

EPHESIANS

GOD'S PLAN FOR GOD'S CHURCH REVEALED

SERMON TITLE: Persevering Grace

SCRIPTURE: Ephesians 3:1-13

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The Book of Ephesians is a beautiful picture of the spiritual blessings we have in Christ and as members together in Jesus' Church. When he arrived, Jesus revealed what was once hidden from us throughout the ages through the power of the Holy Spirit. As a result, we're introduced to something new—a life in Christ where we find THE answer to the brokenness of this world. But what should this look like? How should we, in the power of the Holy Spirit, live this new life? Jesus' church is meant to be a source of wholeness and life amidst a world of brokenness and death. What does this entail? What does it mean practically? In this letter to the Ephesians, Paul explains the mystery of the church and gives us practical insight into living as believers who have been raised from death to life by faith in Christ.

In his excellent book, *Disappointment with God*, Philip Yancey writes: "For many people there is a large gap between what they *expect* from their faith and what they *experience*. From a steady diet of books, sermons, and personal testimonies all promising triumph and success, they learn to *expect* dramatic evidence of God working in their lives. If they do not see such evidence, they feel disappointment, betrayal, and often guilt." The fact is, when your experience doesn't match your expectations, the natural result is discouragement. And, how highly you value a certain expectation determines your degree of discouragement. The more expectations you have and the more tightly you hold those expectations, the more disappointed you may be when your experience doesn't match your expectations. For many of us, our most basic expectation goes something like this: *Get it reasonably right and things will go reasonably well*. You do your part in the marriage, get it reasonably right, and things should go reasonably well. Get it reasonably right at work, and things should go reasonably well. Get it reasonably right with your friends, and they should treat you a certain way. Get it reasonably right in your relationship with God, and things should turn out reasonably well. Not that we believe in a health, wealth, and prosperity gospel, but we do tend to believe that if we practice biblical principles then we can expect things to go reasonably well.

There's a difference, by the way, between expectation and desire. From a Christian perspective, *desire* looks forward to something, but holds it loosely. *Desire* recognizes that the fulfillment of what is hoped for may very well be beyond our control to bring it about. *Expectation*, on the other hand, looks forward to something and *assumes* the fulfillment will come because you've done your part to make it happen. But life in a broken world doesn't work that way. And, the Christian life doesn't work that way. It's not what the Bible promises in this life—just read the stories of people like Joseph and Job and Jesus and you'll understand. You see, unless we get a handle on this, we'll continue to live at the mercy of *unmet expectations*, and if our discouragement grows bigger and bigger, you may find yourself saying to yourself, "*It's just not worth it.*" And you may seriously consider throwing in the towel. Sadly, that's happened to countless Christians. We find some help with this whole idea in the passage we are going to be looking at this morning in Ephesians 3.

The people to whom the apostle Paul was writing were very discouraged because Paul was in prison and they were part of the reason why. READ Acts 21-22 to find out why. After being arrested in Ephesus, Paul had spent several years in prison and he was writing this letter from a prison cell in Rome. Paul had preached about Jesus ruling and reigning over all powers and authorities in heaven and earth. He wrote about that "in brief" in 1:19-23. And the people reading this letter were confused as to how, if Jesus had accomplished a great victory over earthly and heavenly powers, then why wasn't Paul benefiting from that victory? How could he preach victory but live in seeming defeat? It made no sense to them. It was certainly not what they expected. And, they felt so discouraged by all this that they were losing heart: "I ask you not to lose heart over my suffering, which is your glory" (Ephesians 3:13). So, Paul is going to pray for them—to pray that they would be strengthened with power in their inner being by the truth of how God continues to use Paul to open the door for the Gospel to go to more and more Gentiles. So, in verse 1, Paul starts to pray, but then he feels he needs to talk a bit more about "the mystery that had been revealed to him," and then he picks his prayer back up in verse 14. (Compare verse 1 and verse 14). Paul has talked about how God has brought Jews and Gentiles together into one family back in 2:11-22 and in this parenthesis (3:2-13), he will revisit that idea once more.

READ 3:2-13 — Now, there's a lot packed in these verses—in this parenthesis—but again, Paul's whole point is that he doesn't want them to be discouraged because he's in prison. He's saying, "I'm here in prison because I've been telling the Jews about how God has called me to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles." He's saying, "The train has not gone off the track; everything is happening exactly the way God wants it to happen. *I am a prisoner of Christ Jesus (not of Rome!) specifically because I preach the Gospel of your salvation.* He's saying, "God has revealed something new and he's revealed it to me. God has revealed a great mystery, something people in earlier times didn't know, a mystery no one expected. And the mystery has to do with you Gentiles." So, what is the mystery? The mystery now revealed is not simply that God's plan was that the Jews would be a blessing to all the other nations to introduce them to God. That was revealed all through the Old Testament (cf Genesis 12). No, the mystery was that, in Christ, God would bring Jews and Gentiles together into one body; he would create one new humanity out of two. And that new humanity would be the Church. That's God's plan for God's church revealed. READ verse 6. Then 2:14-22. See how it all ties together?

What I'm about to say could blow your mind. Paul was not arrested and thrown in prison—Paul did not die a martyr's death in Rome—because he preached a Gospel of personal salvation. He did not suffer and die because he was preaching that if you believe in Jesus, you will go to heaven when you die. No, he was a prisoner *of Christ Jesus*—he died a martyr *for Christ Jesus*—because he preached that Jews and Gentiles were now one new humanity in and through Christ. The Gospel, the Good News, is that God in Christ has reversed the curse that divided the nations—that God in Christ has abolished the law of commandments that separated Jew and Gentile—and he has made the two groups into one body in the church of Jesus. Jews and Gentiles together on equal footing before God. And, that was not revealed anywhere in the Old Testament. The Good News for you and me is we get to be a part of God's great plan. So, salvation is not first about me and then about the church. No, the Gospel is about the Church first and about you and me being a part of the church second. That's verse 7. READ verses 7-12. What's the manifold wisdom of God? That God would bring together ALL peoples into ONE new people, so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known *through the church* to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places. *Did you get that?* What God is doing by bringing all people together in Christ makes the angels—good and bad—stand back and go "Wow! —"Amazing!" *God really is the Father of all peoples.* Again, this is God's plan for God's church revealed! That's what he unpacks for us in the prayer parenthesis found in verses 2-13.

NOW, here's the thing. All that explanation is important to understand how Paul was able to go through difficult times and not get discouraged. I call it persevering grace—the grace to persevere through difficult times. Remember what we said about expectations? *When your experience doesn't match your expectations, you can easily become discouraged.* Paul was not discouraged; he was encouraged. Paul was in a bad environment, but he was encouraged. *Why?* Because Paul's perspective on his circumstances and his calling enabled him to live by persevering grace. *How so?* (1) Paul was not defined by his circumstances. (2) Paul did not expect things to be easy; his perspective was not, "If I get it reasonably right, things will go reasonably well." No, Paul's perspective on his circumstances and his calling enabled him to overcome false expectations. In other words, having the right perspective saved him from wrong expectations. Focusing on God's unseen realities saved him from having unrealistic expectations. READ 2 Corinthians 4:16-18. (3) Only the Spirit can work this expectation-breaking perspective in our lives. This is exactly what Paul is praying for us in 3:14-21. And this is how we need to be praying for ourselves and others as well. We will look at this prayer in more detail next week. "Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen!"

Community Group Questions —

Read Eph. 3:1-13. As you read through these verses, what are the main themes? Take note of the words or phrases that jump out at you. Share those with your group.

- What is God's plan and purpose for the church in verses 10 and 11? What's one way the church—and you personally as a part of the church—can put the manifold wisdom of God on display?
- How did an "eternal perspective" change Paul's sense of what was happening in his life as he sat in prison? How about for you when you find yourself in a "prison of problems?"

Read Eph. 3:14-21. As you read through Paul's prayer, take note of the words or phrases that most resonate with you personally. Share those with your group.

- How do we hear this prayer differently knowing that Paul is praying this prayer for a church, not merely individual persons?
- How have you dealt with unmet expectations that have left you discouraged?
- Have you ever changed your perspective on a significant issue that helped you move from discouragement back to joy?
- In your life, has God ever done immeasurably more than you asked or imagined? What's most significant to you about the theology found in the first three chapters in Ephesians?