

WBS Talk Ephesians 3:1-13 I will be reading from the New Living Translation.

I, Paul, am a prisoner of Christ Jesus because of my preaching to you Gentiles. As you already know, God has given me this special ministry of announcing his favor to you Gentiles. As I briefly mentioned earlier in this letter, God himself revealed his secret plan to me. As you read what I have written, you will understand what I know about this plan regarding Christ. God did not reveal it to previous generations, but now he has revealed it by the Holy Spirit to his holy apostles and prophets. And this is God's plan: Both Gentiles and Jews who believe the Good News share equally in the riches inherited by God's children. Both are part of the same body, and both enjoy the promise of blessings because they belong to Christ Jesus. By God's grace and mighty power, I have been given the privilege of serving him by spreading this Good News. Though I am the least deserving of all God's people, he graciously gave me the privilege of telling the Gentiles about the endless treasures available to them in Christ. I

was chosen to explain to everyone this mysterious plan that God, the Creator of all things, had kept secret from the beginning.

God's purpose in all this was to use the church to display his wisdom in its rich variety to all the unseen rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was his eternal plan, which he carried out through Christ Jesus our Lord. Because of Christ and our faith in him, we can now come boldly and confidently into God's presence. So please don't lose heart because of my trials here. I am suffering for you, so you should feel honored and encouraged.

What is this mystery that Paul is talking about? What is the church and why did God establish it? How does the church impact the present and the future? Why is life so hard for believers?

Tim Keller preached on this passage from Ephesians chapter 3. I will be using his outline to go through these verses.

The first heading is **The Hardness of Life.**

In the beginning of this passage, Paul calls himself a prisoner of the Lord. Like Paul, everyone experiences hardship in life, whether it is sickness, loss of a job, marriage difficulties, struggles with parenting, mental health issues, or grieving the death of a loved one. No one will escape experiencing suffering. Paul does not ignore this, but engages in talking about suffering. Suffering can shake your faith. We may ask, does God really care?

In chapter one of Ephesians Paul calls himself an Apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God establishing his God given authority. Now Paul begins chapter 3 calling himself a prisoner of Jesus Christ. He quickly digresses to explain what this means and how it impacts the church in Ephesus. Paul is writing from prison, and the Ephesian church is concerned for his welfare. Why is Paul suffering? Paul is experiencing suffering as a prisoner but Paul declares himself a prisoner of Christ and not of Rome. In Philippians 1:13 Paul says, “ I am in prison because I am Christ's

servant.” He described his suffering as due to his preaching the Gospel to the Gentiles. The Jewish officials brought charges against Paul because of his work among the Gentiles which led to his arrest and detention in Jerusalem, Caesarea, and Rome. Paul who had been a devout Jew, who had persecuted the church, was called by God to share the Gospel to the Gentiles.

To the Corinthian church Paul explained his suffering , "We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body."

2 Corinthians 4:8–10

Paul also speaks of his suffering in 2 Corinthians 12. “So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. **8** <sup>i</sup>Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it

should leave me. **9** But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. **10** For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” (2 Corinthians 12:7–10)

Paul encourages them to not be disheartened. He points them to the Gospel and its power. Megan Hill expresses it this way, “He is ultimately Christ’s prisoner. This undoubtedly comforted him. He knew Christ would release him (either in life or in death) at exactly the right moment. “ I am reminded of the song “My Worth is Not in What I Own.” This verse and chorus expresses what Paul is saying about himself. “Two wonders here that I confess: My worth and my unworthiness. My value fixed, my ransom paid At the cross. I rejoice in my Redeemer, Greatest treasure,

wellspring of my soul. I will trust in Him, no other. My soul is satisfied in Him alone.”

What about us? How do we approach our suffering? Megan Hill continues, “What might it look like to emulate Paul’s submission to God’s providence? You’re not simply a patient at the cancer center; you’re Christ’s patient; You’re not answering ultimately to a difficult boss; you’re working for Christ. You’re not at the mercy of a negligent landlord; you live in Christ’s kingdom. He’s with you, and he’ll bring you out of your hard situation at just the right time.”

When John Piper was diagnosed with cancer, he wrote a booklet entitled, “Don’t Waste Your Cancer.” One thing he stated is this:

“The arm of God in our cancer is to knock the props out from under our hearts so that we rely utterly on him.” David Powlison when he battled cancer stated, “Illness can sharpen your awareness of how thoroughly God has already and always had been at work in every detail of your life.” We find our comfort and

strength to face our struggles through the power of our loving heavenly Father.

This leads us to the next point: **The Wonder of Grace**. Paul speaks of the mystery of Christ. What is this mystery? When we think of mystery, we think that a mystery is something we need to figure out. We watch a murder mystery and try to work out who is the killer. This is not the meaning of mystery that is spoken of in the Bible. The mystery that Paul speaks of is something that is revealed by God that we could never figure out on our own. It is the exact opposite meaning of what we think mystery means. God has revealed a message to Paul. First, the mystery is that salvation can only be found through grace. This is counterintuitive to our thinking. In the Old Testament, God established the Covenant of Works. To have a relationship with God, you must completely obey his law. This makes sense to us and to the world. You obey, you are rewarded. If you don't, you suffer the consequences. Tim Keller stated that the Ten

Commandments and the Golden Rule were never called a mystery. They were never intended to provide salvation because no one can keep God's law perfectly. Yet, we like to think that if we live a good life then we will be accepted. The first part of the mystery is that Jesus came to earth, suffered, and died but then rose again. He won the victory by losing; suffering so we can be saved by grace. We are sinners who are loved and accepted into God's family. The Gospel doesn't make sense, but trying to live by our works will crush us. The Gospel is wonderful and liberating. Is the Gospel astonishingly wonderful to me? To you?

Our home group is studying the book of Isaiah using a study guide by Jonathan Gibson. I've been challenged by his call for repentance and faith. One area of repentance that he shared is: I come to grips with the futility of my own efforts. The prayer of repentance that resonated with me is that: "I (would) reorient my life to truly love what is good and just and merciful, and to no longer be about a show I put on for God, others, or my

conscience.” Likewise, another of Gibson’s calls for repentance is: I heed the call to come and be clean. My prayer is that: “I (would) have an inward change of dependency, turning away from self-reliance and toward Christ-reliance.” I do want to be astonished by God’s grace.

Continuing In verse 3 regarding this mystery, Paul mentioned that God made known to him the mystery by revelation. Ephesians 3:6<sup>6</sup> “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.” We see foreshadowing of this mystery in the Old Testament. In Genesis 12:3 God promised Abraham that He would bless all the families of the earth through him. Later we see God including Rahab and Ruth, two foreign women who are included in the genealogy of Jesus. In Isaiah 49:6 God told His people Israel, "I will also make you a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." In the New Testament in Acts 10, God used a vision to teach Peter that the good news of the Gospel was for the Gentiles also. After the

vision, a Gentile Cornelius came to Peter. Peter then understood the meaning of the vision. Peter said, “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.(Acts10:34)” After Cornelius’s conversion, the Holy Spirit came upon him. This was a sign that God was including the Gentiles into His church. In fact, Jesus himself left this call to his disciples as he ascended into heaven, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.Go therefore and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always to the end of the age.” Matthew 28:18-20.

The third point is: **The brilliance of the Church**

Paul was called to preach the Gospel and make it plain.

Ephesians 1:8-9 explains God’s ultimate purpose is to bring everything under the authority of Jesus Christ. The mystery Paul

revealed is that God is reconciling both Jews and Gentiles through the establishment of the church.

In this world, things fall apart. There is famine, war and racism.

Our bodies are breaking down and eventually die. Relationships face challenges and hardship. This was not how it was supposed to be. In Genesis chapters 1 and 2, God created everything good. But because of sin, suffering and death entered the world.

However, in Christ everything will be made right. One day Jesus will bring peace on earth. How will the world see this happen?

This will happen through the church.

John Stott explained what this mystery was: “that the theocracy of the Jewish nation would be terminated and be replaced by a new international community, the church; that this church would be the body of Christ, organically united to him and that Jews and Gentiles would be incorporated into Christ and his church on equal terms without any distinction. It was this complete union of Jews, Gentiles and Christ which was radically new and which God revealed to Paul, overcoming his entrenched Jewish prejudice.”

The church is the Christian community that will point us to healing. FF Bruce explains it this way, "The Church appears as a pilot plant for the reconciled universe of the future." What does he mean by this? The church is the joining together of Jews and Gentiles. Through the unity of the church, we see a picture of what is to come when Christ comes again. Stott states, "...by setting aside the divisive elements of the law Jesus was creating a new people and building a new temple." This will be a taste of what it will be like when Jesus returns and establishes His kingdom. It is a new society, which will impact family life, racial relations, and business and economic practices. As Tim Keller explains, "God's plan to heal the world is demonstrated through the church." FF Bruce also expressed it this way, "The church is meant to be a mini-version or a 'sneak preview' of the upcoming kingdom of God. When the world looks at the church it is supposed to see a functional sample of what humanity looks like

when fully reconciled, living in justice, and operating under the lordship of Christ.”

Also, In the church, the Gentiles will experience the same blessings as the Jews. They are co-heirs, co-members, and co-sharers. As fellow heirs, they equally receive the inheritance Paul mentioned in Ephesians chapter 1. They will spend eternity with God. In Matthew 20:1-16 Jesus told a parable about the workers in the vineyard. Those who worked only an hour were paid the same wage as those who worked all day. In verse 14 the master says, “I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you (the first worker). Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?” The Gentiles are those who had worked briefly at the end of the day. Thus they receive the same reward as the Jews. The Gentiles are also a part of the same body of Christ. In Ephesians chapter 2 verse 15 and 16 Paul explains that Christ made “to himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.” Finally, the Gentiles share

in the same promise. God will be their God. God intended Jews and Gentiles to receive the fulfillment of his promises together. In the church, God dwells with Jews and Gentiles together. Paul also tells us in Galatians 3:28, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

As the church, we are called to share the truth of the Gospel with all people no matter their nationality, no matter what the cost. I am reminded of Jim Elliot who was a missionary in Ecuador. He was martyred by the Auca tribe. His wife Elizabeth later returned as a missionary to the same tribe showing forgiveness and extending God's grace. Where has God called me, called you to share the Gospel with someone of a different race, a different background, a different age group, or a different economic status?

I am thankful for the small group Eloise and I lead. Our group is a small picture of what the church is to be like. We have a young woman from South Africa, another woman who is Indian, another from Russia, and two who are of Asian descent. I am blessed to

be in a group with them and to hear their perspectives of their walks of faith and their understanding of God's Word.

I have also been reminded of the bond that believers have no matter what their backgrounds or nationality. Have you ever met someone for the first time and then discover that the person is a believer? There is a dynamic shift in the conversation. This past August my husband Paul and I were in Ocean City. We love to dance. We found a fire station that hosted senior dancing on Tuesday nights. We went and were warmly greeted. While sitting at a table, another couple joined us. As we talked, we discovered that they were believers. We got to share our backgrounds and how the Lord had been working in our lives. It was such a blessing to connect with them. We believers have a special bond because of our relationship with Jesus.

To continue: We also see in Ephesians 3:10, this demonstration of the church is not just for the visible world, but also the invisible world. John Stott expresses it this way: "The audience watching

this unfold are the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms.”

Angels and demons will see how God is at work in the church.

God uses this multiracial, multicultural community to demonstrate this unique diversity and harmony which displays His wisdom and

eternal purpose to both good and evil spiritual authorities

watching the earth. 1 Corinthians 4:9 speaks of this: “For I think

that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men

sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the

world, to angels, and to men.” The ministry and struggles of

believers are observed by the spiritual realm including angels. In 1

Peter 1:12 Peter states, “It was revealed to them that they were

serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been

announced to you through those who preached the good news to

you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels

long to look.” Finally, Luke 15:10 states, “Just so I tell you, there is

joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

God has established his church, but the church is made up of sinful (yet forgiven) people. Even though the church is not perfect--It has its troubles--the church is necessary. It is indispensable. God is building and refining it. Before we came to Christ, we were shaped by our culture. The world encourages us to live for ourselves. When we came to Christ, we needed a new community. God did not design us to live as individuals. God has called us to be a part of his community. Hebrews 10:25 admonishes us, “not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”

Paul’s final point is: **The freedom that comes to those who understand the truth.** Verse 13 “So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory.” Paul returns to the topic of the suffering he is experiencing and once again acknowledges that all believers will experience suffering. Jesus himself experienced suffering while he was here on earth. God

has a purpose for our suffering. He uses it all for His glory. When Jesus was cast out, beaten, and crucified, he faced that suffering so we could have access to God the Father. Paul knows how to face suffering because he knows what is to come. Glory is coming. We have that same hope. No suffering can really hurt us. If a believer faces death, she knows that she will be in the presence of God. Think of Joni Eareckson Tada. She became a quadriplegic after a diving accident. God has used her even in her suffering to minister to others as an artist, author, and radio show host. So when you are suffering, where do you find your meaning? Where do you get your joy? On what do you set your heart? God can use us in our suffering. Even in our weakness, we know where our treasure is. Jesus told us in Matthew 6:21 "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Likewise, 2 Corinthians 4:7 points out, "But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us". The writer of Hebrews tells us in Hebrews 4:12 that our treasure is that "we can approach the throne of grace with

confidence so we may receive mercy and find grace in time of need.” Therefore, Paul comforts the Ephesians and encourages them to not lose heart because God will use his imprisonment for their glory.

Because of the Gospel we experience freedom from the bondage of sin, guilt, and striving in our own strength. John 8:34 reminds us, “And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free .”

I recently read Saint Patrick’s prayer which expressed that we find our hope and security in Christ. He assured himself and us that Christ is always with us.

“Christ be with me, Christ within me, Christ behind me,  
Christ before me, Christ beside me, Christ to win me,  
Christ to comfort and restore me,  
Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ in quiet,  
Christ in danger, Christ in hearts of all that love me,  
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.”

In conclusion,

Paul gives us hope when we face suffering. God has created the church to demonstrate the hope for the future as He unites believers from every nation, tribe and peoples in His body, the church. He has called us to shine light into the darkness. We need to remember that God calls us “to know Jesus and make Him known.” John Stott states, “The God who created all things in the beginning will recreate all things in the end.”

Finally, Revelation 7:9-12 reminds us of what is to come.

“After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice,

“Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

Prayer:

Precious Father, we thank you for your great love for us by sending your Son to suffer and die for us. We thank you that we are part of your family, the church, which is made up of people from every tribe, nation, and tongue. Stir our hearts to want to share the truth of the Gospel to all. May we as your church shine as a light to the world with the hope of one day being with you in your forever kingdom.

In Jesus name we pray,

Amen