

Ephesians 14-02-23b

We're in Ephesians chapter 3, and we have looked in some detail at verses 1-7, where Paul, in thinking about his status as a prisoner of the Lord Jesus Christ, it started out almost as an aside, and he realizes that it's a great chance to make a point. And whether it is conscious or unconscious, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he gives us a wonderful example of how to think about adversity. Here's the thing.

You can say, okay, I've got some adversity, so I'm going to think about it like Paul does. All right, let's see. The glass is half full.

Let me try to think about something good about this adversity. Well, I'm not dead. There's one good thing.

Well, it's one thing to say, I'm going to choose to think like a mature believer. I'm going to follow the example of the Apostle, and I'm going to think about this challenge in a positive way. But all right, give me a little bit more about how it's done.

Well, we have the answer to that question here as well. We asked the how question earlier this morning. We said, well, it's the Proverbs chapter 2 thing, receive my words, have my commands.

I've done that. I've been in Bible class. I've got notebooks.

I've got my Bible marked up so bad it bleeds through to the other side of the page. But I'm having trouble because every time I try to get on this lofty plane of thinking about the grace of God, I have to grab my back, or I have to sneeze, or I've got to go take some more medicine, or, you know, somebody says a new hurtful thing, or I suffer a new setback in my circumstances, and I'm really having a hard time keeping this lofty, elevated thinking going in the midst of my challenge. And you can imagine the Apostle Paul in a dungeon, being transported from place to place, being abused by guards who think it's funny to have a Jew to pick on.

Oh, you think you're a Roman citizen, do you? Well, you're also a Jew, and you know how we treat Jews here, and, you know, there's all kinds of unspoken suffering involved in this. He gives us a few lists of his suffering in various places, but you can only imagine. But so how does he, in the midst of his own interruptions and fresh insults and fresh hardships, keep this focus? Because he's not availing himself of anything that we don't have.

So how is this done? Well, you pick up in verse 8, and he has already talked about, by revelation it was made known, the mystery, this mystery of Christ in verse 4, it has been revealed by the Spirit to the apostles and prophets that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and partakers. So he shifts his attention to what is going on in this age. This is kind of the biggest picture.

And then he's going to focus in. So you and I, we're trying to keep our thoughts on a godly plane,

we're trying to do this spiritual thing in the midst of earthly challenge. And you know, it sounds good in church, but when you're in the midst of it, it's not that easy.

So it's interesting to observe the how when Paul is implementing the how. He is thinking about the Word of God, he's thinking about the grace of God. Well, how does he do that how step? Well, you'll notice that he begins by widening his focus to the largest level.

He's a little, short, bald, hook-nosed, squeaky-voiced apostle in prison. And he could think about that and all of the abuse. What does he do? He says, let me get the biggest picture.

God has got this plan that began in the earliest ages with a line of people coming down from Adam through Seth, and down through Noah, and down through Shem, and Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and eventually creating this nation, and we've got these Old Testament scriptures that detail it, and God dealt with them in a certain way. But now, God in Christ has revealed a whole new phase of His plan and purpose. So Paul goes to the big picture.

This is one of the healthiest ways to shake ourselves out, break ourselves loose from subjectivity is lift your eyes onto the hills, the farthest you can see, from whence cometh my strength. I will lift my eyes onto the hills. Let me get the big picture here.

I'm in distress, I'm under attack, things are bad right here, let me lift up my eyes. We did a study one time, you remember, on lifting up the eyes? All the places in scripture talk about he lifted up his eyes. One of the most striking ones is just as Abraham is about to plunge the knife into Isaac, and he hears the voice from heaven, stop, now I know, you've not withheld your only son from me, and he lifted up his eyes and saw the ram and the thicket, that's a great one.

Lift up your eyes. He's not just sweating in relief and falling down in a crumpled pile and rapidly untying the knots, he lifts up his eyes and he sees the provision of God. So you have that idea here.

Paul says, I have the privilege of being the guy that gets to reveal these things. God gave it to me and I get to express it to you. What a wonderful privilege.

This is the feeling, I think, that all communicators of the Word of God have. What a privilege it is to be the guy that gets to receive this information, learn from it, appreciate it, and pass it on. It's a wonderful thing.

And he says, to me, verse 8, who am less than the least of all saints, this grace was given. Now, I've talked to people who want to press this. In another place, Paul says he's the chief of sinners.

So here he says he's less than the least of all saints, and in another place he says he's the chief of sinners. And there are people, I know people, that want to take this absolutely literally. Paul is absolutely the worst sinner who ever lived, and he is less than the least of all the saints.

No. Now, trust me when I tell you, Paul is not below the least of the saints. The least of the saints are going to be patting flames out from their barely there wispy garment, saved yet so as by fire.

Paul is going to have so many stars in his crown. He is a wonderful example of a faithful, godly, mature believer. So why does he say this? Is he lying? Is he aw shucksing here, hoping people say, oh no, Paul, you're not less than... Why does he say this? Context.

Context. Context. If you say, this is the worst pizza I ever ate.

Context. Seriously? Let's think about every pizza you've ever eaten, you've never had anything this bad ever in your entire life. That's the worst song I ever heard.

Literally, you haven't heard Smash Mouth, Metalhead, you haven't flipped past that on the radio. This song, You Light Up My Life, is in fact the worst song you've ever heard in your entire life. Debbie Boone just hit a new low.

You know my objection with that song. It can't be wrong if it feels so right. You know, that's just completely off the map.

As a believer, she should know better. It can't be... Don't get me started. What is the worst song you've ever heard? What is the worst food you've ever eaten? In an immediate context, you are using hyperbole.

You are saying, you know, in the limits of what I'm talking about, this is right at the edge. And he says, it isn't because I am a wonderful, noble, high-flown, four-winged cherub of a believer that I get to impart this knowledge. It wasn't my personal qualifications.

If you want to talk about why would God select me to be an apostle, at the time that He chose me as an Old Testament believer heading for Damascus to imprison some more Christians, I was less than the least of all saints. To me, less than the least. Where was he at the point that the gift was given? Where was it when the Lord Jesus accosted him and said, I'm going to make you the apostle to the Gentiles? He's not always less than the least.

He's not ever more less than the least. They're not going to stop him at the gate of the New Jerusalem and say, wait a minute, Paul the apostle, I believe Timbuktu, there's a grass shack you're supposed to be living in for the duration of the kingdom of the Father. We'll send you a leaf from the tree one of these days.

Watch the mail. Nobody's going to come as far as your hut, but maybe a raven will drop it on you. No.

Context, context, context. To me, he says, who am less than the least? He's talking about, look at the grace of God. It's not based on human merit, human achievement, human talent, human gifts and wisdom.

Paul says, look, I can tell you it wasn't that I was a great guy that this grace was given to me. That's all he's saying. And he can list some really extremely low points that he had in his life, starting with where he was when he met the Lord.

We can all do that. Can you think back to some embarrassing things and you hope, I hope some angel somewhere will just delete that file in the folder that's got my name on it in the heavenly computer. You know, you find some pictures and you think, oh, look, I've got, there's spinach in my teeth.

Oh yeah. Delete that. Or, you know, you, you get your digital pictures and, and there's one where it's a picture of your foot because you hit the, you hit the, I've got one.

I was in Rome. I was on top of St. Peter's Basilica thing. I was up, you know, the Rome is stretched out before you.

All the apostles in statuary form are arranged on each side of you up on the outside. You can go up and spiral thing and you get up and outside and you're on this little cupola, a stand thing. Only a few people can get there at a time because it's small.

And I thought, wow, I got to get a picture of this. Well, I put it in the album because it's just so typical of me. I have a picture of my belt buckle because I was trying to get the camera on snarl.

I had a jacket on and it was on a strap and I look like a tourist from Asia or something and I was trying to get the thing loose and, and there's this great picture of my belt buckle standing on top of St. Peter's Cathedral. And I thought, you know, that's just, that, that's a great reminder for my humility. And so I put it in my album.

You go through my album, you'll see it. There I am, the glory of Rome and all I get is my belt buckle. I who am the less than least of all saints, we can all think of these low points.

We aren't what we are in our human fallibility. We are what we are in Christ. He says, look, when it comes to human stuff, like many of you, I am less than the least.

But this grace was given that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ. What does Paul do here? What is the functional procedure here for getting ourselves out of ourselves and escaping subjectivity under pressure? Go big picture. Get the big picture.

This is a wonderful age in which I live. The grace of God is available to everyone and it has been given to me. On my own, I am less than the least, but in Christ, grace has been given to me.

And I have privileges and I have opportunities. For Paul, he was an apostle. For you, you might be a child of parents or you might be parents of a child or you might be the spouse of a spouse or you might be an employee, well, the husband of a wife, wife of a husband.

It's just easier to say spouse of a spouse, but now you've made me belabor it. You can't pretty much be the spouse of something that's not a spouse, can you? But we have relationships and we have the opportunity to exercise our gifts in those contexts. You can be a blessing to someone in a marriage or in a family or in an employment situation, in a student situation, in a friendship.

You're in a position to be a blessing. Paul says, the grace has been given to me. I get to be a blessing to the entire Gentile world.

What a gift. What a privilege. This is what he's thinking about as a prisoner of the Lord Jesus.

This is what he's thinking about when he says in verse 13, I ask that you do not lose heart at my tribulations on your behalf. My hardships and sufferings on your behalf. And these were no light thing.

This tribulations is the word that is used for the tribulation, philipsis. This wasn't minor inconvenience. He says, look at the privileges I have.

Verse 9, to make all see what is the fellowship of the mystery. And you've got a text note there and it's a good one because this is not fellowship. This is dispensation of the mystery.

This is the church age. To make all see the church age. What God is doing in the age that you and I live in.

We know what we know largely because of the ministry of the Apostle Paul about the filling of the Holy Spirit, the giftings that we have, the opportunities that we have, the positional and experiential opportunities and potentials that we have in Christ. We know most of that through the Apostle Paul. He is the apostle of the Gentiles.

From the beginning of the ages it was hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ. Can you get any bigger picture than that? Big picture. We've got to get out of our own skin.

We've got to get beyond our local woe is me. I feel so sorry for myself. I am the president and secretary of the poor Sam fan club.

All I can think about is me, myself and I. Woe is me. Look at me. Aren't I in sad shape here? No.

Think big picture. Go large. Go big.

Throw the football in the end zone. Get big. It's the plan of God for the ages.

It's the dispensation in which we live. It's chapter one. What do we have in Christ? Think about it.

Don't be a prisoner of circumstance. Don't be a prisoner of these limiting subjective thoughts. It imprisons us.

Paul is a prisoner of Christ. He's not a prisoner of circumstance. Notice he doesn't say, I, Paul, a prisoner of the Romans.

I, Paul, a prisoner of these evil minded Jews. I, Paul, a prisoner of the evil people who are keeping me down, blocking my progress. These, you know, I could be great if it weren't for these people hampering me all the time.

All these naysayers. I could be the voice. I could be the American Idol.

I could be, if they, if they would just be on my side. So look at my privileges. I get to make all see the fellowship of this mystery.

Go large. He's not content to talk about God creating all things through Christ Jesus. Look at verse 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 heavenlies. This thing is big. My gift and my opportunities in Christ are making a difference in angelic realms.

The principalities and powers are noting what takes place. And this is not just true of Paul because he was an apostle. It is true of you because you are in Christ.

There's an old gospel song based on a Negro spiritual and that's what they were called back when they were invented. They weren't African American spirituals. They were Negro spirituals.

And there's an old Negro spiritual. It's a great thought. Angels watches over me.

And the ungrammatical nature of it tells you the origins. Back in the day when those folks didn't have access to education, but they had access to their Bible. And they said, angels watches over me.

And angels do observe you. There is a, we are the object lesson in an amphitheater type classroom and angels are observing. There is significant importance on the line in the small decisions that you and I make.

God is teaching the angels about responsibility, about opportunity, about the nature of free will and free choice, consequences of choices that are made, the blessing that God is able to dispense in this dispensation of His grace on people who are faithful and obedient. It is an object lesson for the angels. It is writing a new Bible.

It's not just Gideon and Ehud and Barak and Deborah and Jonah and Ezekiel and Daniel. It is fill in your name here in God's largest Bible. We write the record of our lives just as those people's records are written in the pages of our Scriptures.

It makes a difference what you do. It makes a difference what you think. To the intent that now, verse 10, the manifold wisdom of God might be made known.

Isn't this great? It's not the manifold stupidity of Sam might be made known. It's not the manifold weakness of me. The manifold failures of S.C. Hall.

That's not what's being revealed. It's the manifold wisdom of God. It's the glory of God being reflected in my life.

Not my faults and failures, which are plenty, but it's the wisdom of God. God, as my Heavenly Father, God caring for me in Christ, treating me as His Son, as His heir, as His possession, as belonging to His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. That's the manifold wisdom of God.

And it's bouncing off of me. It's reflected on me. You can have a wonderful sunrise, but do you know what really makes a sunrise beautiful? It's seeing it reflected off the landscape.

I was doing a little work on a passage of Scripture. Somebody was arguing some skeptic of the Bible, saying, oh, the Bible is dumb because it says the world is flat. It says in Job that the earth is flat like clay under a seal.

You go to the passage in Job, it doesn't say the earth is flat like clay under a seal. In the context, it's talking about the sunrise, and it's talking about the light of God in the morning, and as the sun rises and it strikes the hills and valleys, the folds as of a garment are revealed by that side lighting in the way that when you're trying to read a seal, you've done this if you find an old coin and you're trying to read the date, you side light it, you light it from the side so that it will come up in relief and you can see the imprint more clearly. And in Job, this beautiful poetic passage is saying God's sunrise rises up, it's the light of the sun, but the beauty is in the way it reveals the folds and the hills and the valleys, the way that you side light a clay seal so that you can read it more clearly, so that you can see what it says.

That's the light of God on our lives. We may just be clay, we may just be made of dirt, dust thou art, and not to dust thou shalt return, but when the light of God's glorious sunrise shines on us, it's a beautiful sunrise. It's the mists in the valleys, it's that red light of dawn illuminating nature.

God can make us beautiful as His light reflects off of us, and that's our privilege. So the manifold wisdom of God is made known by the church, in and through the church, by means of the church, to the principalities and powers in the heavenlies, that's heavenly plural, heavenlies, according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. You will notice in verse 1, prisoner of Christ Jesus.

You will notice in verse 4, the mystery of Christ. You will notice in verse 6, promise in Christ. You will notice in verse 8, unsearchable riches of Christ.

Verse 9, created all things through Jesus Christ. Verse 11, purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus. This is chapter 1, this is chapter 2, we have these things in Christ.

It's Him making the difference. In whom, verse 12, another great, in whom, in Him, we have boldness and access with confidence through faith in Him, in Christ. Through faith in Christ, we have boldness and access with confidence.

How do your problems stack up when you recognize your privileges and your benefits? Therefore, verse 13, I ask that you do not lose heart at my tribulations for you, which is your glory. This kind of makes sense now, doesn't it? Paul doesn't just say, I don't lose heart, he's already got that licked. He says, you shouldn't lose heart at my tribulations.

And as we look at one another and we are full of empathy, full of sympathy, full of a desire to pray and to ask for restoration and healing and so on, Paul says, don't lose heart when you look at the tribulations of others. Don't be depressed and discouraged at the tribulations of others. This is for God's glory, right? That's why when we pray, we pray not only for deliverance, we pray not only for blessing, we pray not only for health and restoration and return to function, but we pray for God's glory.

God's glory, like the sunrise reflecting off the undulating hills, reflecting off the clay that has been impressed with the name of God. For this reason, verse 14, now he returns to where he was in verse 1. For this reason, I, Paul, and we've had this inclusion, this parenthetical reminder that hardship shouldn't be a discouragement, it should make us appreciate the big picture. When you're in hardship and having trouble, getting you down, making you subjective, what's the answer? Yes, it's the Word of God, yes, it's Proverbs chapter 2, but specifically, you climb the ladder out of the hole by thinking big picture.

Let's go large. There are angels observing. This is the plan of God determined before the foundations of the world.

I live in the dispensation of the age of grace. I am in Christ. I've got privileges.

I have boldness and access to go right into the throne room of God. So what am I complaining about, really? For this reason, Paul says, I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Time and again, Paul's thought loops back to the Lord Jesus Christ.

He can't get three or four verses without returning to the Lord Jesus Christ. It's all in Him, for Him, by Him, through Him, because of Him, on behalf of Him, in Him. I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

He doesn't even say my Father, my Heavenly Father, our Heavenly Father. He says He's the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is only our Father because we are in Christ, and He's Christ's Father.

From whom, once again, large picture, the whole family in heaven and earth is named. The whole family in heaven and earth. Your classic Christian interpretation of this would be what? Who's the family in heaven? Pop quiz.

Who's the family in heaven in Ephesians chapter 3, verse 15? The whole family in heaven is named for the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. He's given them the name. Who are they? Oh, everybody's being really careful now.

Who's the family in heaven? What would a classic Christian answer be? All the believers that have died up in heaven, they've got the name. Christians up on high, right? The whole family in heaven and on earth is named. You know most Christians are dead, right? Did you know this? Most Christians are dead.

I mean, literally. Defunct, off the perch, belly up, feet in the air, dead. Six feet under, non-compose corpus, right? Not here.

Dead gone dust. Most Christians are dead. It's a fact.

You think about history from Pentecost till now, a lot more people have lived and died in faith and are now dead than we have circulating with this momentary flesh. Most of them are dead. So is that the family in heaven? No.

The family on earth is in the earth. The family on earth is above ground and below ground, but we're all in contact with the dirt. You've got a few astronauts, a few bear line pilots.

Most of us in contact with the earth, right? And sooner or later, even if you're an astronaut or a pilot, you'll be in the earth, on the earth, under the earth. We are the earthly family. So who's the family in heaven? If you've been following along in our Elijah, Elisha study, if you have been thinking about the double portion, if you have been thinking about all things being reconciled in Christ, things in heaven, things on earth, and things under the earth, it's big.

The picture is big. This is why he talked about the principalities and powers in the heavenlies back there in verse 10. There is a family in heaven.

It's the angelic family. We call them angels. They're not actually all angels.

This is like calling Native Americans Indians. They're not even from India, but it's convenient. Native Americans, ourselves, themselves, call the community of Native Americans Indians.

It's the Bureau of Indian Affairs. We're comfortable with that. The name has come to mean something other than from India, thankfully.

Well, we call the heavenly pre-existing civilization angels, but angel is a misnomer. The malak, the angelos, is a messenger, and only some of them have the function of being angels. It would

be like calling all Christians apostles.

Well, it would just be a misnomer. We're not all apostles. Some of us are apostles, very few.

It would be like calling all of us pastors. Well, you know, the community of pastors, well, we're not all pastors. Only some are pastors.

Well, only some of the heavenly civilization are, in fact, angels, but we call them angels because we don't know what else to call them. It's some unpronounceable name. But they're the family in heaven.

That's another thing you can call them. They're God's family in heaven. The unfallen angelic hosts are the family in heaven.

We're the family on earth. And guess what? They get their names from God just like we do. The whole family in heaven, and notice it's family singular, it's not the families, one in heaven and one on earth, it's all one.

God is reconciling all things to Himself in Christ, and interestingly enough, theologically, this includes the angels. This includes the angels. It includes the angels in prison, the angels in chains who kept out their first estate who were disobedient in the days of Noah.

It includes them. Something about the work of Christ is fixing that problem. We don't know.

It's way past our grade level, way past our security clearance, but there is something there. By the way, Drew Freeman did a very interesting study on this years ago, and I've got a copy of it in print, where he did his best to parse the few clues we have in Scripture as to what the nature of this benefit of Christ's work is for the angels, and I can summarize it for you. It's about that thick, and I can summarize it for you in one sentence.

We don't know. We just don't know. God does not reveal that.

The same way the church wasn't revealed in the Old Testament, God's work in angelic realms when it comes to disobedience, when it comes to reconciliation, it's not revealed. We don't need to know. We don't have a need to know.

"...Bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that He would do three things." This is what we're going to pick up next time. Paul's prayer, remember in Chapter 1, he had a three-fold prayer, that you will come to know what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance to the saints, what is the surpassing greatness of His power, and that final section of Chapter 1, three-fold prayer. Here's another three-fold prayer.

"...I bow my knees to the Father, that He would do three things, that He would grant you

according to the riches of His glory." This is in the context of God's glory. It's not just grant you Christmas presents, grant you birthday gift cards, grant you the desires of your heart. This is according to the riches of His glory, on behalf of, in the context of, for the purpose of, His glory.

"...I pray that the God the Father would grant you three things. Number one, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man." Hands up anybody who does not want to be strengthened with God's might in the inner man. Is there anybody that wouldn't love to have this? You'd have to be insane to not want to be strengthened with God's power in the inner man.

This is where we need it. You want to be strengthened with might in the outer man? You want to bench press 330 pounds? You want to do, you know, 30 pull-ups as an alternate? I'd rather have muscular strength? No, we want strength in the inner man. This is where it counts.

It's not the outer man that's going to glory, it's the inner man. That's number one. Number two, verse 17, "...that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith." You'd have to be very confused to not want the indwelling presence of the Lord Jesus Christ with you.

You'd have to be in a very bad place and have very perverse desires as a believer to not want the ongoing, indwelling presence of Jesus Christ. And this is Paul's prayer. Why? Because it is a practical thing.

This can happen. You and I can be strengthened with might in the inner man. You and I can experience the indwelling of Christ in our hearts.

How? Through prayer? Through accident? Through faith. Remember all the things we underlined? Revelation, understanding, knowledge. In the first part of this chapter, that's the object of our faith.

We believe it. It makes a difference. "...Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith." Number three, "...that you, being rooted, already having been rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height." May be able to comprehend.

Comprehend the width, the length, the depth, the height of what? "...the love of Christ," verse 19, "...which passes knowledge." So that you can comprehend what passes comprehension. That you can get the dimensions of the infinite. That you can comprehend the incomprehensible.

With the result that you are filled with all the fullness of God. What a great prayer. We will look at the details of those three things.

Sounds great? Wonderful? In the abstract, what difference does it make in the context of our ongoing journey through this life? How can this become something that tangibly, visibly motivates and energizes us to do what we're supposed to do? To think what we're supposed to think? To see what we're supposed to see? To comprehend what we're supposed to comprehend? In our

fallen flesh, in this corrupt world, in the dark and perverse generation in which we live, how do these high-flown, ideal prayers come to be fulfilled? We'll see that next time. Father, thank You for the truth of Your Word. Thank You for the powerful way that it expresses to us Your love, Your grace, and the gifts that You have given to us in Christ.

We pray that these things will be a source of motivation and challenge in the days ahead. We ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.