

EPHESIANS | Dealing with Discouragement

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Introduction

Last week one of the most powerful realities that Pastor Dylan pointed us toward is — that ***within the context of the church, God brings people together that would typically never choose to spend time with one another.*** Yet within His body, God brings together people from every generation, every culture, every socio-economic class, every ethnicity — and He brings us all in and says, ***“You are now ONE in me.”*** The primary way you must identify yourself is no longer according to human standards that bring division and hostility — but as My people, the primary way you must identify yourself is through ME. And through ME you are being built into community where my presence, my Spirit loves to dwell.

*This has enormous implications on what God is going to do in the life of His church. One of those implications is that God inevitably is going to confront the areas of our lives that we elevate above Him. It means God is on a mission to tear down **the idols that divide us** — to tear down the dividing walls of hostility, so that we might become one unified body, united under His Kingship.*

This was a letter that was circulated to churches in the region of Asia Minor. What Paul is saying is — it’s not just one location, it’s not just one local body of believers — but God is actively confronting and tearing down the dividing walls of hostility in the capital “C” church.

PERSONAL: When my family was pastoring in Washington state, just north of Seattle, one of the things I quickly realized is that if churches didn’t link arms and cooperate and commission with one another, they didn’t survive. The average life cycle of a new church plant is two years. And especially in that region of the country, if you don’t link arms with others in the body of Christ, you won’t last.

We learned very quickly how desperately we needed one another, how we needed relationship with other churches, other pastors, both ahead of us, and coming up behind us.

Because in our little church, we had wealthy, and homeless — C-level executives and mentally ill and addicted — all moving toward unity in Christ.

EXAMPLE: One rainy Sunday morning, a homeless man wandered in part way through the service, laid down on the hard wooden floor, and just went to sleep. He’s just snoring away in the back of the room during the sermon... I really had to step up my preaching after that.

Members of the same body

This is what can be so beautiful about God’s church. Yes, it’s messy, but it’s God’s mess. And in the Church, you have people from every background imaginable gathered together for one purpose. Paul says in Ephesians 2, that God is building this family together to become a dwelling place for His very presence.

Ephesians 3:1

For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles—

- Now, what's a bit odd here is Paul is about to take a hard left turn, I mean a major detour... and he doesn't complete the thought in vs 1 until He gets down to verse 14...

Ephesians 3:14

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father...

- He prays for the church. (*Papa Don Finto will be bringing that word for us next week.*)
- In verses 2-13 he takes us on a scenic detour before he completes his thought...

Ephesians 3:1-13

For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles— ² assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, ³ how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. ⁴ When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, ⁵ 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. ⁶ 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.

⁷ Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of His power. ⁸ To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, ⁹ and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, ¹⁰ so that **through the church** the **manifold wisdom of God** might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. ¹¹ This was according to the eternal purpose that He has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, ¹² in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in Him. ¹³ So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory.

WHY does Paul take this detour? It seems like Paul is almost bragging about God's grace over His life... like he's giving the Ephesian believers of his credentials. But if you look at the first and last verse of this section, it gives us a clue as to why Paul took the detour in the first place.

A prisoner for the Lord

Ephesians 3:1, 13

For this reason I, Paul, **a prisoner**... ¹³ So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you...

Paul is a pastor, he's a shepherd, he loves these people. God used Paul to plant these churches, and now Paul is writing to them from prison, and you can almost sense that Paul is saying, "You know what, I bet the believers in Ephesus are facing some level of discouragement because of what I'm suffering. Because I'm in prison." They already knew His credentials; they already knew God's grace upon Paul — but Paul is reminding them so that they wouldn't lose heart. That they wouldn't become discouraged – *to be without courage*.

What is the first thing that He says? He doesn't say, "I Paul, a prisoner of Rome. I Paul, a prisoner of Nero. I Paul, a prisoner for unjust reasons, or reasons I don't understand." No, he says...

Ephesians 3:1-13

...I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus...

What Paul is saying that is so profound — that if you're a follower of Jesus and you do something unethical or immoral and that gets you thrown in prison, that's one thing. But if on the other hand you say, "I'm a follower of Jesus, and I'm doing my absolute best to obey God, I'm submitted to Him, I know His will, I

know His word, I know what pleases Him and I'm doing my best to follow the ways of Jesus, and now I'm imprisoned because of it — I'm not a victim of my circumstances, I'm a prisoner for the Lord. I'm right where I'm supposed to be. I'm in alignment with His will.

EXAMPLES:

- It's the waitress who refuses to underreport her tips, and ends up getting fired for not "cooperating" with her coworkers.
- It's the indentured servant families in the brick kilns in South Asia refusing to renounce their faith — and as a result, remaining enslaved for another decade or two because they refuse to compromise.
- It's Daniel and his friends refusing to bow and worship the statue of Nebuchadnezzar and being thrown into the furnace to be burned alive.

Daniel 3:17-18

...our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. ¹⁸ But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up."

What Paul is trying to get the Ephesian believers to understand is — ***that if you're following Jesus, obeying Jesus — God will give you opportunities to glorify Him in the worst of conditions.***

When Paul was in prison in Rome he penned some of the most theologically rich writings of the New Testament. Not only that, but the guards also that Paul was chained to started giving their lives to Christ. Paul literally had a captive audience.

Philippians 4:22

All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household.

He's talking about the guards that he led to Christ! See, Paul had a perspective that we desperately lack in our culture. If we're following Jesus, obeying Jesus, and hardship comes upon us because of it... when you and I complain about those circumstances, what we're really doing is complaining about the will of our Father. He is the one who sets our course and numbers our days.

Paul never lost this perspective. And He's instructing the church in Ephesus to hold on to this perspective in light of *his* sufferings for *their* sake. And because Paul trusted in the sovereignty of God, He didn't waste a single opportunity given to him.

**Paul is telling us in verse one alone,
that whatever hardship you face as a result of obedience to Christ,
you face as prisoner of Christ,
not as a victim of circumstance.**

How do we gain the perspective that Paul has here?

Ephesians 3:2-6

² assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, ³ how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. ⁴ When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, ⁵ 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. ⁶ 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.

What is Paul saying here?

He's not bragging about his resume; he's not just giving us a list of credentials. *He's reminding us of what a miraculous thing it is that God has entrusted this message the of gospel to him! He's saying, "I'm a steward of God's grace, and while it was given to me, it wasn't given to me just for me, it was given to me FOR YOU. To serve you, to bless you."*

How many of us feel that way about the message of Christ? What a privilege it is, what a treasure it is, what a gift, not only that we are recipients, but that it's been entrusted to us to steward.

- Here's the unfortunate reality that is alive in the church today... many of us don't view the gospel that way. We don't view it as a privilege, but as a burden. *"Oh man, I've got to share the gospel with my neighbor, or coworker, or whoever... I don't want to do that so I'll just avoid them."*
- We view the gospel as a treasure for us — but not for them.
 - Do you know what that reveals? It reveals that on some level we're ashamed of the gospel. We're ashamed of Christ. We're afraid of the consequences of obedience to Christ. As a result, we disobey God when the stakes are too high for our comfort level.
 - We hoard the treasure for ourselves, and as a result our Americanized version of Christianity has become a vain, self-centered, consumeristic, unattractive and powerless mockery of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The privilege of being an obedient servant

Ephesians 3:7

Of this gospel I was made a **minister** according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of His power. ⁸To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ,

- Paul has this overwhelming sense of the privilege that he's been given. In essence what he's saying is, *"I don't belong to myself anymore. I'm a prisoner of Christ. I'm a servant, and my life is not my own. I've received the message of the gospel, and I've relinquished all the rights I previously held over my life. I'm the least of all the apostles! I received the gift of God's grace... and it came to me, of all people!"*
- Therefore, wherever God calls me, whatever He tells me, that is what I will do. If He says *wait*, I wait. If He says *go*, I go. If He says *speak*, I speak. If He says *stand*, I'll stand — and come what may, I will obey.

That word *minister* is the word *diakonos*, and it means to be a servant. **To be a servant means that you no longer serve your own purposes, but you serve the purposes of your Master.**

This is why Jesus teaches us to pray, "Your Kingdom come, Your will be done." Not my Kingdom, or my will — I'm here to serve your purposes.

Paul is saying, *"I've given up control of my whole life, and it's okay because it is the highest privilege of my life to carry this message to just one person. My values, my priorities have been completely reordered. And the core of what I'm really after in life has changed."*

Paul is reminding the believers in Ephesus, that **if you look to your circumstances for hope, you'll always be discouraged.** You'll live in perpetual defeat and discouragement. You'll blame your

circumstance for why you're not living the way you know you should, or choosing to do things you know you shouldn't. You'll think the circumstances are the problem, and you'll sit in discouragement and wish your circumstances would change.

What do you want me to do for you?

PERSONAL STORY: On Tuesday morning as I'm driving into the office, I'm listening to the portion of scripture about Jesus asking Bartimaeus, a blind man, a question.

Mark 10:51

And Jesus said to him, **"What do you want me to do for you?"**

And as I listened to this scripture, it hit me very differently than it had previously. The way I heard it wasn't, *"Rob, give me a list of things you want me to do for you."* It was more like, *"Rob, if you could ask me to do one thing for you, and that's it... just one thing... and I'll do it, what would you ask me for?"* Maybe would ask for one circumstance to change.

- That's a much harder question to answer. Because if it's a list, we'll just rattle a bunch of things and not think much about it. But if it's only one thing, and God is saying, *"I'll do it. Whatever you ask, one thing, I'll do it."* What would you ask for?

As I'm driving, I'm contemplating the question, running the list, and paying attention to what thoughts are coming to the surface... and almost immediately I recognize this desire for vindication regarding a specific part of my journey as a follower of Jesus.

- I remembered hearing John Mark Comer say, **"Our strongest desires are not actually our deepest desires."**¹

Vindication was my *strongest* desire... and as I thought about it for a few moments... and it was like the Lord offered to me, *"Okay Rob, so after vindication, what then? Because you have no idea the hardships that might be coming down the road for you..."* (which was not very comforting thing to hear from the Lord).

And it was almost instant. It was like the Spirit of God gave me words for what was a much deeper desire... and my prayer was not *"God I want vindication,"* but ***"God, I want to know you so deeply that I become the type of person that no longer needs vindication."***

- *Because if I know you like that... it doesn't matter what the consequences are. It doesn't matter the trials, the pain, the hardship, the suffering, the disappointments — because compared to knowing you — they really are light and momentary afflictions producing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.*

The enormity of the grace we've been given

If you and I grasp the enormity of the grace we've been given — like Paul, as a prisoner in Rome — your circumstances may throw you, but they will never crush you. The tree may bend in the storm, but it won't be uprooted.

¹ John Mark Comer. *Live No Lies* (Crown Publishing Group, Sep 28, 2021) p.121

It allows you to say, “Jesus, you are the one who did the unthinkable for me, you’ve rescued me from the pit, and you’ve given me life to the full.... now because you’ve given me this great privilege, to be your servant, I’m happy to do anything you want me to do. Do you want me to succeed? Wonderful. Do you want me to fail? Great. As long as I get to walk through it with you, for you.”

What Paul models for us here allows you to say, “I’m not ashamed of the gospel. I’m not afraid of the consequences of my obedience. My life is not my own, what can man do to me? I’ve been bought with the blood of Christ, and nothing can separate me from Him. I want to be found faithful stewarding the gift of God’s grace that was given to me.”

Church, is that how you feel? Is that what you think?

Paul says, “The reason I’m able to deal with my suffering is, I realize if I suffer gladly, if I suffer happily, I’m not only pleasing Jesus, but I’m also doing it for you Gentiles’ sake.” That’s the way Paul deals with it. That’s the way Paul comes to his conclusion.

**Love Christ and be after him more than anything else,
or be destroyed with self-pity.
There’s nothing else.
There are no other alternatives.**

Discussion Questions

1. What is something you’ve been discouraged about lately?
2. What do you think God’s perspective might be on that situation?

NOTES