

God's Plan For You

Ephesians 3:1-7

1 For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles—
2 assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was
given to me for you, 3 how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as
I have written briefly. 4 When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the
mystery of Christ, 5 which was not made known to the sons of men in other
generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the
Spirit. 6 This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same
body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. 7 Of this
gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was
given me by the working of his power. (Ephesians 3:1-7)

May we begin our message today by stating some obvious thoughts that come to mind
as we read these words . . . first, that all men and women are born onto this earth in
much the same way, each generally with the same faculties and abilities! And
somehow, with what we bring with us and then with what we are able to learn, we grow
and become relatively productive adults, finding our way in a world that has many
directions and varied opportunities available to us.

And from first observation, and given no further information it would appear that the
directions we take in our life are a series of random choices and happenstance. As we
grow from childhood, we seem to be good at this or that and so we follow this or that
pathway. We find work in this or that city and we go there.

Along the way, we meet someone that seems compatible with us and we marry them.
And from our marriage we have children. And then the cycle starts all over again.

But the question that is constantly being put before us in these words of scripture is, "Is
life really an assortment of random chances and opportunities, or is there a greater
mind and hand that is continually at work to guide and direct the many activities and
directions of our lives.

In Jeremiah 29:11, God spoke these words concerning this question, He said . . .

11 For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and
not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. 12 Then you will call upon me and
come and pray to me, and I will hear you. 13 You will seek me and find me, when
you seek me with all your heart. (Jeremiah 29:11-13)

And God has also said to us in Acts 17: that

26 He (God) made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, 27 that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; 28 for in Him we live and move and (have our being) exist. (Acts 17:26-28)

As we read these words and as we carefully consider all the many events that have taken place, both within the pages of this bible and within the pages of our own lives, we can easily see that life and all of the events within it are not really random and unplanned.

Here in the words that I have just read to us, God is declaring that He knows us, and knows us very well. In Psalm 139, He tells us that He actually has always known us, even before we were born. Listen to the words of the Psalmist as he declares of God,

13 . . . you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. 14 I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. 15 My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. 16 Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them. (Psalm 139:13-16)

Are these words not so very, very clear? God not only sees our whole existence, He is intimately involved in everything that takes place within it, beginning even from the first moments of our existence.

Unfortunately, though we are able to easily read these words and can intellectually comprehend them, there is often still a wide gap in our ability to accept them. And that is true even for those of us who claim to really believe in the God who has written them. We seem to continually waver, one moment accepting, the next moment doubting.

In our best moments we are happily walking hand in hand with God, but then the next moment, we are like a rebellious child flailing against our father's hand, trying to get loose to go and play with the next toy or on another plaything.

Our concerns and desires seem most often to be in reaching for the "enjoyment of the moment" and not about the "long-term" effects and consequences of what we are doing.

Thankfully, as any good father would do, God our Father is patient with us and resists letting us just go running willy-nilly into every situation that strikes our fancy. He lovingly hangs onto our hand and gently guides us towards the plans He has for us.

However, with that being said, sometimes when we remain insistent on having our own way God agrees to let us wander from His grasp. And much like as with Adam and Eve, those moments of freedom bring about severe, destructive, long-term consequences.

And that unfortunate scene plays out continually, every moment of the day all over the world.

Thankfully though, God does not always acquiesce to our rebellious and childish demands. He wades on through our flailing and squirming to be set free and through what is often very painful circumstances for us, He drags us “kicking and screaming” along the path of His special plan for us.

And here in today’s passage, the Apostle Paul is referring back to that exact kind of handling and guidance in his own life. In verse 3 we read,

3 how that by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I have briefly written already), (Ephesians 3:3)

These words, “by revelation He made known to me the mystery” are very significant words. God does not often lay His complete plan out before us. He most often keeps much of His plan cloaked in mystery and only reveals the part that we need to know for the moment.

With Paul, the manner of God’s revelation had been dramatic and breathtaking. Paul who had been commissioned by the Jewish leadership to seek out and to imprison anyone who would convert to Christ was one day suddenly slammed to the ground and made to listen to God’s plan.

Listen to this account from Acts 26 as Paul explains his conversion experience to King Agrippa. He said . . .

12 "While thus occupied, as I journeyed to Damascus with authority and commission from the chief priests, 13 at midday, O king, along the road I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and those who journeyed with me. 14 And when we all had fallen to the ground, I heard a voice speaking to me and saying in the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.'

15 So I said, 'Who are You, Lord?' And He said, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. 16 But rise and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to make you a minister and a witness both of the things which you have seen and of the things which I will yet reveal to you. 17 I will deliver you from the Jewish people, as well as from the Gentiles, to whom I now send you, 18 to open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me.' (Acts 26:12-18)

And then Jesus said,

6 rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." (Acts 9:6)

Again, God does not often lay out this much of His plan before us. Most often, we simply receive moment by moment guidance. But this was a very special plan, a plan that would reach to the ends of the earth and even include you and me, because we are the Gentiles Jesus spoke about in these words.

Here, God clearly reached His hand into a man's life and said to him, Paul, you are going to do exactly as I say and don't give me any "back-talk". And just so as to make my point clear, I will leave you blind and helpless for a while.

And then, as if to accentuate the specific nature of His plan, God reached on into another man's life, Ananias, and gave him the privilege of being part of the plan. Listen, these words from

10 Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." 11 And the Lord said to him, "Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying, 12 and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight."

13 But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. 14 And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name." 15 But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. 16 For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." (Acts 9:10-16)

Folks, are you listening carefully to these words? This is God reaching into a man's life and guiding and directing his every move.

Many questions should come to our minds as we read these words. “Does God do this all of the time in each of our lives? Is He doing this right now in my life? In recent decisions that I thought that I was making, was it me who made them or was it really God who was directing them?”

Or am I still that rebellious child who is continuing to flail and squirm against the hand of God, trying my best to get free to go and do my own thing, to have my own way, to not be held back by His tight-grasping hand.

But why . . . why should I be struggling against Him. If He has a loving plan and means only good for me, why am I fighting against Him? Those words again from Jeremiah 29,

11 For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. (Jeremiah 29:11)

God truly is a loving Father who wants only the best for us. But like foolish sheep, we seem to have an inherent nature to stray away from the safety and security of the flock.

Expressed in today’s language, we seem to have a flawed gene within our DNA that causes us to want to go astray. And I do believe that that is so.

That flawed gene in our DNA is what these scriptures call our “sin nature”, passed along to us through all the many generations all the way back beginning with Adam and Eve.

But thankfully, the truth of these words given to us here in the Book of Jeremiah is really real. God really does have a precious and loving plan for our lives.

Has He planned out every person’s life? I confess that I don’t really know the answer to all those kinds of questions. But based on the fact that you are here today and are listening to this message, I would declare to you that you and I are a part of His plan. And we ought to get silent and begin to listen to His words.

Here in this passage, God laid out an exact path that He would take the Apostle Paul along. He would start by getting Paul’s attention so that Paul would listen. Then He would hold Paul captive in blindness until Paul was fully receptive to His words.

Recall those words in verses 12 and 13 of Jeremiah 29,

Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. 13 You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. (Jeremiah 29:12-13)

God really got Paul's full attention and Paul was ready to listen. And that is when God began to reveal the next part of His plan, a plan that would lead Paul far and wide and to the saving of souls all over the earth.

And folks, please note carefully that the plan that God had was not for the exclusive benefit and pleasure of the Apostle Paul, a plan in which Paul would get saved and then live a happy, trouble-free life ever after.

Yes, he would have eternal life and is right now somewhere in the heavenlies in a very, very wonderful position of honor near to the throne of God. But while he remained here on the earth, Paul would suffer and he would struggle to accomplish blessings for everyone else except himself.

May I emphasize these words for a moment? We live in a corrupt culture with corrupt ideals. Individually and culturally we are most often self-centered, even to the point of narcissism. We look for and hunger after ways to improve our own circumstance, most often at the expense of everyone else, even those that we would claim to love.

But that is not God's plan for us. His plan emulates the plan of Christ, a plan where other people benefited at His expense.

May we stop and ask ourselves, "are we self-centered, even perhaps with at least a little bit of narcissism within us?" Is our first thought most always about our self and our plans? Do we want what we want? Are we, as the Apostle Paul was said to be here, "kicking against the goad"?

An ox goad was a stick with a pointed piece of iron on its tip used to prod an ox when plowing. And Jesus was saying of the Apostle Paul that He was "kicking" against that sharp and painful point, and asking him why he kept doing it.

May I ask you, are you lately finding yourself struggling against one matter or another in your life?

While God might not be knocking you to the ground with a blinding light, He may be using some circumstances in your life for the same purpose, that of getting your attention and telling you that He wants you to go another direction, a direction that is not centered upon your own ideas and desires, but centered upon a plan that He has for you, one that will benefit and bless other people?

That is what God did with Paul and that is what God wants to do with you.

My counsel to you and to me is to do as the Apostle Paul did. He gave up his own self-centered plans and agreed to follow God and His plan. And He was eternally blessed for doing it.

May I ask . . . Are you ready to listen? If you are not, please be warned, God is patient. He will simply keep the pressure of circumstance flowing against your rebellion until you stop “kicking against the goad”, give in and surrender to His plan.

Next week, I hope to continue with these thoughts and say to us that when God calls us into His plan, He also generously equips us to carry His plan forward. And as the words of verse 8 tell us, with His quipping comes a very, very special kind of power.

But for now, may we close with these words from Jeremiah 19,

11 For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. 12 Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. 13 You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. (Jeremiah 29:11-13)