

Ephesians 14-02-23a

This is Sunday, the 23rd of February, Feb, February, Feb 2014. We're in the book of Ephesians, chapter 3. We'll take a moment to address ourselves to God the Father, and seek the ministry of God the Holy Spirit, in the power and presence of God the Son, in whom we have all things. Shall we pray? Father, what a comfort it is to remember that our success as believers, our progress and our future as your children doesn't depend on our strength.

It doesn't depend on our abilities or our natural talents. We subsist, we abide, we progress, we grow, and we achieve because of what you give us through the Lord Jesus. We thank you for Him, we thank you for His faithful and obedient ministry when He came to this earth and lived in human flesh, was subjected to the tests and the temptations and the challenges that we face, and He met them all successfully and without sin, using the very same resources that you give to us, your Word and your Spirit.

We thank you for the gift of these things for ourselves. We thank you for the age and the time in which we live. We thank you for the circumstances that you have placed us in.

We thank you for our challenges as well as our blessings. And we pray that as we look at this portion of your Word this morning, that God the Holy Spirit will minister it to us in a way that is meaningful and that will reside in our memories and in our souls to be fruitful in application in the hours and the days ahead. We pray these things in Jesus' name.

Amen. Ephesians chapter 3, quick review, and I mean quick review of the book. Chapter 1 expressed to us the many things that we have in Christ, how important it is to recognize ourselves, to identify ourselves, to think of ourselves in Him, in Christ.

There's a lot of force exerted. There's a lot of pressure in the world today to dismiss Christians, to demean us, to belittle us, to mock us as out of touch, out of date, unsophisticated, non-intellectual, scientifically ignorant. Oh, you poor saps.

Do you still really follow that old tired book of Hebrew myths and legends and something written when only 1% of the world's knowledge had been gained? I hear this stuff all the time. You poor saps, wake up. This is the modern age.

We have knowledge. We're sophisticated. We've got science now.

You need it as a crutch. You're emotionally weak. You're mentally deficient.

What's the matter with you? Christianity? Come on. That's something from the past for primitives. This is a very convenient position for someone to hold, and it pretty well aptly describes them.

You haven't lived until someone is accusing you of all of the things that they are. It's like first strike. Before you remind them of the fact that they're talking about a Bible they've never read,

and they are talking about passages they don't understand.

They're talking about a God that they have rejected. They're talking about a Christ and Savior who has done so much for them sacrificially, and they're completely uninterested. They know Him as God, but they do not glorify Him as God.

They are not thankful. They purposely empty their own minds of that knowledge. Their foolish heart is darkened.

Okay, fine. If that's your personal choice, that's you. You go and operate.

But they're not content to do that. They must come and try to disabuse us of our faith. They must mock and deride and make an identity out of being an atheist.

They would have no identity if it weren't for God belief and Christians. Their identity is, I am one who opposes Christianity. They don't have a separate, I am a person who is, you know, I've built a whole system of philosophy and good works, and very few of them actually do this.

How many charities are there with a Christian background? How many charities are there, historically speaking, where atheists are just banded together because they're, you can't even say atheists. What philosophy is it that binds people together and causes them to charitably look out for the neighbors and for this and the other and to organize themselves? They only do this because they're trying to follow the model and trying to say we're as good. They remind me of the magicians in Pharaoh's court.

Well, if you throw down a rod and it turns into a snake, we'll do the same thing because we're trying to show that we're as good as you are. They didn't spontaneously throw down a rod and have it turn into a snake. They can only try to imitate God's power.

Anyway, it is to laugh. And it's really sad that this hostility, Jesus said they have hated me and they're going to hate you. And there is a hatred and a bitterness on the part of a large segment of the God-denying crowd that you'll experience.

And so we live in a time when we can suffer in social ways. We can suffer in... And this has an effect if you're in a workplace and everybody is of like mind in terms of let me tell you about my exploits, my immoral activities last night, this past week. Let me engage in conversation with two or three others here about subjects that are extremely undesirable to hear for someone who is of faith.

I don't want to hear the details of what you've been up to. I don't want to hear about your observations in these unseemly realms. It is pressure.

It is hostility. It is opposition. It is difficult to hear people use the name of the Lord as a swear word all the time.

It is difficult to hear people talk about things that partake of immorality all the time. And wallow in it. Glory in it.

Whose glory is their shame, Paul says in one place. Well, so we can be feeling a bit afflicted and oppressed. When you come to chapter 3 of Ephesians, Paul says, for this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles.

When you get to verse 13, he says, I ask that you do not lose heart at my tribulations for you, which is your glory. This is the bracket of this section. Prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles.

My tribulations for you. Now, let's just think about being a prisoner and those tribulations that Paul endures. And it isn't because he was trying to build up a great scheme of gaining wealth and he got caught and now he's in prison.

It isn't that he decided that he would be a professional thief and gain a great, amass a great wealth and treasure for himself and he got caught. The reason he's in chains, the reason he is hounded and persecuted and defamed and rejected by his professional peers. He was a Pharisee of the Pharisees and now he's completely rejected.

All of that seems to have gone to waste. And he hasn't just lost his social status. He hasn't just lost his professional status.

He's lost his liberty. He is physically imprisoned, often chained to Roman guards, falsely accused of no end and manner of things, vilified across Asia Minor and down into Israel. Why? For his own sake.

He tried something. He tried to get ahead and got smacked down. It's because he is concerned for the Gentiles.

He wants to share the good news of Jesus Christ with them. He wants to teach them what life in Christ can be. And because of this, he is personally suffering.

So when you think about that, think about suffering, think about an occasion where you've had a bad time. There are two ways we can respond to that. And we've been talking about it earlier this morning in the sense of just physical illness.

But any kind of slowdown, any kind of circumstantial friction in our lives, we have two ways to look at it. We can either go into the woe is me mode. Nobody feels as sorry for me as I do.

I have never had an occasion for more pity of myself than I do right now. Oh, how did this happen to me? Why did this happen to me? Why am I grinding through this and it seemingly has no end? Whose idea was this? It wasn't my idea. Why is everything conspiring? You know, self-pity.

Remember the description of subjectivity? What is subjectivity? Our little memory aid. Eyes on

self. You can stop right there.

Eyes on self. Really, the other two impinge on self, don't they? Eyes on people, eyes on circumstances. It's circumstances that make me feel bad.

It's people that make me feel bad. It's me, myself, and I, the unholy trinity of selfhood. Right? So, Paul says, Paul is writing along.

He's talked about being in Christ. He's talking about how in Christ not only do believers have all of these wonderful privileges and blessings and opportunities and potentials. In chapter 2, and remember the big structure of the book now.

Chapter 1, in Him. Chapter 2, unity in Him. There is no longer this division and the Gentiles are no longer separate.

They've been brought into the fold and God has made a new thing in Christ where everyone, by faith in Christ, can share in these tremendous blessings in Him. So, it's in Christ. Chapter 2, unity in Christ.

We are brethren. We are fellow members of the household of faith. Saints and members of the household of God.

Built, verse 20, on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone. What a privilege. We are part of something where the Lord Jesus Christ is the crowning jewel, the capstone, the finishing essential piece.

Old Testament Jews couldn't say that. Israelites couldn't say that. Patriarchs couldn't say that.

Pre-flood parties couldn't say that. It's we who can say that. What a great privilege to live in this age.

That's chapter 2. Chapter 3, Paul is going to introduce something. We know not what because we haven't read the whole chapter yet. For this reason, I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles.

And then you've got that long em dash there. Because he's going to break off. And he's not going to resume that thought until verse 14.

Because this is an occasion when he says, it's sort of a casual idea that comes into his mind. For this reason, I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles. And then he says, you know what? My prisoner status, my sufferings for you Gentiles.

This is a good occasion to make a great point that has application for you. And verse 2 through verse 13 is parenthetical. It's all based on I, the prisoner for you.

My tribulations for you, verse 13. Got it? Those are the little curved eyebrows that make the parenthesis. Verse 2 through verse 13, this is parenthetical.

He'll pick up his thought. Remember verse 1 says, for this reason. Look at verse 14, for this reason.

He's going to pick it right back up there. So this is a great big parenthesis. Why? Why the parenthesis? What induced him to break off his thought and talk for a dozen verses? What's the point? I am a prisoner and I am enduring tribulation for you.

How could Paul think about this? He can be objective or he can be subjective. Now, let's pretend like the Bible before you is blank in verse 2 and verse 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, and 12. Okay? 2 through 12 is blank.

Just pretend like it's not there. You're Paul and you get to write these verses. You're going to write 2 through 12.

For this reason, let me just give you a for instance. For this reason, I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles, and let me tell you what it's like being a prisoner for you Gentiles. Have you ever been in a Roman dungeon? Let me tell you the conditions.

You want to know what kind of slop they feed us in this Roman prison? Do you realize how much I'm enduring for your sake? Do you know that they don't let me out of the cell to go to the bathroom? Did you know that I have to stay in here day after day and they don't empty the chamber pots? Do you know the other human filth that I'm locked up in here with? Do you realize that there are mass murderers in here? There are sedition types. There are professional assassins. I'm in here with thieves and mountain banks and ne'er-do-wells and fools and crazy insane people.

Let me tell you about my sufferings for you Gentiles. Do you realize they take me out from time to time and beat me because I don't say what they want to hear and I will not comply and talk about the deity of the Caesar or whatever? Let me tell you about being a prisoner for you Gentiles. Do you know what's happening to my health? Do you know the ongoing afflictions that I have? There's no medicine in here.

Do you know that Tylenol will not be invented for the next 1,950 years? Do you know that I have no aspirin? I have no protection against fever. Let me tell you about the lack of antibiotics in this prison situation. Did you know that when bones get broken they don't set them here? Do you wonder why I'm a funny little hook-nosed guy that limps? It's because of the physical abuse that I have endured without medical care.

Let me tell you about the primitive state of medicine here in circa 50 Anno Domini 5060. Let me tell you a little bit about being a prisoner. Is that the way he fills out these verses? Subjective or

objective? Just so that you can pray intelligently let me tell you about my afflictions.

You can be praying for this infection I've got in my foot that will not heal. You can be praying for these stripes on my back that have exposed the bone that will not heal. You can pray for the fact that I don't have a change of clothes in here and I've been wearing these clothes for months.

You can pray for my physical safety with insane guys that I'm locked up with who if they take a notion and think I looked at them cross-eyed can give me a physical beating. You can pray for the fact that my digestion is a wreck because I'm eating stuff I can't even describe day after day after day. The water is foul and there's crawlies in it.

I have dysentery. I have lesions in my skin. I am sallow.

I don't get sunlight. I'm down in this dungeon for weeks on end. I, Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles.

And Paul stops right at that point because when he says I'm a prisoner for you he's got a decision to make. How am I going to write these next verses? Let me engage your sympathy and your pity. Let me tell you just how much I am enduring for your sake.

He can do that or he can do what he did under the ministry and the power of God the Holy Spirit. These inspired verses do the opposite. If you have heard, what Paul says is, yeah, I'm a prisoner but have you heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which was given to me for you? I, Paul, the prisoner, he's not thinking about the physical circumstances.

He's not thinking about the digestive issues and the skin issues and the hygiene issues and the diet issues and the physical danger issues and the beatings and the stripes and the restriction of his freedom and the loss of his opportunities to go around and preach. And he says, Lord, why am I chained up in here when I could be out? Paul is thinking in a different way. And when he says I'm a prisoner, he breaks off with that long M-dash that we have in English.

Semantically it's there in Greek. He breaks off in the middle of his thought. And he says, if indeed you have heard not of what I'm going through physically but the dispensation of the grace of God given to me for you.

This status that I am enduring is the grace of God. Now, is that not an amazing thing that a guy in his circumstances, when he thinks about his prisonership, when he thinks about his hardship and his incarceration, when that subjectivity thing starts looming up, when that self-pity starts to rise, he says, this is the dispensing of the grace of God to me. How do you do that? Remember one of the three questions in our final verse from the Joshua Code? There was the why question, there was the what question, and there was the how question.

And the how question was answered in Proverbs 2. And that's what Paul uses here. If indeed you have heard of the dispensing of the grace of God which was given to me for you. You might

highlight that word dispensation.

This is not dispensations like Schaeffer and Schofield. This is the dispensing. This is the giving, the allocating.

And what is that? It is something from God to Paul. And this is knowledge. This is revelation, which you have in the next verse.

How that by revelation he made known to me. You can highlight revelation and made known. How did this grace come to Paul? Did he get a magic sword? Does he have a laser saber, light sword? Does he have a magic hammer? Does he have a golden lasso like Wonder Woman? Does he have an Aladdin lamp that he can rub and an angel will pop out and do his bidding? What is, well, seriously, what is this grace? What did God give him? How did God give him this grace? What is it? Has he got an apostolic gift for opening locked doors and releasing handcuffs and chains? Can he put Romans to sleep and walk out of the prison? What is the grace? By revelation he made known.

That's God's grace. And the grace that Paul has is the grace that you have, that I have. By revelation he has made known.

By which you may understand, verse 4. You can highlight understand. The grace of God is knowledge given by revelation so that you may understand. My knowledge in the mystery of Christ.

Why is it a mystery? Because it wasn't Old Testament truth. It wasn't given in the Old Testament. That's what he says in verse 5. Other ages it wasn't made known, as it has now been revealed.

It is revelation. It is truth. It is knowledge.

It's information. People love to celebrate science. These same people that are always decrying Christianity and calling you a fool for believing it say, you know, the real value is knowledge, science.

Look at, you know, they like to wrap themselves in the flag of science. We've made airplanes. We've made toasters.

We've made cell phones. Look at us. We made the Internet.

Human science is the answer. You too, don't disappoint me. In other ages it was not made known to the sons of men.

There is a kind of knowledge that is divine. It partakes of something higher than the earth. It's not temporary.

All the science in the world, all the toasters and cell phones, don't help you when you die. Did you ever notice how they don't put iPhones in the coffin? And it ain't because there's no signal in there. It's because there's no life in there.

It doesn't do you any good. You know, all the airplanes in the world, is that maybe ship your coffin back home to plant it in the ground. That's the last benefit you're going to get from an airplane, posthumously.

Human wisdom is only for human time. And human time is the grass withering and the flower fading. It's the word of God that stands forever.

And it is what lifts us up out of the mundane and the short-term and the fallible and the temporary and the ephemeral. You know how happy you are, how excited you are when you get a new thing. You know, people stand in line.

It's just a form of insanity to me. The people will stand in line for a couple of days to get the latest Xbox. Like the timing makes a difference.

Will you not be as happy with it if you wait two days and you can just walk in the store and buy it instead of camping overnight on the sidewalk so that you can be the first? I mean, what kind of... These are the people telling us that we're stupid. You may understand verse 4. It has been revealed, verse 5. And what is it? What is this? Now, think about this. This thought was introduced because Paul said, I'm a prisoner, I'm suffering.

So when this comes up in his mind, and does it ever come up in your mind? Things aren't going well. I'm not having a good time here. Circumstances are against me.

I've got challenges. I've got requirements. I've got tasks I can't meet.

What is the thought that comes to our mind? Well, look at the example of the Apostle Paul. And he tells us in another place, follow my example. Well, here's his example.

I'm a prisoner for you. And when he thinks about prison, does he think about the details of the circumstance? He thinks about the details of the grace. Verse 6. That the Gentiles should be fellow heirs of the same body, entered into all of these wonderful things that come from God alone, things that partake of eternity, that partake of lasting value, lasting benefit, beyond this planet, beyond this universe, beyond this physical existence.

Same body, partakers of his promise in Christ through the good news. Now, here's our challenge, your challenge, my challenge. When we come up against those things that tend to depress us, social rejection, and if you're a Christian and you're not getting socially rejected, you are hiding, you are playing along, you are compromising in some way because you cannot be a believer, you cannot be a Christian and engage in conversations with people in the world for very long without

a distinction showing up.

They want to talk about activities. They want to talk about viewpoints. They want to talk about, oh, isn't it wonderful that this perverse and immoral thing is taking place? Isn't it great? You know, nudge.

I want your response. They come up to you. What do you think? Isn't that wonderful? Isn't it great that this new low has been reached morally? And if you say, oh, yeah, that's great.

Are you representing the Lord Jesus Christ? Are you shining as a light in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation? We don't have to go out of our way to, you know, strap a sandwich board on and run around saying, and doomsday is here. It's all in the handbasket because of these new lows that have been reached. But if someone asks you, if someone presses you for your opinion, do you give it? Do you find a way to express the fact that, well, actually, no, I don't think that's a good thing, and here's why.

The judgment of God is going to come on our nation because of these things. People are not going to be happy because of this because it indulges the worst aspects of human nature. And it is a part of our nature that shouldn't be celebrated and glorified.

It needs to be repaired. It needs to be fixed. And God can fix it.

How is anybody going to come to Christ if you just say, oh, yeah, yeah, that's great. I don't want to make a ripple. Don't want anybody to think I'm not cool.

Don't want to think, you know, I don't want to lose this friend. I don't want to lose their opinion. Maybe I'm going to be professionally slowed down or stopped if people think I'm not one of the crowd.

Let me laugh at these bad attempts at humor based on salacious things. Let me laugh along as they mock someone else who's trying to live a moral life. Can't wear camouflage all the time.

There is a time to stand up. It is the truth of God. It ought to make a difference.

How can you be salt and light if you refuse to be salty and you refuse to shine? There is a time to let things slide. There is a time to speak up. How do you know which is which? What did the Lord Jesus tell His disciples? If you are abiding in me and my words are abiding in you, you can ask what you will and it will be done for you.

You know what I would ask? Lord, give me wisdom to know when to speak. There is a time when the Lord Jesus opened not His mouth. It's not every time that you speak up, but there is a time to speak up.

And if you haven't spoken up lately, you need to rethink what the judgment seat is going to be like

when the Lord Jesus returns. Do you want that well done, good and faithful servant? Do you want a life that is transcendent, that is blessed, that partakes of things to where being a prisoner is a grace? Do we see our relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ, a prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles? It's a life of love for others. It's a life of dedication to the Lord Jesus.

And all of the hardship that comes with it to Paul isn't what counts. He says this is the dispensing of the grace of God. How do we do that? What's the answer to the question how? I would submit it's the same as what we saw at the beginning of the morning.

Proverbs chapter 2, My son, if you will receive my words, hide my commandments with you, treasure them, recognize their value, you will understand the fear of the Lord, you will find the knowledge of God. Not the fear of people, not the fear of society, not the fear of rejection, not the fear of, oh, they're not my friend anymore. Who wants friends with those values? I heard something I hadn't heard in a long time earlier this week.

When you drop a glove in the mud, the mud doesn't become glovey. I like it. I like it as well as if you put a good apple in a barrel of bad ones, the bad ones don't all turn good.

Or as Paul puts it, bad company corrupts good morals. And do you really want the approval of people that shallow? They're sitting around talking about somebody that's not in the room. Guess what happens when you're not in the room with that kind of people? They're talking about you.

You associate with people who are incurable gossips and mockers and deriders and they try to elevate themselves by putting other people down. When you're not there, they're doing it about you. Is this what you want for friends? This is who you're trying to cultivate their approbation and their approval because it's so valuable when compared to the approval of God, the well-done, good, and faithful servant from the Lord Jesus Christ himself.

Seriously, you want to compare those two and choose the approval of people? I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles, when you think about the prisonership, when you think about the relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ and our obligation to others, what is the priority? My hardship or all of the benefits, all of the graces, all of the knowledge and revelation and understanding, being fellow heirs and partakers? And Paul says in verse 7, I have the privilege of being a minister according to the gift of the grace of God given to me by the effective working of His power. When Paul thinks about being a prisoner, and he looks around the dank, damp, unhealthy environment, you know what he's thinking about? He's not seeing the stone walls. He's not seeing the fungus.

He's not seeing the crawlies in the water. He's not feeling the effects of the beatings that he receives. He's thinking about I have the privilege of being a minister according to the gift of the grace of God given to me.

What a gift to be alive in this age. What a gift to have the presence and power of the Holy Spirit

and the knowledge from God's Word that makes our life meaningful. It's not just killing time.

Remember some of those board games where it's got the little hourglass and you've got to do something before the sand runs out? We used to have a game, I forget what it was, we had little red plastic tips and a little hourglass, and you turn the thing over and the sand runs out. And you think that's a day. The sand just runs through the glass and you flip it over.

Another day goes by. Do you want to burn it all up in chewing gum activities? Well, I made that time pass. I started a movie.

Now the movie's over. I look at my watch. Two hours of my life have gone by.

Okay, good. I mean, what are we trying to get to? We're trying to numb ourselves and get through the time so that we can get to what? For us, it's eternity. What's the best use of two hours? What's the best use of first thing in the morning? What's the first and best use of the last thing at night? What's the first and best use of our priorities? Paul says, I recognize what God has given me.

He's made me a minister according to the gift of the grace of God by the effective working of His power. It's not an abstract. It's not a historical record.

It's an effectual working. The power of God is at work in Paul's life, and he knows it. He can see it.

Can we say the same thing? Well, you think about verse 2 through 12. How do you write in that blank space? When you look at difficulties, you look at challenges, you look at rejection, you look at hardship, how do you write those next few sentences? You can see how the Apostle Paul wrote it, and it is a challenge to us. Let's pause here and take our break.

When we come back, we're going to pick up at verse 14. Having made this point, this parenthetical application for us, dealing with tribulation, Paul is now going to resume the thought and the main point of this book, and that's what we'll see when we pick up in chapter 3, verse 14 after the break.