is God's present purpose--a purpose which has temporarily *interrupted* the prophetic program.

DIVINE DESIGN

This edification process establishes the believer in the faith and provides the capacity for faithful service for Christ as we walk by faith. This divine design can be seen in the way Paul's epistles has been preserved and collated in God's Word:

Romans not only stands first in the order of Paul's epistles, it is also the great book of *foundational* doctrine about the *cross*. The next great doctrinal epistle is *Ephesians*, which progresses on to the advanced mystery truths concerning the *church*, the Body of Christ. The *Thessalonian* letters comprise the final great doctrinal books and focus on Christ's *coming* both in mystery and prophecy. By the way, the *Pastoral Epistles* (I&II Tim., Tit., Phile) detail the functioning of the local *congregation* as the manifestation of the Body of Christ. The epistles lay themselves out thusly:

Romans:

Faith looking back to the Cross.

Ephesians:

Love looking around at the Church.

Thessalonians:

Hope looking for ward to Christ's Coming.

Pastorals:

Fellowship working in the Congregation.

About this edification process Paul wrote Timothy:

“As I besought thee to abide still at Ephesus, when I went into Macedonia, that thou mightest charge some that they teach no other doctrine.

"Neither give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which minister questions, rather than GODLY EDIFYING WHICH IS IN FAITH: so do.

"Now the end of the commandment is charity out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience and of faith unfeigned" (I Tim. 1:3-5).

If we are to be--and produce--strong believers,able to be good soldiers instead of hopelessly confused and impotent spiritual whimps, we must obey this commandment.
