

September 17, 2023

GRACIOUS SUFFERING FOR A GLORIOUS MINISTRY

Ephesians 3:1-13

*(5 of 16 in a series through Ephesians)*

It's very rare that you'll hear a story where someone notes that he was certain something was the Lord's will only for that thing to end badly. For example, you're probably not going to hear a guy tell you a story about praying before he asked a girl out on a date, feeling confident this would be honoring to the Lord, and then saying, "When she soundly rejected me and made clear that she would prefer almost any other man on the planet, that's when I knew this indeed had been of the Lord." We struggle to accept the category of the Lord leading us to something that ends up going poorly, results in our suffering, or simply goes in an entirely different direction that we anticipated.

But we aren't the first to struggle with this. As Paul wrote to the Ephesians, he wrote from prison. We heard the account read earlier in the service. He'd been preaching in the Temple, and suddenly the crowd turned against him. They charged him—among other things—with teaching against the law of Moses, which makes sense if he was proclaiming to them what we saw in Ephesians 2:11-22 as Paul proclaimed that Christ has brought the Mosaic Covenant to an end so that the people of God are no longer marked by being circumcised, eating certain foods, celebrating certain days, or wearing certain garments and in its place had established a New Covenant where the people of God are marked by having been circumcised in their hearts. This isn't actually against the law of Moses, for the law of Moses itself pointed forward to this glorious reality that Christ would bring, but you can see why an unbelieving Jew would think Paul was simply speaking against the law.

Then, this imprisonment was followed by Paul appealing to the Roman emperor so that Paul wrote this letter to the Ephesians from a Roman prison. And we know that ultimately he would be executed under the vicious Roman emperor, Nero. But Paul is well aware of the fact that these Ephesian believers to whom he writes know of his imprisonment and perhaps are quite tempted to be concerned about it. They may even wonder if this means that something was wrong with Paul or this message that he had preached to them that had brought them to faith. Again, if they think like us, someone going to prison wouldn't necessarily bring to mind the thought, "This looks like Paul is following God's perfect will."

Therefore, as Paul is in the middle of this letter, it seems that he is about to write out another prayer he prays for them, when his thoughts are interrupted. Let me show you what I mean. He writes in verse 1, "For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles." But he never really completes the thought he began with the words, "For this reason." We're left asking, "For this reason . . . what?" Well, he answers by beginning the thought again in verse 14 as we there read, "For this reason I bow my knees before the Father." In other words, "For this reason," had been his lead in to tell them what he prays for them. But immediately after his lead in to this in 3:1 he diverges from telling them what he prays and talks about the grace given

to him in being given insight into the mystery of God and given a commission to take the gospel to the Gentiles. And I have a guess at what led to this quick divergence.

Notice how Paul describes himself in verse 1. He identifies himself as a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of the Ephesians (and other Gentiles). In other words, he's telling them what they no doubt already heard, namely, that he's writing this letter from prison. And he knows that this thought could cause them to get discouraged or think that something has gone wrong or somehow someone has missed the will of God in their lives or the like. This is why Paul ends this section by writing in verse 13, "So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is for your glory."

Paul doesn't want them to be discouraged or think something has gone wrong or that Paul has missed the will of God. But this doesn't mean that they've misheard, and he really isn't in prison and isn't suffering. No, he is indeed in prison and suffering in that way. Moreover, he's suffering on their behalf and for them, as he states in verses 1 and 13. But this isn't a reason to lose heart or be discouraged? Why? Why shouldn't this news discourage the Ephesian believers? The answer to that question is found in verses 2-12 of our text this morning. That is, Paul brackets this section by a proclamation of his imprisonment (v. 1) and an exhortation not to lose heart over his imprisonment (v. 13), and in the middle of those two verses he states why there is no reason at all they should be discouraged as they hear of Paul's imprisonment.

So why is it that they shouldn't be discouraged? Paul gives two reasons, and these two reasons will shape the sermon this morning. In verses 2-6 he tells them that they shouldn't be discouraged about Paul's imprisonment because he has been given grace from God to understand a glorious reality that no one knew in past generations until the Lord revealed it to him and some others. Then, in verses 7-12 he gives them another reason not to be discouraged, noting that he was also given grace to be the one who proclaims this glorious revelation to the nations of the world in order that even the demons themselves might be forced to stand in awe of God's glorious plan and work. As we look at this text together, then, I want to walk through it under these two headings—the gracious revelation Paul received and the gracious mission Paul was given. First, let's look at the gracious revelation Paul received.

### **The gracious revelation Paul was given (vv. 2-6)**

The reason I say *gracious* revelation is because this is how Paul speaks of it. In verses 2-3 Paul writes, "Assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of *God's grace* that was given to me for you, how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly." Paul sees himself as an object of the Lord's grace because God made known to him a reality that had been hidden in generations past.

But we should note that "mystery" (mentioned in verse 3, and which will be mentioned again in verses 4, 6, and 9) doesn't quite mean the same thing in the Bible that we mean when we use that word. It seems to be a very technical word in Paul's use, referring to something that was always true but wasn't clear until Jesus Christ and his life, death, resurrection, and ascension.

So, what was revealed to Paul—this mystery—wasn't something absolutely new, but it wasn't seen clearly until Jesus. In fact, Paul explicitly notes that this insight he's about to share wasn't made known to those in prior generations as it has now. He writes in verse 4, "When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, 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."

But before we get to the content of this mystery and see exactly what it is, I want to say a brief word about the group Paul identifies as Christ's "holy apostles and prophets." We see it there in verse 5 as that group to whom this revelation was made known, and we saw it last week in 2:20 as Paul mentioned that the church was "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets." So, who are these people?

Well, the apostles would have been that group whom Jesus authorized to speak truly and authoritatively to his people. They were those who saw the risen Christ and could bear first-hand testimony to his resurrection. These would include the twelve whom Jesus called to follow him (including Matthias and not Judas, since Judas betrayed Jesus, took his own life, and was replaced by Matthias) and Paul (who saw the risen Christ some time after the others as Jesus appeared to him in the sky as Paul was on his way to Damascus). These apostles were promised by Jesus that the Spirit would remind them of all that Jesus had taught them and lead them into all truth (John 14:26; 16:13-15). Consequently these men were able to write Scripture, as we see for example with the gospel of Matthew, John's gospel and letters, or Peter's letters, and we rightly treat their inscripturated words as the words of Christ himself. So it makes sense to say that the church was built on the foundation of the apostles (2:20) and that these men had received authoritative revelation from God by the Spirit (3:5).

But what about the second group—the prophets? Well, some have suggested that Paul means the OT prophets like Jeremiah and Isaiah, and I think that argument would work except for two reasons. First, Paul always orders them with the apostles first. And it seems to me that if he meant OT prophets, he would have mentioned them first since they actually came along first in history. Second, in our text Paul explicitly notes that these truths that have been revealed to him were not revealed in prior generations as they have "now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets." This means that the prophets cannot be OT prophets from prior generations but those who were living in the very time as Paul. Therefore, most suggest that he means "prophets" that we find in the NT. But who are they?

Some would say that they're individuals like Agabus, whom we see in Acts, prophesying that Paul would suffer in Jerusalem or that there would be a famine. And that may be, but you never have evidence of him having revelation and insight like Paul is talking about here. Agabus never writes Scripture or unfolds mysteries veiled in the OT. He seems simply to tell what's going to take place. Others might say anyone prophesying, like you see in the church at Corinth, are the prophets Paul refers to here. But again, it's hard for me to imagine the Corinthians being given authoritative divine revelation like Paul is about to write about here when we have no record of

what they said and Paul longs for all of them to prophesy. That just doesn't seem to add up that they would be on the same authoritative plane as the apostles.

But there is another group whom we know who were given divine revelation, who wrote with the authority of Christ, and who didn't belong to this special group of the apostles. These would be men like James and Jude, the half-brothers of the Lord who wrote the letters of James and Jude and men like Mark and Luke who wrote those gospels. And then we have whoever wrote Hebrews—perhaps Apollos? Perhaps these are the men Paul refers to as prophets, since there is no arguing that they received divine revelation and wrote with the full authority of Christ. They may not be apostles, but they're something special. After all, the Spirit brought them into all truth and enabled them to write the very words of Christ.

If that is the case, then Paul is telling us that the church was built upon the divine revelation given to those who wrote the Scripture for us, thus preserving for us this divine revelation, and that this divine revelation included the "mystery" that he's about to disclose now. That makes most sense to me. So what is this mystery? Paul writes, "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" (v. 6).

This is very much what we saw when we looked at Ephesians 2:11-22, which is why Paul noted in verse 3 that he'd already written about this briefly. That which wasn't clear until the Spirit revealed it to Paul and some others who'd written the NT Scriptures is that in Christ, God was redeeming not just Jews who trusted in Jesus but Gentiles as well. Nor was he redeeming Gentiles so that they might be a kind of second-class citizens among Jewish believers. Rather, he was redeeming all Gentiles who trusted in Christ so that they would be heirs with believing Jews of everything God had promised to give them, members with them of the same body, and partakers of God's promise that involved giving them new hearts, putting his Spirit in them, etc. In other words, there is absolutely no difference between the standing or blessing of a Gentile believer and Jewish believer before God. They're one in Christ, all on the same footing before God.

Now, we might ask, "Why does Paul say this wasn't really revealed in prior generations?" I mean, we can read the OT and see that God promised Abraham that he would bless all the families of the earth through him (Gen 12:3) and that he would make a new covenant with his people not like the one he made through Moses when he brought them out of Egypt (Jer 31:31-34). So what wasn't revealed before? I think the answer is that this glorious work would come about through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, that he would not only bring a new covenant but bring the covenant through Moses to an end, and that there would be no difference between believing Jews and believing Gentiles at all. We would all be children of God, members of his family, and heirs of his promises. If you're a Gentile, you're not from among the people to whom God first revealed himself, but by his grace, you're an heir of the whole world (Rom 4:13), a child of Abraham, and a treasured child of God because of the work of Jesus Christ for us and our faith in him.

That's the first grace that was given to Paul. That mystery was fully revealed to him. But that's not where God's grace ended. Second, we see the gracious mission Paul was given.

### **The gracious mission Paul was given (vv. 7-12)**

Just as grace was given to Paul to understand this mystery, so Paul writes in verse 7, "Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace which was given to me by the working of his power." Paul sees his mission to proclaim this good news to Gentiles as a gift of God's grace. God privileged him with the mission of taking this good news to the Gentiles. In fact, Paul stresses just how much he sees this as a gift of grace instead of something he deserves by writing in verse 8, "To me, though I am the very least of the saints, this grace was given to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ." Before Christ took hold of Paul, he actually persecuted Christians. He is a brother who knows he deserves nothing and that every blessing is a gift of grace, and the level of grace he's been shown is astounding. Christ revealed truth to him and then made him an apostle to the Gentiles. That's why I say Paul was given a gracious mission.

But note one key reason why Paul was commissioned by the risen Christ to preach to the Gentiles that they could become children of God through faith in Jesus. He says, "This grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ [Eph 1-2], and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for all ages in God, who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places" (vv. 8-10). What does verse 10 mean?

Well, "rulers and authorities in the heavenly places" could mean angels. One reason to think this is because Peter writes that the redemption we humans experience through faith in Christ is something into which "angels long to look" (1 Pet 1:12). Since angels don't experience redemption, they marvel at God's work through Christ to forgive and redeem us. And it may be that as Paul preaches to Gentiles that they can become full-fledged forgiven children of God through faith in the crucified and risen Christ, these angels sit and marvel at the manifold wisdom of God in doing this. That may be what he's referring to.

However, it may very well be a reference to demons instead of angels. One reason to think this is because in 6:12 Paul will say that we "wrestle . . . against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." That sounds very much like "rulers and authorities in the heavenly places," and there it's clearly talking about demons.

Therefore, it may be that Paul preaches this good news and Gentiles are gathered into the church alongside believing Jews, and demons are forced to marvel at the manifold wisdom of God which they can do nothing to prevent from being put on full display in the church. It may well be that as we gather here today—from every kind of background, race, class, etc.—and worship the risen Christ together, trusting in the gospel, and loving one another as those who are fellow heirs of God with us as his children that the demons are watching and, as much as

they hate our Lord, are forced to recognize and marvel at his wisdom in doing this. Even as they're thrown into the lake of fire one day, they will be forced to acknowledge that God is infinitely wise and has shown his glory in the church.

Or it may be for both angels and demons to see and acknowledge. But either way, Paul says that this was God's eternal plan and purpose that has been realized through the Lord Jesus Christ so that all believers—Jew and Gentile—can boldly approach our Heavenly Father in Jesus' name as his children (v. 12).

That's why Paul says that they shouldn't be discouraged about his imprisonment. First, they should recognize that he who is the least of the saints (according to Paul) has been shown more grace than one could dream of. God revealed to him this glorious news that Gentiles are made equal children of God with believing Jews. Then God graciously privileged him to take this good news to the Gentiles. He's in prison because he was carrying out this glorious gracious mission. And all of this results in glory for these Gentiles who will believe. Paul would happily suffer imprisonment to see Gentiles find life and forgiveness in Christ so that one day they might be glorified with him at the resurrection.

So, imagine you're Paul. You realize one day that you were persecuting the Lord's people, and if anyone deserves death and hell, you especially do. But then, instead of receiving God's wrath as the Lord Jesus Christ appeared to him from the sky, you were told that you were going to be shown truths that no one else has seen as clearly as you will and that you were God's chosen instrument to take the gospel to the Gentiles. Do you think you'd whine about imprisonment? Of course not. You'd say, "I'm the most blessed man on the planet. I've been shown more grace than anyone." That's why Paul writes as he does.

But I want to suggest to us that we're not that much different from Paul. We too deserve death and hell apart from God's grace, don't we? And yet if we're trusting in Christ, we'll never see it. But it doesn't stop with us avoiding the wrath of God that we deserve. We've been made children of God. One day when Christ returns, we'll reign over a new heavens and new earth with Jesus forever and be with him in his glorious kingdom forever with no pain, sin, or death. And until then we've been privileged to have our eyes open to the glories of the gospel. We see the truth while many are still in darkness. And we've been commissioned to take this good news to our neighbors and the nations. Is that not the richest privilege? It means that even if we suffer humiliation, reproach, persecution, imprisonment, and even death, we will still be able to boast of being objects of God's grace—indeed, trophies of his grace. So let us pray that we'd be characterized by gratefulness as objects of God's grace and faithful to proclaim his glorious truth so that even the demons themselves have to marvel at the Lord's grace and glorious work of redemption through Christ in his church. May they marvel now as they see us gathering together and giving thanks for the work of Christ for us as we come to the table. Amen.