

Grace to You • Hebrews 13:23-25

As a college freshman I worked for a wholesale carpet and drapery dealer located across the street from the Merchandise Mart in Chicago. The business served interior decorators throughout the Metropolitan Chicago area. The manager and my boss was a man named Mr. Bruner. Mr. Bruner was already past retirement age when I started work there, so he was an older man, a nice guy, although at times a little gruff. Sometimes I would be in the office area while he dictated letters to his secretary. A typical letter went something like this:

This is to, uh, Miss Decorator, don't remember her first name, look it up. Dear Miss Decorator, Your special order #3687 for a beige and pink wool shag carpet has been delayed in the Georgia mill. Delivery will take another 12-16 weeks. Etcetera, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera.

Later I would watch the secretary type Mr. Bruner's letters. She would take 8 ½ x 11 stationery and fill it up when all he had dictated was a salutation and a couple of sentences. The rest was all the "etceteras" that she apparently made up to fill in the space. I always had the impression that those final cordialities were not very important.

Maybe that's the way you read the last few sentences of Hebrews 13. It may seem that everything important has already been said and that the final three verses of Hebrews 13 are merely "etcetera, etcetera, etcetera." But, let's take a closer look at the "etceteras" in Hebrews 13:23-25 before we conclude this series and leave Hebrews 13. These verses read:

I want you to know that our brother Timothy has been released. If he arrives soon, I will come with him to see you.

Greet all your leaders and all God's people. Those from Italy send you their greetings.

Grace be with you all.

In these closing verses are many parallels to the realities of life. For example, these verses deal with some difficulties. Verse 23 says that "*Timo-*

thy has been released," assuming that he has been released from jail. Just that little tidbit of information tells us a great deal about some of the difficulties Christians in the first century had to face. If he was like other Christians of the first century Timothy was in jail because of his Christian faith. It was a time when the problems and the persecutions were beginning to mount. Christians then and even more so in the second and third centuries were accused of all kinds of atrocities. Often Christians were accused of being atheists because every other religion had a god you could see, but the Christians had no visible god so they must be atheists and that was against the law. They were accused of cannibalism because it was said that they regularly met together in secret places and would eat the flesh and drink the blood of some Jewish man who came from Palestine. They were said to be homosexuals because they all loved one another. And they were labeled as traitors because the only person who was ever to be called "lord" was Lord Caesar, yet these Christians went around preaching that they had a Lord who was greater than Caesar himself.

It was not easy to be a Christian . . . and it got worse. Christians were crucified, dipped in oil and set aflame or were fed to wild animals. Prison could not have been easy. Food often wasn't provided unless someone from the outside

would bring in the food. Clothing was the prisoner's responsibility. Light was often dim, if at all present. Jails were often damp, dreary dungeons. Disease was rampant.

First century Christians had greater problems than most of us, yet they seemingly had less complaint. They saw problems and difficulties as opportunities to faithfully serve God. Even if they gave their lives for Jesus Christ, they considered that to be an honor. When problems and difficulties mounted up, they saw them as opportunities for faithfulness and service.

Imagine a conversation between us and them. Each would have opportunity to list our blessings

God gives to us all the gifts we need for the realities we face in life.

and difficulties. We would list hassles at work, cars that won't start, house payments, an ailment or two, a crowded church hallway or classroom, shortage of parking and a busy schedule. They would list slavery, imprisonment, persecution and threat of death.

But the comparison doesn't carry much weight because we know that whatever our problems, whenever we live, we all understand that one of the realities of life is difficulties!

A second etcetera at the end of Hebrews 13 is personalities. Sometimes we modern Bible readers become a little impatient with the lists of names in the Bible because they mean nothing to us. However, every time I read one of those lists I am freshly reminded that God is concerned about our name, about us individually. While New Testament epistles end with a lengthy list of names, Hebrews ends only with the "I" of the unnamed author, Timothy, leaders and all of God's people.

With each person mentioned comes a different personality. Timothy is probably the same Timothy after whom two New Testament books are named, the companion of Paul, the son of a Jewish mother and Greek father, a missionary apprentice, pastor of the Ephesian church.

The author is unknown (to us). Some have conjectured that it was Apollos who was a brilliant and articulate member of the apostolic circle.

The leaders here in this chapter were . . . leaders. We don't know their names but we know from the earlier comments in Hebrews 13 that they apparently had the typical problems of leadership. In Hebrews 13 we are instructed several times to submit to them, to greet them and to remember them, so it seems there was a rub between the leadership of the Hebrew church and the follower-ship of that church. Leadership is a place of both responsibility and vulnerability in every generation. It is impossible to meet all the expectations, yet no matter what leaders do the expectations get higher.

"All God's people" were the rank-and-file of Christians, men and women like you and me who had accepted Jesus Christ as Savior and were now part of the local church. I imagine they were a typical church, probably a lot like us. Some were more committed, some were less committed; some were older, some younger; some were men, some were women; some easy to get along with, some difficult.

All people, all personalities, all mixed together . . . and with them they bring together all that any mix of personalities brings. Whenever there is such a mix of personalities there are inevitable personality conflicts, personality attractions and everything else we experience in our church, our homes and our worlds.

These final verses of Hebrews have their fair share of uncertainties. We are uncertain who even wrote the book of Hebrews. As a result there have been critics through the centuries who wondered if these 13 chapters should even be included in the Bible.

Hebrew 13:23 all turns on an "if": *"I want you to know that our brother Timothy has been released. If he arrives soon, I will come with him to see you."* We don't know whether he ever came again. Even the author of the New Testament book was uncertain as to whether his colleague would do what was anticipated. We can identify with that because our lives are loaded with uncertainties. We all like to have all the data before we ever make a decision, but all the data is never available. We all like to know exactly the way everything is supposed to be, but our lives are often shades of gray rather than black-and-white. We must continually punctuate our conversations with "if" because we can never guarantee that other people will do what we want and expect of them. We understand that uncertainties are one of the realities of life!

Add to all of this "trivialities." Some of the things in these final verses are really quite trivial. They don't make a great deal of difference one way the other. Several turn on the finest points of biblical scholarship and Greek grammar. For example, the verb in verse 23—"to know"—may be either an indicative or an imperative. If it's an indicative it means that the readers already knew Timothy was released and if it's an imperative the author was telling them for the first time.

"Greet" probably meant kiss. (They did that in those days!) So it meant "give those guys a kiss for me."

To many of us these things honestly don't matter. Few, if any, of us will live tomorrow differently over whether the Greek in Hebrews 13:23 is imperative or indicative, but it is a reminder that our lives are loaded with trivialities.

The truth is that much of life can be consumed with trivia. I can spend hours every day scraping the windshield, brushing my teeth, shaving my face, getting gas and reading junk mail. In fact, life can be so full of trivialities that after awhile it becomes difficult to distinguish one year from another. Unfortunately, we can waste much of life living among the trivialities. So, we certainly understand that trivialities are one of the realities of life.

And, so are the ambiguities. An ambiguity is something that can be understood in two or more possible ways. *“Timothy has been released”* is ambiguous in Greek. It can mean that he was just set free from prison or it can mean that he just set out on a trip.

“Those from Italy” is also ambiguous. It can mean that the writer is outside of Italy sending greetings from all the Italians in the church or it can mean that the writer is in Italy sending greetings from all the Italians in Italy. This is important to Bible students because it could give a hint as to where this epistle was written and where it was received.

Ambiguity is, indeed, another of the realities of life. There are many things that can be taken two different ways. Johnny Carson once told someone, “You look great. I hardly recognized you!” That can be taken as a compliment or an insult. Or, on a pastoral staff reference to one of our Wooddale calling committees the reference said, “I can’t say too many good things about this man.” Either way!

But, there are far more serious ambiguities in life. Losing a job can be a disaster or an opportunity. Getting a promotion may mean more money but it can also mean moving. Many words are spoken to us that can be interpreted in opposite ways with significant consequences. We understand that ambiguities are one of the realities of life.

“Okay,” you say, “so these final verses of Hebrews 13 have difficulties, personalities, uncertainties, trivialities and ambiguities. Why are you telling me all of this?”

Why? Because that’s the way our lives are! That is reality. The reality is that there will always be difficulties. We all have this illusive dream that around some magical corner life will finally be easy and simple, but it never will be! When today’s difficulties are gone new ones are guaranteed for tomorrow. When tomorrow’s personality conflicts are over other people will come along to fill the void. When present uncertainties no longer plague us, new ones will come along. When the trivialities of this place are gone, we will have moved to another place with new trivialities. And ambiguities! They, too, will continue.

What, then, is the answer? How do we cope and even overcome amidst the realities of everyday life? How do we succeed in life? The answer is in Hebrew 13:25: *“Grace be with you all.”* In the realities of life we have the resources of God, and that is God’s grace.

Grace is one of the most frequent and most significant words in the New Testament. Grace and gift mean the same thing. The Greek word for gift is “charis” from which we get our word charisma or charismatic. It means gift or gifted. “Grace” is the gift of God to us. It is God’s goodness. It is God’s good. God gives to us all the gifts that we need for the realities we face in life.

Grace is the basis for our salvation. Someone has wisely said that grace is God’s riches at Christ’s expense. We are sinners. We don’t deserve salvation. There is no way we could ever deserve salvation. Only by God’s grace—his gift; his goodness—are we offered forgiveness of sin and salvation through Jesus Christ.

But, like any gift, it must be received to be effective. The most important thing any of us can do to cope with the difficulties, personalities, un-

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Let me suggest what I often suggest: Do it now! Accept the gift of salvation right this minute. Tell God.

But grace is not just for salvation. God's gifts are for all the realities and situations of life. He gives grace to cope. He gives grace to face difficulties. He gives grace to live with all kinds of personalities. He gives grace for the uncertainties of life. He gives grace for the little trivialities and grace for the many ambiguities we face on a daily basis.

God is the God of grace. He is anxious and ready to give. But are we anxious and ready to receive? Too often we reject God's grace and depend on our own inadequate resources until the realities of life do us in.

What is your resource for life's realities? Is it God and his grace?

"Grace be with you all." If God's grace was for all of them then God's grace must be for all of us!!! I assume that they were much as we are. Some were new Christians and some were veteran Christians. Some were spiritual saints while others were far from God. Some were involved in the church and some were on the far fringe. Some were facing big problems, others faced little problems. It didn't make any difference who they were or what they were. God's grace was for them all. And so God's grace is for us all. It doesn't matter who we are or what we are, God is gracious and generous—and his grace is for all of us!

Oh, how I need to hear that! I need to hear that because I need God's grace. I know I don't deserve his gift. I know that I'm not worthy. I know I often reject it. But, God's grace is for me. And God's grace is for you.

This is a sermon. Tomorrow it is life—difficulties, personalities, uncertainties, trivialities and ambiguities—real life. For the realities of life, *"Grace be with you all."* Amen!

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