

Jason Upchurch - Ephesians 3:1-13 Take heart, we only know a little

I think our passage this morning is going to be unusually encouraging to us in a variety of ways. It might not seem like it at first but I think you'll see how these truths come alive.

Before I get to the encouraging part, let me begin by saying that as a Christian you're going to face a lot of things in life that are going to be discouraging. And especially when you're really striving to follow after Jesus and things don't turn out the way you think they should you could be discouraged.

You're going to have times when you tell the gospel to an unbelieving friend in gentleness and grace, you were finally bold and you thought the conversation went really well. And they text you a few days later disowning you.

There will be family members that you've prayed for and loved and claimed they know the gospel who later abandon Jesus. Was your time and effort all a waste?

Maybe you lose your job because you won't do what the boss wants you to do because it would violate your conscience. Or you lose money because you won't lie. You're not in the "in group" because you don't do the things of the world like they do.

A lot of times discouragement comes because we're trying to be faithful to Jesus and we get backlash for that.

That's what's going on in this passage. How do we know that? Look at the last line in **Vs 13**. This brings the whole thing together. **Read 13**

Where did that come from? We've had 2.5 chapters of super thick theology and then out nowhere Paul says "Hey, don't lose heart." Don't be discouraged, don't be down. Why would the Ephesians be down and discouraged?

Here's where we're at in the flow of Ephesians. Paul has talked about how the amazing gospel message has come to the Gentiles. God in his amazing grace has brought us near, made us his people, given us all the blessings of Abraham, given us covenants and promises. He no longer dwells in a temple made by bricks, he dwells in us who are his temple. He did all of that through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Not only did Jesus save us from our sins, but he brought us into the family of God.

And what's the result of that amazing message? What's Paul's reward for proclaiming that message to the Gentiles? **Read 3:1**

There it is. Paul's great reward for preaching the marvelous gospel message that Jews and Gentiles who have faith in Jesus are the one people of God is that he's doing hard time in prison. That's the worldly thanks he gets for his efforts to proclaim the gospel.

And it seems as though the Ephesians are discouraged by this. They love Paul and love his message but they're a little disheartened by what's happened to him.

This is a constant theme we see in Scripture: we are not often rewarded for righteousness the way we'd like to be.

Jospeh runs away from the Potipher's wife - he gets thrown in prison.
Moses stands up to Pharaoh - he makes the slaves work harder.
David plays calming music in Saul's house - he almost gets killed.
Nehemiah wants to rebuild the wall - he is criticized.

Often the worldly thanks and results we get for being faithful are not what we'd really like to see or experience.

But in each of those stories if we were to stop the story there we'd miss the bigger picture.

What eventually happens to Joseph? He eventually rules the whole world.
What eventually happens to Moses? He leads the people out of Egypt and defeats Pharaoh.
David becomes king, Nehemiah builds the wall in record time.

What keeps them going in the midst of that?

Here's the big picture: Take courage in the midst of gospel setbacks because God is doing more than we know.

Talking about the Providence of God John Piper once said "Right now God is doing 10,000 things in your life and you might be aware of like 3 of them."

That's true. God is often doing all kinds of things we can't imagine or don't understand or aren't even on our radar. And so when things aren't happening the way we want them to, we need to keep in mind God is doing more than what we know.

We see that in several ways here.

1) Set backs are often how the gospel moves forward.

I mentioned several examples a minute ago, but if you think of the whole storyline of the Bible this is a pretty common theme. So much so that really the whole gospel seems like a set back. They can't imagine that God would allow the Messiah to be crucified.

Jesus dies on the cross and everyone thinks: Man, it's just over. The disciples all run, they're devastated. **Turn to Luke 24:13-27** for a minute. This is the road to Emmaus - remember this? This is actually after the resurrection but many of those who followed Jesus don't know he's been raised yet. **Read 13-35**

They're devastated. And then there's this report that maybe Jesus is alive and they don't know what to do with that. Have you ever been so down you don't even want to hear potential good news because if it's not true you might not be able to take the disappointment? That's these guys.

At the core of the gospel is that Jesus dies. That was a setback to everyone but God. How God raises us from the dead spiritually and will raise us from the dead physically in the resurrection when Jesus comes is through the exact same power he used raising Jesus himself from the dead.

If Jesus doesn't die and rise, we don't die and rise. But first there has to be the death - the supposed setback. This is a constant Bible theme. **Turn to Phil 1:12-14.**

Paul is in prison again. In fact, if you add it all up Paul is in prison about 1/4 of his life after he becomes a Christian. That's a lot. Imagine if our SMLs were in prison 1/4 of their life.

"Why are you in prison again?" "So I met this guy at Arby's and we were talking about the gospel and a mob fired up and there was a massive protest, the police came and here I am."

Imagine if Dirk was in prison 1/4 of the time we knew him. "Hey I need help at Bible camp this year - any way you could volunteer? Also, could you send me some money for the prison snack bar."

That's a lot of time. And it sounds silly - but Paul lived this. Four books in the NT are actually called "prison epistles" because Paul is writing them from prison: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon.

There are often setbacks, but this is often how the gospel moves forward. Here's Paul in prison writing to the Philippians. **Read 12-14.**

Isn't this interesting. Paul is chained to guards in prison, those guards have to rotate constantly. So what's Paul talk to them about? Jesus. The whole imperial guard knows not only why Paul is in prison, but the gospel itself.

If he's going to be tossed into the slammer, everyone's going to hear about Jesus. He's chained, but the gospel is not chained. **Read 1:27-30**

So he says live your life in godly way - in a manner worthy of the gospel? Why? For it has been granted to us to not only believe but also to suffer.

We love the doctrine of predestination and that God has appointed us to eternal life. He granted us to believe - we like that one. But do we also like that God granted it to us to suffer for his sake? And don't forget that - he hasn't just granted to us to suffer -period. He has granted it to us to suffer for him.

He suffered for us, we should gladly suffer for him.

Look at the end of Philippians. This is the little Easter Egg at the end. **Read 21-23**

Everybody greets you, especially who? Members of Caesar's household. Who from Caesar's household is a Christian? The prison guards who were chained to Paul.

Paul's in prison for sharing the gospel, so he's going to make the most of it and preach to whoever and it turns out his suffering means the salvation of the guards.

1 Pet. 4:12: Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you as though something strange is happening to you. But rejoice, insofar as you share in Christ's sufferings' that you may also rejoice and be glad.

When we suffer it's not strange, it's not unusual. It's how the gospel goes forward. And our conduct and attitude in the suffering is how the aroma of the gospel spreads. **Turn back to Eph. 3**

Big picture: take heart when setback happen because God is doing more than we know.

1) Setback are often how the gospel moves forward.

2) The Gentiles were always part of God's saving plan. But no one knew it. It was hidden it was a mystery for ages and ages. **Read 1-6**

So Paul is talking to Gentiles here. He says I'm in prison because of you guys! I'm in prison for preaching this amazing gospel that Jesus - the Jewish Messiah - has broken down the dividing wall of hostility between Jew and Gentile and made the two one. There's no more Jew or Gentile in the eyes of God. It's just whoever believes in Jesus.

But the inclusion of the Gentiles was a mystery for thousands of years. No one saw it coming. God was doing something and planning something no one could have imagined. In **Verse 3** how did Paul say he figured it out? By revelation. **Read 3**

Remember Paul was the consummate Jewish scholar - he was rising in popularity and rank beyond many of those his own age. He was a Rabbi prodigy and he couldn't fathom God was ever going to include the Gentiles. God had to reveal it to him.

Here's the irony of that: the OT is packed with examples of Gentiles who were grafted in to the covenant people of God. We think of Rahab and Ruth and Naaman. But there are others.

Asenath. Who's that? Jospheh's wife, who bore Ephraim and Manasseh. All the earth was ruled by a godly Jewish king with a Gentile wife who bore 2 tribes of Israel.

Tamar who bore Perez to Judah who was Jesus's far off grandmother.

You remember when Israel was coming out of Egypt? Who came with them? Many of the Egyptians. And God let them cross the sea, and eat the manna and drink the water with the rest of Israel.

Remember the Gibeonites who deceived Joshua when the Israelites entered the Promised Land? They said they were from far away but were actually from a little ways over? And we roll our eyes at Joshua for being so dumb and think these evil liars got mercy. You know what they did? They hacked their way into the covenant all by God's grace.

But they're Gentiles who got as Jesus said "they took the Kingdom by force." You fast forward to **2 Samuel 21** and there's this famine in Israel. Why? Because king Saul tried to kill them. Saul didn't treat them as part of the covenant people of God so God cursed Israel because Israel wasn't accepting these Gentiles. David had to fix that.

But the gentiles were a mystery.

Have you ever seen the difference between polarized sunglasses and normal sunglasses? Usually if you go to outdoor shows or the fair they'll have people selling polarized sunglasses. At outdoor shows there will be a pond or something with fish in it and you look at can't really see anything. Maybe a fish or two. But polarization removes light waves so you can actually see more of what's going on and less glare.

So you put these glasses on and you realize the pond is full of fish. Were the fish there the whole time? Yes. But it had to be revealed through these special glasses.

That's kind of how it is with the Gentiles in the OT. If you didn't know any better, you'd think there's no hope for Gentiles. But if you read the OT this side of Jesus you look and see Gentile inclusion everywhere.

Remember Jonah? The whole nation of Gentile Assyrians repents when Jonah preaches the weakest sermon ever preached. Over and over throughout the gospels the Jews reject Jesus as Messiah and Jesus chastises them for their weak faith and it's the Gentiles who are commended for their great faith.

And we find out that in the gospel God had always planned to include mass salvation of the Gentiles. Paul says twice that this was a mystery. **Read 3-6**

When the NT authors say something was a mystery they don't mean we can't understand it. What they mean is that God didn't reveal something before and now he has. **Read 6**

This is the radical stuff we've talked about for the last 2 weeks. Gentile believers in Jesus are fellow heirs - we get the same promises as the believing Jews.

Some people will say "No, there are still promises just to genetic Jews." No there's not. All the promises of God are fulfilled in Jesus. There's only one group of God's people - the covenant people of God through faith. That's why he says we become partakers of the promise through Christ. If you believe in Jesus you get all the promises. God's not holding out on us Gentiles.

But the point is that God was always doing this. And nobody really saw it. He was always working and no one realized it.

Has there ever been a time in your life when you were really confused by what God was doing? You were being incredibly faithful and God's like "Well, let's move you over here." Or you were wandering around and God's like "Okay, let's bless your socks off despite not being all that wise." You ever had stuff that seems just totally random?

And maybe now that you look back on it you see some connections. You see the dots connected. You have the proverbial polarized glasses on and you can see that life wasn't that random?

Life is never random. We live under the constant good providence of God. We just don't always see it. The Gentiles being grafted is the unexpected good providence of God on a big scale.

But it happens on a small scale too.

- 1) Setbacks are often how the gospel moves forward.
- 2) The Gentiles were always part of God's saving plan.

3) God uses unlikely people for his purpose. **Read 7-9**

So God in his good providence often uses unlikely people for his purpose. Paul was a very unlikely candidate for the ministry God gave. We would have never guessed that Paul was the guy God would pick.

Paul, the superstar Jewish rabbi prodigy. Who was he a minister to: Jew or Gentile? Gentiles.

He says in **Galatians** that God made Peter the apostle to the Jews and made Paul an apostle to the Gentiles. Now that doesn't mean that he never encountered Jews. Whenever he went to a city he started at the synagogue or Jewish prayer meeting. And basically stayed there until he got kicked out. Then he went to the Gentiles.

But what an odd thing for God to use a Pharisee, thoroughly trained in the OT Law and the embodiment of Jewish faithfulness to preach Christ to those who could care less about all his training.

Have you ever called you into some ministry and you're like "I have no idea what I'm doing here or why he would ever do that?" Or have you seen someone who was chosen to lead something or minister in some way and they have zero experience and yet in God's providence they do an amazing job?

This is often how God works. This isn't a bug, it's a feature. God often uses unlikely people to do what he needs done.

God often calls those who aren't prepared for the work and uses them in their weakness for his glory.

Not only was Paul the elite Jewish scholar, he calls himself the least of all the apostles. **Read 8**

Why does he say that? Well it seems like he's the last apostle to be appointed. But it's also probably because he began life as a persecutor of the church. None of the other apostles put Christians into prison or cast their vote to have them stoned.

Paul did that. He was a persecutor of the church. Now he's the one preaching the gospel. It was so bad, if you remember, in the book of Acts that Barnabas had to vouch for Paul's conversion because no one wanted to be around him.

This is how God works. And what it does is show his wisdom, his grace to accomplish his will despite the weakness of his people. He uses unlikely people.

4) There's a larger spiritual world that watches us.

Before I read this, I think most of us know the story of Job. How Job's life and family and wealth is all taken away because there's a contest between Satan and God. Satan is trying to prove God wrong. In Job, it also mentions that the sons of God all show up to report to God on a regular basis.

So what's going on in Job's life isn't just about Job, is it? It's not just about him or his family or his wealth. There's a bigger audience. We have to understand, that's true with us, too. Watch carefully what Paul says here. **Read 8-13**

Paul gives all this theology and then says in **Vs. 10**: so that. Here's the purpose of all of this. Here's the purpose. **Read 10**

Why did God bring the filthy Gentiles into the covenant people of God? Why did he bless us with promises and grace and sonship and eternal life? So that God's wisdom might be shown to rulers and authorities in heavenly places.

This is sacred ground. There's a sense in which everything we experience and do is lived in the light of the spiritual world that we can't see.

When we were first married we used to watch a lot of sitcoms. And it's a little weird to think that you're peering into these peoples' lives - well, their fictional life. Millions of people tuning in to watch how the plot is going to unfold. How people are going to react to this or that. But it's all fake.

But there's a show that's real. It's our life. Who's watching? Heavenly beings. Rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

1 Pet. 1:12 says that angels long to look into the salvation we've been given. It seems as though there's a fascination the spiritual world has with the physical world.

Just like in Job, God asked Satan if he knew about Job. And he knew right away. How did he know about Job? What made Job stand apart?

His godliness. There was no one like him. I think it fascinates the spiritual world that we live our entire lives by faith. I think that's something that's hard for them to understand. That we live our lives by truths we can't see.

We're can't see God, they can.

We can't see the resurrected Jesus, they can.

We can't see the glories of heaven, they can.

We live very short lives, they've seen the world for thousands of years.

We live by faith, they live by sight.

We live our entire lives striving after things we can't see. We just trust God is true. And I think that fascinates the spiritual world.

And it puts God's glory on display.

You think about kids, or employees. You want them to obey when you're with them, but really more than that you want them to obey when you're not there. Do they really believe this? Have they really changed.

When we live our lives in faith and hope, it puts God's glory and wisdom on display. There's a spiritual world around us that glorifies God even when we don't know it or think it.

And it's truth - that we're part of a larger spiritual world - that Paul says should encourage us. **Read 11-13**

If you're struggling, don't lose heart. Don't give up. God's doing way more than we could ever know. And our boldness to trust and obey through trials is what brings him glory in ways we could never imagine.

Pray