

Becoming Who We Are: *What's the Big Deal?*

Ephesians 3:1-13

This weekend, I spoke at the memorial service for long-time church member, Steve Lazarian. Dr. John Perkins was there too and did a powerful eulogy about how God had used Steve's life. And, Dr. Perkins and I reminisced about the first time he and I met. It was the first year that I was president at Trinity International University back on Chicago's north shore. When we met, I told him about how, years before as I was reading Paul's letter to the Ephesians, I was gripped by Paul's vision of the church, i.e., that God has had an eternal plan to bring together one household of faith made up of both Jew and Gentile—indeed, of people from every people, language and national group, all united in Christ. I told him of my conviction that, when Jesus is the Lord of a church, the walls that separate people from people must come down as we are brought into one “unexpected family” when we place our faith in Jesus. I remember saying, “I don't know exactly how to lead us from where we are to where God promises we all will be. Do you have any counsel for me, Dr. Perkins?”

And Dr. Perkins said, “Greg, you'll have to share that vision of what God is doing every time you have a chance. Talk about it at every chapel talk, every faculty meeting, and every Trustee gathering. Then, when you have decisions to make, make decisions that go in the direction of that vision. People may not like the decisions – but they won't be surprised by them. And,” he said, “don't give up when things aren't immediately successful or when hardships come. The ways of the kingdom of God will always clash with the kingdoms of the world.”

That conversation with Dr. Perkins took on new importance to me this week as I prepared this message from Eph 3:1-13. The Apostle Paul had been gripped by the vision of the church that was rooted in the prayer that Jesus prayed in **Jn 17:20-23** – “*I pray for those who will believe in me, that all of them may be one so that the world may believe.*” In Paul's post-resurrection meetings with Jesus, Paul had learned that in the “all of them” that Jesus had prayed for were to be all human beings who believed regardless of race or ethnicity. So, Paul did in Ephesians exactly what Dr. Perkins told me to do. **He said consistently in Ephesians:**

- God's eternal plan has been to have one family made up both of Jew and Gentile who through unity would bring glory to God (1:3-14)."
- Both Jewish and Gentile believers would experience the power that raised Jesus from the dead (1:15-23).

- The key to our oneness in this broken world will be our humility because all genuine Christians have been rescued from death and judgment by God’s grace through faith in Jesus (2:1-10).”
- And then, in last week’s text -- because of the blood of Christ, all who follow Jesus become one body, one new humanity, and one household of faith (2:11-22).”

So, as we’ve seen, Paul kept making the same point – though always emphasizing different aspects of it. And, I can envision Paul anticipating some pushback from a congregation that didn’t seem to want to be in one church together. So, in **3:1**, Paul began to pray – and he seems to sense that some people were still not ready to accept that Jew and Gentile are now both in God’s family together. So, Paul interrupted his thought. Look at **3:1-2**. *For this reason, I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles -- Surely you have heard about the administration of God’s grace that was given to me for you...*

Do you see Paul broke off in mid-sentence – only to resume his prayer in 3:14? It’s not that Paul had ADD! No, before he prayed, he wanted to make an important point. He wanted them to know that he was in prison precisely because he had preached about Jesus both to Jew and Gentile! You see, the reason Paul was in prison can be found in Acts 21. Paul had been hanging out in Jerusalem with a Gentile named Trophimus. Some of the Jewish people saw them together and assumed that Paul had taken this Gentile man into the Temple and across the dividing wall that threatened death to Gentiles who crossed it that we read about in 2:14-15. Now, Trophimus was from Ephesus. So, do you see it? Although Paul didn’t take Trophimus across the dividing wall, people accused him of it. Because of that, he was in prison.

Notice what Paul did not do as he was in prison? **He did not take the “Eeyore” approach** saying, “I’ve worked so hard as an apostle and nothing ever goes right for me.” And, he didn’t make a frantic call to the church people saying, “You’ve got to pray demanding that God get me out of this prison now!”

What did he do? Paul wrote a letter that gave people then, and gives us still today, simple lessons about how to live for God as God is at work completing his mission in this imperfect world. Paul teaches us to view all things in this world as only a worshipping Jesus-follower can, i.e., with God at the center of our lives. Paul wants us to look at good times and bad times through the lens of certain truths about God. What are they?

#1: God is at work in this world – Learn be faithful to his calling both in good and in difficult times. *You have heard about the administration of God’s grace that was given to me for you (2:2).*

So, Paul was in prison – but this did not mean he was outside the will of God. Far from it! In **vv. 2-6**, Paul said, “You know that God has called me to make known a part of God’s plan for his creation that has long been a mystery.” Now, what God had planned to do was not a complete mystery, i.e., that he would bless all nations through his people Israel. But, what was a mystery was how God would do that. Paul said that this mystery has been made known. God entered the world through his Son born, through the line of Abraham and David, lived a sinless life that fulfilled the requirements of the law, experienced death for sin on our behalf, defeated sin and death through his resurrection, and now offers membership to God’s family to all – yes, to ALL people -- through faith. See **3:6**: *The mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.*

God had called Paul specifically to make known that Gentiles now are welcome in God’s family. Because Paul was faithful to that calling, he was in prison. Look at how Paul spoke of this in **3:1**. You may find his words strange. Paul called himself in v. 1 “a prisoner of Christ” – not of Rome. And in **3:6**, “a slave of the gospel – enslaved as a gift of God’s grace...” – not a slave of Caesar. Paul had learned as the Apostle Peter said in **1 Pet 1:18-19**, “We are bought with a price, the precious blood of Jesus, so we are no longer our own.”

So, the Apostle Paul had been called by Jesus to declare the gospel to Gentiles. Since he was called to do so by his Lord Jesus, he would obey. You see, some of us might ask, “What’s the great Apostle doing in prison. He had a right to be in a 5-star hotel, didn’t he!” But, Paul said in **3:8**, “No, no! I am less than the least of all God’s people. Remember, I too was dead in sin and God made me alive. This calling I have to tell people that all people can be in God’s family through faith is a gift – a grace. So, if God sends me to a prison to do it – then, fine. I’ll do it!” (And, remember, many of Paul’s letters now in the Bible were written from a prison.)

I imagine most of us would be asking people to pray that God would get us out of prison. Look at Paul’s prayer request from prison. *Pray for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly (6:18-19).*

Paul is teaching us that our Lord Jesus is in control of all things. When you follow him, you often will find yourself in challenging places. But, he will be with you and ask you to trust him and be faithful to him. So, my own prayer often is this, “Lord, where I go today may not be where I want to go. But, my life is now yours so wherever you send me, I will go as your servant and give witness to you with my words and my life.”

#2: God has an end in mind that he will accomplish – and it’s good. Live each day with a view to that end. *God’s intent was that, through the church, his manifold wisdom should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord (3:10-11).*

This is what John Perkins told me to do, i.e., to keep my focus attention on what God is doing – keep that in front of those under my care and live in the light of God’s ability to do what he promises. Notice that v.10 reminds us that there are spiritual realities that we are dead to until we know God. The Bible teaches that, apart from God’s making it known to them, those angels and powers in the heavenlies apparently don’t know the future. The Apostle Peter would say in 1 Pet 1:12 that angels long to look into these purposes of God. Paul is saying here in 3:10-11 that, from the time sin entered the world, these heavenly beings watched this world but didn’t understand what God was doing. They saw all this division and fighting. All this darkness. But, with the establishment of the church of Jesus Christ, one in which all people could be reconciled to God and to one another, for them the coin dropped. Their “aha moment” arrived. When spiritual beings look at people as different as those people were in Ephesus were and as we are here at LAC – and they see us loving God and loving one another, they say, “So, this is what God has been up to!!”

Notice the remarkable language: “*Through the church, the manifold wisdom of God has been made known...*” Through the church! That word “manifold” means “multi-colored.” It’s the word used for Joseph’s coat in the Greek version of the OT. I love it. Jew and Gentile – African and European – Asian and Central American together! We together declare to the universe the wisdom of God! When the universe sees this unexpected family of God coming into being, worshipping together, working things out, serving together, living in unity, they see the wisdom of God.

All this is to say that, when we have challenges in figuring out what God would have us to do as a church – or as individual followers of Jesus – we should look to the eternal plan of God to unite all things in Christ and we should live in the light of that promise. When we see relationships broken, we should live should live

directed by that promise and always seek to make peace. We become God's ambassadors of peace (2 Cor 5:18).

When I preached about this several years ago, Irene Leon, sent me a card saying, "Everything will be okay in the end. If it's not okay, it's the end." Amen.

#3: God makes us alive to eternal things. Learn to value them more than you value temporary things. *In Christ Jesus and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory (3:12-13).*

So, Paul was in prison not in spite of but because of his faith in Jesus. But, he's not discouraged. Not in the least! You see his point, don't you? His values, his purpose in life had been completely overhauled when he met Jesus. So, he's not discouraged because, though he was in prison, nothing that mattered eternally could be taken away from him even by a prison cell. He could still "approach God with freedom and confidence!"

Isn't it amazing that Paul was the one encouraging the Ephesian believers? He was the one in prison – but he was encouraging the church people!! Basically, Paul said, "Let me tell you what I'm after in my life. What I want to do is with my life is to please Jesus – the one who died for me; the one who gave me the privilege to tell others this mystery of how God makes it possible for people like us to be in his family. So, I'll do it wherever he sends me. If I succeed and get to preach in a great worship center like is at 393 N. Lake Ave. in Pasadena, CA, then great. What an honor! But if Jesus sends me to a prison somewhere, well, I do it there too. What matters to me now cannot be taken away from me."

More specifically, Paul wrote, "A little bit of time in a prison is no big deal compared to the eternal purposes of God that it contributes toward. Look at what's happening in this prison: The rulers and authorities in the heavens are learning of God's wisdom. And, there in Ephesus, all of you – both Jews and Gentiles – are approaching God with confidence together. So, don't cry for me! This is worth doing." Look at vv. 11-12 again: This is happening "according to God's eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. In him and through faith in him we may all approach God with freedom and confidence."

Now, you have to tune in right now – especially if you're discouraged over the loss of something very important to you, e.g., health, a friend, investments, job, or anything in this world. What I'm going to say is thoroughly biblical but is just as thoroughly counter-cultural. In fact, it's so counter-cultural here in Southern CA that I'm afraid it'll make no sense to you. So, listen to me

carefully. Discouragement comes in this world when we lose the things we most desire. So, the first question you should ask when you are discouraged is this, “What am I really after in this world?” If the main desire of your heart is God himself, then nothing will ever take him and his love away from you.

Scottish pastor and author, George MacDonald about dealing with the discouragement and suffering that loss brings with it. He wrote, “*Jesus suffered not that we might not suffer but that when we suffer we might become like him.*”

Do his words ring true to you? Our Christian faith is not that Jesus endured pain so we would never be sick, that Jesus was homeless so we would never be homeless, or that Jesus was poor so we might never be poor. This is NOT what the Bible says. Jesus willingly gave up his life so that when we trust him and live for him in the midst of loss, we will become like him. So, as Paul wrote from prison, “*I’ve learned the secret of being content whether I have plenty or nothing.*” When we put eternal things at the center of our hearts, we can remain content wherever we are and whatever we lose. Learn to value eternal things as Paul did.

I believe that days of financial turmoil, health concerns and political uncertainty usually provide our greatest opportunities to be salt and light in this world. In times of loss, we have the opportunity to show, as Paul did, that, when our faith is in the resurrected Jesus, there is nothing of eternal value that can be lost eternally.

I think we hear a pastor’s heartfelt cry for his people in v. 13: *I ask you not to be discouraged...*” That’s my longing for you as your Sr. Pastor today. So, ask yourself this: *What am I really after in my life?* If you mostly want to use God to become healthy, when you get sick, you’ll be discouraged. If you say you trust Jesus but what you most want is more money, when you lose money, you’ll be discouraged. If what you’re really after is fame, youthful looks, physical comfort in this world, you’ll be enslaved by your pursuit of those things. But, if your deepest desire is to know Jesus, please Jesus and to become like him, you will be free.

And, that brings us to the communion table today. What a time for us to remember the death of Jesus. When we do, we declare what it is that brings us to God and what it is that brings us into one family, one body in Christ. We are one because 1) we were all dead in our sins and desperately in need of mercy and grace and 2) we have all found mercy and grace through faith in Jesus. This can be true for whosoever may come to Jesus in faith. Jesus died so that people from every tribe, language and nation might be in one unexpected family together. Hear again these words summarized from Ephesians 2:15-18.

Now, in Christ Jesus, all who trust in him have been brought near by the blood of Christ. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity... and in one body

to reconcile all of us to God through the cross... For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.