

EPHESIANS WEEK #5 – SJGC

“A Foretaste of the Future”

Ephesians 3:1-13

PATTI

We’re in the book of Ephesians,
which is about THE CHURCH.

Admittedly, chapter 3 is a strange passage,
because of **the dash** in the middle of the first sentence.

For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—

See the dash there at the end of verse 1?

Smack in the middle of a sentence, Paul
breaks off and goes into a rabbit trail,
and he doesn’t come out of it until verse 13.

It’s kind of a ramble.

But what’s in here is so practical.

First, Paul is describing here...

THE HARDNESS OF LIFE

He interrupts his own train of thought to say to the Ephesians,

“I’m writing to you from prison.”

In v. 13 he says,

“I ask you, therefore ...” (referring to the previous 12 verses)

“I ask you, therefore, **not to be discouraged because of my sufferings ...”**

Paul knew his being in prison was **a huge discouragement** to his friends.

So he breaks off here and addresses this.

No book in the world more realistic about the **inevitability of SUFFERING**
and the **hardness of life** than the BIBLE

Even the best people suffer huge disappointments and tragedies.

The Bible unflinchingly shows us that.

And Paul knows... *“My friends are really struggling
over the bad things that have happened to me,”*

But he doesn’t just say, *“Well, suck it up.”*

He doesn’t ignore it. He engages them.

The Bible engages the reality of suffering.
Because suffering has the ability to shake our faith.

JEFF

In Matthew 11, **John the Baptist** is in **prison**.
John had declared Jesus was the Messiah.
He said, “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”
So when he’s in prison and about to be executed,
John sends Jesus a message, and the message is,
“Are you really the One who is to come or should we look for another?”

Why is John experiencing doubts?
Because he’s in prison, about to die.
He’s saying, Jesus, “If you’re really the Messiah, why would your servant be in this situation? If you’re really the Son of God then why is my life falling apart?”

Paul’s friends are apparently feeling the same way about HIS suffering.
When someone you love is suffering, YOU SUFFER.
And you feel helpless.

So in verse 13 Paul says,
“I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged ...”
It’s a word that means **disheartened**.
The heart gets taken out of you. You get bitter. You get numb.
Paul is saying, “I don’t want that for you.”

The Bible knows that LIFE IS HARD and we need help to deal with it.
All of verses 1–13 are Paul’s help.
And this help has everything to do with...

1. THE WONDER OF GRACE

PATTI

One word that comes up the most often in this whole passage
is the word **MYSTERY**. Paul says it’s his job to **proclaim a mystery**.

In English that word mystery actually conveys
something that is almost the opposite of what
Paul means by it, so we have a bit of a translation problem.

For us a mystery means

something that is hidden that it's your job to discover.

When you read or watch a mystery, the truth is hidden from you till the end, and it's your job to try to figure it out.

But the Greek word that Paul uses means exactly the opposite.

It means, NOT something hidden that you have to discover.

But rather, something REVEALED BY GOD,
that you would otherwise never discover or figure out logically.

In other words, as Paul uses the term, a mystery is a counterintuitive revelation that goes completely against anything you would've guessed.

And the MYSTERY that Paul is talking about here is **THE GRACE OF GOD**

The gospel of grace, salvation by grace, is the great mystery.

And it stands in stark contrast to THE LAW of God.

The Ten Commandments are never called a mystery in the Bible.

The Golden Rule is never called a mystery. Why?

JEFF

The gospel is NOT that if you live a good life,
obey the Ten Commandments,
live by the Golden Rule, then God will bless you,
hear your prayers, and take you to heaven

That's not the gospel. Because it's not a mystery.

Because it makes too much sense.

It's exactly what you'd think, to live according to the Golden Rule,
don't lie, don't murder, and don't steal.

BUT it's NOT the GOSPEL!

The gospel is that

the Son of God came to earth and triumphed through weakness and suffering.

He won through losing. He gained everything **by giving it all away.**

He overcame your and my sin and guilt **by taking it on himself.**

When you're baptized into Christ and respond to him in faith,
you are as Martin Luther said, **simul justus et peccator.**

Simultaneously, a SINNER and a SAINT.

You are a sinner, and yet
you're loved,
you're affirmed,
you're pardoned,
you're accepted,
you're delighted in.

You're simul **justus et peccator**, simultaneously a terrible sinner
and yet absolutely loved, justified, holy, and accepted in God's sight.
That's a mystery.

It's counterintuitive. It goes against all your instincts that,
in spite of how bad you are,
you're saved by sheer grace.

PATTI

Yes, and if you decide to live the first way -
by rule and commandment keeping, in hopes that
God will accept you and take to heaven,"
at first it makes sense, but as time goes on,
it will crush you, because no one can live up to it.

If you live by the gospel that you're saved by sheer grace,
no matter how bad you are, no matter what you've done,
it doesn't make sense, but as time goes on,
it will become more and more wonderful,
more and more liberating,
the more wisdom and grace you'll see in it.

Is the gospel a counterintuitive, astounding wonder to you?

If it is, you never get tired of thinking about it;
you are always fascinated by it.

There are depths to it. You're always seeing new things,
always being liberated in new ways, and you'll never get to the bottom of it.
Because it's that wonderful.

So to recap... Paul says we can endure the HARDNESS OF LIFE
for two reasons... 1. THE WONDER OF GRACE and...

2. THE BRILLIANCE OF THE CHURCH

What do we mean by the brilliance of the church?
Paul is saying it's his job, his calling, to be a preacher and missionary of this gospel of grace.

In v. 7–9, he's actually saying it's his goal in life to preach the unsearchable riches of Christ and to make plain to everyone the brilliance of the gospel.
But HOW?

The great purpose that God is going to accomplish through Christ is the overall theme of Ephesians.

And we saw it back in chapter 1, v. 8 and 9, where Paul says that

the ultimate purpose of God is
to bring together everything in the world in Christ Jesus.

Because the truth is that EVERYTHING IN THIS WORLD **FALLS APART**. Everything. What is WAR, VIOLENT CRIME, and RACISM?

People who should be together are at each other's throats.
Things that should be one are coming apart,
society is falling apart, your relationships falling apart.

What is disease? What is hunger? What is death?
It's your body falling apart, which eventually happens.
God created the world for everything
to stay together in eternal harmony...

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But because sin came in, now everything falls apart,
but God in Christ is someday going to bring us
to the place where all those things are
brought together again forever.

There'll be no more suffering, no more tears,
no more death, nor disease, nor more injustice.
Only peace on earth.
That's God's purpose.

But HOW will the world really see that this is God's purpose?

That this is what God is up to in Jesus?

v. 10 - **“His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold ...”** That’s a word that means brilliant. **“The brilliant wisdom of God, the brilliant gospel, should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms.”**

It’s through the Church, through the Christian community, through healed relationships, that the world can most clearly see the incredible future God is preparing for everyone.

F.F. Bruce, the great biblical scholar, says of this verse...

“The church thus appears to be God’s pilot scheme for the reconciled universe of the future ...”

Think of that.

The gospel brought Jew and Gentile together in the church. The gospel brought down a division that would never have been reconciled by anything else.

PATTI

So what if the healing of racial divisions inside the church is only a foretaste of a time when all the mutually hostile elements in creation will be united.

All the things that fall apart right now will come together and be united again.

And it’s the church that shows people a foretaste of what that’s going to be. “A foretaste of the feast to come,” we say in our communion liturgy. Because in eating and drinking together at the same table, we anticipate this promised future.

The church is to be, not just a fellowship, but a new society in which the world can see what family life, business and economic practices, what race relations, what all of life will be **under the healing kingship of Jesus.**

God is out to heal all the effects of sin... psychological, social, and physical,

and the place where people can most clearly see it will be in the church.

Paul says the manifold wisdom of the future can be seen now in the church in a way that no individual person can exhibit it.

We together are a witness, not just to the world, he says, but to “the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms ...”

To **angels and demons**.

In Deuteronomy 4, God told to Israel...

“If you obey me and you create a godly society, you’ll be showing the nations my glory.”

Paul says here to the New Testament people of God, “don’t just show this **WORLD** the brilliance of the gospel but also **the invisible realm of powers and principalities**.

Let them look in and be amazed at what God’s Church is!

JEFF

Here’s the point..

81% of all Americans say to pollsters,

“You can be a good Christian and not be part of a church,”

and Paul has no idea what they could possibly mean.

Because for him, in order for the world to understand the brilliance of the gospel, you have to have full churches.

Of course, Paul knows what a mess all churches are to some degree. Look his writings...

To the Corinthians, and the Colossians.

The churches Paul planted were often riddled with trouble. He’s not naïve, yet he says the church is indispensable.

If you think the gospel should change your life, then you have to ask, “How did I get the life I have right now? How did I become the person I am today? Not because of a personal decision.

It's because of who your family was.
 Because of your community.
 It's because of the relationships around you.

That's what formed you, and most of your
 personal decisions were a response to those things.

That's how the gospel works.
 Do you see the brilliance of the church?

The word manifold means brilliant, multicolored.
 It might be referring to the racial diversity of the church of God,
 but it's probably referring even more than that.
 He's referring to...

4. The freedom that is ours

Paul is not lecturing students. He's pastoring hurting people.
 All the heavy theology we just laid out was all a way for him to say at the end,
 "I ask you, therefore ..." now that you know all these things,
 "not to be discouraged by the suffering around you."

PATTI

Paul is showing believers that in Christ, no suffering is wasted,
 no suffering can really hurt you, and all your suffering will be for glory.

Joni Eareckson Tada is a woman who has been in a wheelchair most of her life.
 When she was 18, she had a swimming accident, and she has been a quadriplegic
 ever since.

After working through horrible bouts of depression and
 turning to her faith, here's what she learned.

1. Suffering can help you grow in faith to maturing and transform
 you into a completely different person.
2. Suffering can give you a platform for bearing witness to other people.
 If they see you being patient in suffering, it shows them God is real.
3. Even when it seems pointless, no suffering is ever wasted.

Because by the way you endure hardship, even if no one else knows, you are testifying to billions of beings in the spiritual realm

B. No suffering can really hurt you.

Paul calls himself a prisoner of Christ.

He will not say he's a prisoner of Rome.

He will not say he's a prisoner of this or that ruler.

In fact, in one section of 2 Corinthians, Paul says,

"If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness."

What does he mean, "boast"? In other words, he says,

"These things don't get me down. These things don't bother me.

I'm not really your prisoner. And you can't ultimately hurt me."

When Jesus says, **"Where your treasure is there your heart will be also,"**

what does he mean? Everybody invests in something that says,

"This is what I really am about.

This is what's really important to me.

This is my real hope.

He says, " I'm Christ's prisoner because He wants me here, but I'm not their prisoner. So they can't really hurt me."

JEFF

Then he says in **v.12**, **"In him and through him we may approach God with freedom."**

Paul is free because his treasure is to be known and loved by God.

And to have other people experience this love through the preaching of the gospel.

Nobody can touch **that** treasure.

It can't ever be taken from you.

It doesn't mean you won't weep.

It doesn't mean you won't feel pain.

It simply means this (as one of our pastor friends says)...

To know Jesus is to know the future.

**To know the future is to be secure.
And to be secure is to be free.**

Because of where Paul's his treasure is, he knows...
"If they kill me, I'll be in paradise.
That'll just give me more of my treasure."

If you're devastated by suffering,
or struggling under a heavy load right now,
could it be because you haven't made this move?
Because you haven't made the Lord your ultimate treasure?

Jesus took away the only kind of suffering
that can really destroy you - **being cast away from God.**

Jesus suffered, not that we would never suffer,
but that when we suffer we would be like him.

Paul is happy to be in prison because, "My sufferings are for your glory."
He's like Jesus now, because that's how Jesus did it.
If you know that glory is coming, you can handle suffering.

Friends, I ask you not to be discouraged because of the sufferings in your lives and
around you, because glory is coming.

To know Jesus is to know the future.
To know the future is to be secure.
And to be secure is to be free.

PATTI

PRAYER:

God, thank you for your wonderful grace that holds us together, and for the brilliance of your church that sustains us through hard times. Thank you for your Word that promises more than we could ever ask or imagine. Help us by your Holy Spirit to find there what we need for today and tomorrow and the next day, that we may be more and more conformed to the image of your Son. In whose name we pray. Amen.