

Ephesians 3

Last we covered in Chapter 2:

- He made us alive from being dead in our trespasses.
- We are saved by grace through faith.
- We are created by His workmanship to do good works.
- We're brought near to God by Jesus' blood that brings us the forgiveness of sins.
- Jesus is our source of peace.
- Jesus is the cornerstone of the foundation of our lives as new creations in Him.

Here in Chapter 3, we get the last of Paul's presentation of all that God has given to the believer.

¹ For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles—

As a reminder, Paul is writing this epistle from a Roman prison. He's a prisoner because of the Jews' allegations that he was disrupting the temple. Yet, look how he describes who he really is a prisoner for – Christ Jesus. The Greek word for prisoner is “*desmios*.” Alternative interpretations of this word include being bound, captive, or tied. For most people, the connotation of being known as a prisoner typically comes with the concept of being convicted guilty of some crime – or at least being in a situation that is counter to his/her will.

Paul noted in his greeting in Chapter 1 that he was an apostle by the will of God. On the surface, there would appear to be a disconnect between being called an apostle and being called a prisoner. What could be the connecting point, or bridge, that helps us reconcile these seemingly opposing titles? All I can think of is a deep love and devotion. One of Paul's apostolic counterparts was John. He said in chapter four, verse 19 of his first epistle that, “We love Him [Jesus] because He first loved us.”

A common question for people who have been in a relationship is, “Who made the first move?” In every believer's relationship with God, the answer, according to John's words, is always going to be the same – Jesus! God was the pursuer of each of us. The proof of the depth of His passion for His pursuit for each of us is found at the cross. Jesus confirmed this in John 15:13, “Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends.”

For Paul, he received as full as one can possibly receive the power of the message of God's love and devotion to him. More importantly, he fully understood that he did not do anything to deserve God's passion for him. I'll get to more of the why he understood this when we get to verse eight. Paul's response to his recognizing and receiving God's love for him was to abandon every component of his will in exchange for complete surrender to God's will. Such a surrender in a relationship is a confession and commitment to, effectively, being completely managed and controlled by the other party.

The key difference between our common understanding of what it means to be a prisoner and that of Paul's is Paul's “incarceration” was an act of his will. You could say that his conviction of God's love for him was so compelling, he became God's convict by choice. God never forces Himself on anyone – that would be a violation of the free will He gives to each of us. From Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, in chapter 11, he lays out a laundry list of trials in verses 24-27 he's experienced because of his imprisonment for Christ. They include: forty *stripes* minus one; beaten with rods; stoned; shipwrecked; a night and a day in the deep; *in* journeys; *in* perils of: waters, robbers, *my own* countrymen, of the Gentiles, in the city, in the wilderness, in the sea, among false brethren; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, and in cold and nakedness.

We should take notice that one of the groups of people Paul had issues with were the Gentiles. Verse one notes that he is a prisoner of Christ *for them*! Only love can provide the foundation and commitment to the point of willingly becoming a prisoner for Jesus. He no doubt saw the parallel that Jesus came to save the Jews – but was rejected and persecuted by them while he was to be the apostle to the gentiles, but they were rejecting and persecuting him.

² if indeed you have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which was given to me for you,

Once again hitting the dictionary, I looked up “dispensation.” One definition is, “*a particular arrangement or provision especially of providence or nature.*” Many Bible scholars have categorized the entire Bible into seven dispensations, or distinct historical periods in which God tests humanity under specific responsibilities and revelations. They are:

1. Innocence – the time of Adam & Eve before their sin.
2. Conscience – the time from their sin to the flood.
3. Human Government – the time from the flood to Abraham’s calling
4. Promise – the time from Abraham’s calling to the giving of the Law to Moses.
5. The Law – the time from the giving of the commandments to Jesus’ death & resurrection.
6. Grace – the time from Pentecost to the rapture – the church age which we are in now.
7. The Kingdom – a future 1,000-year reign of Jesus’s second coming.

The number seven is significant as it is symbolic of completion. That being said, this is man’s assessment. It does make some sense, but it’s not worth getting dogmatic or defensive about it if questioned. Paul’s point in verse 2 that this sixth dispensation of grace was given to Him by God for the purpose of revealing it to the Gentiles. What’s notable about this is the Jews are not part of this dispensation. While there’s no question God dealt with the Jews with enormous grace in the Old Testament, this particular period of grace is reserved solely for the Gentiles to be saved. The Jews are, though, included in the seventh and final dispensation.

³ how that by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I have briefly written already, ⁴ by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ),

Paul spoke about a mystery in Chapter 1. As a reminder, he told us in verses 9 & 10 about this mystery of God’s will, “....according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself, that in the dispensation of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth—in Him.” In other words, it was God’s will to one day gather both Jew and Gentile in Christ.

This mystery was something none of the Old Testament prophets knew or wrote about. Several times in Isaiah’s book, he mentions that God’s blessings would extend to the Gentiles. However, he did not know how these blessings would be extended. I have often thought about what it must have been being an Old Testament prophet. Much of the prophecies they wrote about they couldn’t have understood when writing them. Some of these prophecies named individuals who were not yet born and wouldn’t be for more than 100 years. Others were about future ruling kingdoms that at the time of the writing were barely existing. I have such deep admiration for these prophets – as well as gratitude to the Jews for preserving these writings. Fulfilled prophecy is one of the strongest testimonies to the inerrancy of God’s Word.

⁵ which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets: ⁶ that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers

of His promise in Christ through the gospel,⁷ of which I became a minister according to the gift of the grace of God given to me by the effective working of His power.

The idea of the Gentiles being fellow heirs of the promises of God to the Jews was as outrageous a claim that could be to the Jews. As I mentioned, last week, in the minds of the Jews, Gentiles were unclean – they were to be avoided at all costs. The thought of the Gentiles receiving the promises and inheritance of the Jews was blasphemous. This was the primary reason Paul was so constantly persecuted by his fellow countrymen.

The portal, or path, to make us Gentiles eligible to receive these promises was Jesus Christ and His gospel. Jesus did all the work, and all we have to do to receive these promises and inheritances is to believe in the One who did all the work. From the Jews perspective, who only knew the Law and its demands to live according to it to have hope of being right with God, you can understand their distaste for the seemingly over-simplistic method of gaining their promises and inheritance simply by belief. I get it.

However, if you go back to their founding father, Abraham, what was it that earned the promises that God would give to him? Back in Genesis 15, God told Abraham that he would father his own child – despite the fact that Abraham was about 100 and his wife, Sara, was believed to be around 80. Abraham's response? "And he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness." (Genesis 15:6). Being accounted for righteousness was the key that opened the door for Abraham to be in a relationship with God. Yes, he still sinned, but his belief, or faith, from God's perspective, was what lifted him above the rest.

For God, whether it's the Old Testament or New Testament, a relationship with Him has always been hinged on faith. The Law was created to set an unattainable standard of holy living to be right with God. Why would God create such a thing? To make people aware of their inability to live a perfect holy life and, therefore, need a Savior to help them be forgiven of their disobedience and get connected to the LORD. Can you see the grace of a holy God through such a provision of His Son to make a way for us hopeless sinners to have hope to be reconciled to God? I'm overwhelmed by this extension of His love.

⁸To me, who am less than the least of all the saints, this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ,

Paul calls himself the least of all the saints. Given all that Paul did for God's kingdom, for him to call himself the least is a strong indication of the depth of his humility. Prior to his conversion, Paul was an elite and well-trained Jewish scholar of the Scriptures as well as a zealous persecutor of the early church. He was believed to be an assenting member of the men who sentenced Stephen to be the first Christian martyr through stoning. Paul likely was a witness to Stephen's final words before dying, "...as he was calling on *God* and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." And when he had said this, he fell asleep." (Acts 7:59-60)

On the way to Damascus - carrying papers that gave him permission to persecute members of the early church – a light shown around him from heaven, and he heard Jesus saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" Jesus would go on to say to Paul, "It is hard for you to kick against the goads." I take some comfort that Jesus sees yours and my persecutions for our faith as persecutions against Him. As for the phrase, "It is hard for you to kick against the goads," a goad was a sharp, pointed rod that people would stick into the hooves of oxen when they got out of line in their service. I believe the "goads" Jesus was alluding to was Paul was likely moved and maybe even haunted by Stephen's dying words of pleading for forgiveness for his persecutors.

When it comes to being a Christian – a child of God, there is a dynamic that, at least for me, to sort out. On one side of the coin, when we start to take in all that Jesus did to make the way for us to become His child and when we, as we’ve been learning in these first three chapters of Ephesians, realize all the blessings He has poured out on us because of our faith in Him, we should develop a sense of real value. There is no truer testimony of the value of something than what the buyer is willing to pay for it. This great sense of worth is the one side of the coin.

The other side of the coin is, at least for me, to feel too good about ourselves – get too puffed up because God loves us so much. This is when our pride and self-righteousness can take over and make us feel above others. The counterbalance to pride and self-righteousness is humility, or humbleness. As I mentioned earlier, Paul is showing great humility in calling himself the least of all the saints. What caused his humility? A direct encounter with God – with Jesus. Should you have the blessing of a moment where God draws close to you and maybe even speaks to you somehow – such as through His Word or worship, I can assure you whatever pride and self-confidence you have will disintegrate in a millisecond. You will be completely undone. His holiness, goodness, love, and countless other glorious facets of His character overwhelm you like a Tsunami.

This is why I do not understand self-righteous Christians. If you have had a true encounter with Jesus, I don’t see how it’s possible to think of yourself more than you do. The prophet Micah summed this issue up well, “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8)

I have an issue with the interpreters using the word “unsearchable” in the phrase, “the unsearchable riches of Christ.” My issue is the connotation I think of for unsearchable means you can’t know them. Another way to describe this, which I like a little better, is they are past finding out. Where I’m going with this is I don’t understand why God would be speaking of His riches in His Word but not make them knowable. I have no problem with the concept of because God is infinite, we can’t know all His riches as finite beings. The God I know and believe in *wants* us to discover as much about Him as we can for the purpose of growing in our love for Him.

⁹ and to make all see what *is* the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ; ¹⁰ to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly *places*,

Paul points out that all are to see the fellowship of the mystery – this mystery that was set out at the beginning of time – that God had been hiding the ultimate unifying force of His creation that He created through Jesus would be bringing Jew and Gentile together in Jesus.

Paul goes on to note that this mystery is truly the manifold wisdom of God is to be revealed through His church. This will be an unveiling to even the angels in the heavenly places. Angels are not all knowing like God – they’re more like us in this manner. Peter noted this in the first chapter of his first epistle – that the angels desired to investigate the dynamics of the Gospel and the amazing truth that the Holy Spirit would live in each believer.

¹¹ according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord, ¹² in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through faith in Him. ¹³ Therefore I ask that you do not lose heart at my tribulations for you, which is your glory.

I’ve talked before about one of the great blessings of being a believer in and follower of God is a life as a new creation in Christ brings with it true purpose. When we read in verse eleven about the concept of an *eternal* purpose which He accomplished through His Son, we can see how the purpose God has for each

of our lives as individuals blends into an overall eternal purpose. What's that eternal purpose? That we may have boldness and access with confidence through faith in Him.

I believe this is God revealing the original plan of His creation. He created us to glorify Him. He also created us to enjoy having a relationship with Him. This relationship would consist of God's constant availability and welcoming way to allow us to come to him boldly and with confidence – not out of fear – for the purpose of getting to know Him and Him teach and bless us. Once again, all of this was to be through one portal – belief.

Paul understood that revealing this was God's purpose for him. Therefore, Paul is telling them to not lose heart at his tribulations. He saw the blessings of being in God's will far exceed whatever suffering that was coming from that place. He confirmed this in Romans 8:18, "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy *to be compared* with the glory which shall be revealed in us."

When you're in the middle of a storm – be it health, financial, or relational, God will find a way to not only teach you about Him but also equip you with the experience of getting through the storm with God's help to assist others who are going through similar circumstances. This is admittedly a hard thing to take in when you're hurting but having been on the other side of a storm, I can assure you it is true.

¹⁴For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁵from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named,

Some people really get hung up on being in the "right position" to pray. Some think only real prayer happens when you're on your knees. Others think you should have your arms stretched wide. I don't believe God cares at all about what physical position in for our prayers. What he truly cares about is the position of our hearts. We once again see the need for humility. Psalm 51:17 sums this point up well, "The sacrifices of God *are* a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart— these, O God, You will not despise."

Did you catch the concept that there's a whole family in heaven and earth? What's the name of this family? The Kingdom of God. Some of us have been blessed with wonderful families, while some not-so-much. The Kingdom of God offers a new and different family – one where everyone can agree on at least one thing – the beauty and wonder of its namesake, God.

¹⁶that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man,

Remember my earlier rant about the unsearchable riches of God? Verse 16 makes much more sense. Paul is praying now that God would grant each of you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened. Not by education. Not by working out in the gym. True strength is in the mightiness and power we have with the Holy Spirit given to us as our guaranty of redemption. On our own, we are sitting ducks in spiritual battles. We are no match for Satan. With the power of the Holy Spirit that is with us at all times, now we are properly equipped down to our soul to survive spiritual battles. Remember, He who is in you is greater than He who is in the world.

¹⁷that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love,

The Greek word for "dwell" literally means to settle down and be at home. Do you think Jesus would feel at home in your heart? Are there things you would not want Him to see? I'm sure you've seen a scene in a movie or show something like where someone shows up unexpectedly, and the person who owns the

home or apartment must rush around picking up clothes, plates, glasses, bottles, etc. to make the place look more presentable and welcoming.

If Jesus were to show up at the doorstep of your heart, would He feel welcome? Would He find things and or thoughts you're doing/thinking of that are not in line with His desire for us to be holy? I'm not trying to lay a guilt trip on you or condemn you. The good news is you already have the Holy Spirit dwelling in you. He will convict you of those things that you're doing/thinking of that are neither pleasing to God nor good for you. These can be uncomfortable times, but they are important as they, when these issues are cleaned up not only make Jesus feel more welcome, but bring more peace into your life.

Jesus said in Revelation 3:20, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me." Below is a famous painting by Holman Hunt. He called it "Light of the World." It is a picture of Jesus standing at the door of what appears to be an English cottage. It hangs in St. Paul's cathedral in London. A critic was reported to tell Mr. Hunt that there was a problem with the painting. There was no doorknob on the door. Mr. Hunt replied, "The door handle is only on the inside, for it's up to the one within to respond to the knock of Jesus."



Praise God each of you have responded to this knock. Jesus wants to feel welcome in your heart, and He is working with the Holy Spirit to clean out the junk through His faithful love, forgiveness, mercy, and grace. The question for each of us to ask ourselves, will we let Him?

¹⁸ may be able to comprehend with all the saints what *is* the width and length and depth and height—

¹⁹ to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

²⁰ Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, ²¹ to Him *be* glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

One of the big mistakes most Christians make, and I'm including myself in this category, is putting their concept of limitations on the possible onto God. Jesus said in Matthew 19:26 that all things are possible with God. There is only one thing I've found in Scripture God can't or won't do. That is lie. God cannot or will not lie. Other than that, everything is on the table when it comes to God doing seemingly the impossible. God is a very big God. Isaiah said in chapter 40:12a of his book, "Who has measured the waters in the hollow of His hand, measured heaven with a span (or the width of His hand.)?"

Paul's prayer – his desire is that each of us may be able to somehow comprehend the width, length, depth, and height of the love of Christ. He claims that to fully comprehend Christ's love is beyond our knowledge. This is why I have always made a component of virtually every one of my teachings the cross. There is no greater, no more powerful display of the totality of Jesus' love for you than at the cross.

In our study over the Summer on Mark's gospel, we went into great detail of what Jesus willingly went through for the sole purpose to make a way for those who choose to believe in Him to be forgiven and reconciled to God the Father. His love for you propelled Him through being wrongfully accused, beaten, scourged, and killed. Your forgiven and reconciled state was the joy that was set before Him in Hebrews 12:2 to endure the cross and despise the shame.

The gift of the Holy Spirit brings us not only hope of our salvation but also hope for experiencing as much of the fulness of God as we are willing to receive. Jesus said in John 10:10b, "I have come that they may have life, and that they may have *it* more abundantly." Paul confirms this when he said, "God is able to exceedingly abundantly above all we ask or think." How is He to do this? "According to the power that is within us."

Preparing for these lectures has forced me to take the time, let go of the pressures of this world for a bit, and take in the depth and meaning of the Scriptures. The result of this focus? Mixed emotions. On the one hand, I find there is possible a life lived in complete surrender to God and allow the unfathomable power of the Holy Spirit to change me for the better and impact others. For Jehovah Jireh, which means the Lord will provide, to be exactly what His name claims - provide my every need – not want. I see the possibility of being so secure in God's love and care that I can let go of my insecurities and concerns and focus on loving Him, my family, and those He brings into my life. I see churches letting go of their endless and relentless struggles and efforts to put new people in the seats and focus on caring for and ministering to the ones that are already in the seats. From Acts chapter two, who was adding to the church? The LORD.

On the other hand, I see the life I'm living. Please don't get me wrong – I love the life God has graciously given me. He's given me my wife, Vickie – the best and most amazing woman I could ever want, ask, or hope for. He's given me my sons, Wesley and Marcus and Allison, Wesley's wife, and Ariana, Marcus' soon-to-be wife, and my three grandchildren, Fox, Giselle, and Pierce. I am abundantly blessed with these wonderful people whom I deeply love. We are all comparatively healthy, we have jobs, and we have places to live. Most importantly, every one of them knows and loves the LORD. On this alone, there are no mixed emotions – just daily gratitude for God's exceedingly abundant blessings and provision.

The mixed emotions are likely coming from a place where I'm at an age where I know there is a lot more of this life behind me than there is in front of me. I'm at a point in my working life that I'm ready to shift gears and live less for the paycheck and more for my giftings. I guess what I'm saying about the mixed emotions comment is God is unveiling to me more of what is possible when He's fully allowed to be God.

I know I've alluded to this several times over the Summer and in this study, but I'm fascinated by our original design – to be constantly walking and fellowshiping with God in His fullness. I realize I won't see that until I breathe my last breath and come face-to-face with Jesus. However, I do believe, by the power of the Holy Spirit and God's good and perfect will through Jesus, I can get a lot closer to that than the way I'm living now.

I honestly didn't write this for the purpose of creating a segue into next week, but it works out nicely that it did. As I mentioned at the beginning of chapter one, Paul spends the first three chapters of this amazing epistle laying out the tidal wave of blessings from God on the believer. Starting next week and for the subsequent two weeks that Paul's going to show us what the right and reasonable response is in how we're to live as a result of receiving all God has given us from His great love and amazing grace.

Any questions? As usual, I have a few:

- Have you ever found yourself feeling like you need to do something more than believe to please God?
- Describe a humbling moment in your life.
- What is your reaction to all that God has poured out on you in the first three chapters?