

The Church is God's Mission Strategy (Ephesians 3:1-13)

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I have yet to meet a sports fan who likes the feeling of their team losing. Maybe if you have no chance of making the playoffs and are in line for the no. 1 draft pick you might stomach a loss. But it never feels good to lose, whether you're watching the game or playing the game. The same principle holds true in other areas of life. Who wants their candidate to lose an election, their company to lose a contract, or their kids to lose a scholarship? The more we personally identify with a person or a cause, the more discouraged we feel when they are beset with trouble.

As Christians, we can feel exactly the same way about the cause of Christ in the world today. We watch the news, scroll through our social media feed, or turn on the radio and quickly despair. "Lord, it feels like you're losing ground. Holiness is outmoded. Your people are derided. Wickedness is celebrated. Justice is denied." Maybe the kids you raised to fear God want nothing to do with him. Or a Christian leader you deeply respected is caught in scandalous sin. The trajectory of God's cause often appears to be anything but onward and upward.

The church in Ephesus could relate. Their founding pastor, the apostle Paul, was imprisoned in Rome for a crime he didn't commit. He couldn't travel to visit and strengthen the churches he planted. There was a good chance the author of a majority of the New Testament would soon be killed by the emperor Nero. You can imagine the sense of discouragement they felt, and all the more so because they lived in a city renowned for pagan idolatry and the black arts.

One of the primary reasons Paul wrote Eph 3:1-13 was to help them "not to lose heart" (v. 13) over what he was suffering. So he takes them back to the basics. He turns their gaze away from what the world is doing and onto the bigger story God is writing in the universe. We need the same medicine, friends. We need to fix our eyes on what God is doing in the world and our role in his glorious mission. Make no mistake, God is doing something magnificent, even in the darkness, and it has everything to do with the church.

I'm not talking about the church in a strictly universal sense – the spiritual body of all believers in all places at all times. I'm talking about the local church – an identifiable assembly of Christians who have covenanted together to uphold the right preaching of the Word, the right administration of the sacraments, and the right practice of church



discipline for the glory of God and the good of his people. I'm talking about the church in Ephesus in A.D. 62 to whom Paul wrote this letter. I'm talking about us, KingsWay.

If you're a member of our church, pause for a moment and look around the room. Look at the faces. Look at all the people who are both like you and unlike you – different stories, different languages, different jobs, different experiences. What do you see? Something altogether ordinary? Or the most vivid display of God's glory on planet earth?

No matter how dark the hour or fierce the opposition, God will not fail to glorify his name through the countercultural institution of the church. It's the centerpiece of his mission strategy. How do we know as much? Two reasons.

1) GOD REVEALS THE MYSTERY OF THE GOSPEL TO FORM A PEOPLE (vv. 1-7)

In v. 2, Paul breaks off the prayer he began in v. 1 to recount for the Ephesians a "stewardship" God had entrusted to him. A stewardship is a responsibility to care for a person or thing on someone else's behalf. In Paul's case, God entrusted him with a message of grace, an announcement of God's unmerited favor. It was Paul's job to receive the message, guard the message, and declare the message for the good of men and women like the Ephesians.

He doesn't immediately cut to the chase and say what the message is. He circles the runway, laying the groundwork for why the message is worthy of our trust in the first place. It's a "mystery," Paul says in v. 3, made known to him "by revelation." He didn't invent it. He didn't create it. It wasn't a product of his own mind or imagination. It was something God gave or revealed to him.

Until recently, the message had been a mystery, not because it didn't make sense or was hard to understand, but in the sense that the full content and implications of the message had been hidden from the minds of men until recently. As Paul says in v. 5, it was "not made known to the sons of men in other generations." It's a message God revealed in Paul's day, inspiring the 1st century apostles and prophets to speak and write on his behalf by the power of the Spirit.

Apparently, it's also something Paul had told the Ephesians about before, a matter of which he had "written briefly," whether in a previous communication or the preceding chapters of the same letter. He doesn't ask them to believe the message with blind faith



or take his word for it. He encourages them in v. 4 to read it, study it, and experience its self-authenticating character that they might “perceive” his words are God’s words.

We know the message has something to do with Jesus because he calls it “the mystery of Christ” at the end of v. 4, but it’s not until v. 6 that Paul comes right out and says what the message is. “This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” In the 1st century Jewish synagogues in which Paul spoke, those were fighting words.

Throughout the entire Old Testament, and the thousands of years over which it was written, the ethnic nation-state of Israel enjoyed pride of place as the chosen people of God. It wasn’t that God didn’t relate to other people groups. He delivered messages to all manner of other nations through his prophets. He even promised to Abraham, the grandfather of the Jewish patriarch Jacob, that in his offspring, all the nations of the earth would be blessed.

Yet the Jews alone possessed the gift of covenant relationship with Yahweh. God gave them the gift of his word, the law. He gave them the gift of his presence, the temple in Jerusalem. If you wanted to know God, if you wanted to experience his saving power, the message to the Gentiles was simple, “Come and see.” But even then, your spiritual privileges as a Gentile were limited. There were still two courts in the temple – the outer court of the Gentiles and the inner court for the Jews.

The ethnic distinction in God’s redemptive work was real. It became a wall of hostility on account of the pride of men. And it was the very wall God brought crashing down through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. On this side of the cross, relationship with God is no longer the reward of adherence to the law of Moses. It’s available to every man and every woman through faith in Jesus.

All of us have broken God’s law, Jew and Gentile alike. We deserve nothing but judgment on account of our sin. The good news of the gospel is that Jesus bore the guilt of our sin in our place. He died so all who trust in him as their Savior wouldn’t have to die. Through faith in Jesus, Jews and Gentiles, black and white, rich and poor, young and old, those who speak English *y los que hablan español* are reconciled to God and thereby reconciled to one another.

As Paul rejoiced in Eph 2:15, God has created “one new man in place of the two, so making peace.” We are “fellow heirs,” mutual recipients of all the blessings of salvation as adopted sons and daughters of God. We are “members of the same body,” spiritually



connected to one another through our common union with Christ. And we are “partakers of the promise,” sharing alike in the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit, God’s down-payment on the spiritual inheritance waiting for us in heaven.

The implications of all of that for the work of Christian missions are massive. First, it says God’s work in the world today isn’t limited to a single nation. He’s drawing men and women to himself from every tribe and every tongue which is why we should be earnestly committed to seeing the gospel advance among every tribe and tongue. As long as there is a place on earth where Christ is not yet named, we still have work to do! And when we urge a man in Bolivia or a woman in Southeast Asia to bow their knee to King Jesus, we are not adopting an attitude of cultural superiority or promoting a sinister species of white colonialism. We are contending for the redemptive mission of God.

Second, God’s work in the world today does not consist of drawing men and women to himself as isolated individuals. Through the power of the gospel, God is forging a people for his own possession. The saving purposes of God are fundamentally corporate. There’s nothing individual about “fellow heirs”, “members of the same body,” or “partakers of the promise.”

We need to think less in terms of whether someone has a personal relationship with Jesus and more about whether they have been added to the visible body of Christ. We need to stop divorcing faith in Jesus from membership in the local church, as if it were even possible to be united with the head, with Christ, without being united to his body, the church. And if our mission efforts are winning professing converts but not faithful church members, we know something’s wrong. Why? Because God has revealed the mystery of the gospel to form a people. That’s the first reason the church is the centerpiece of God’s mission strategy.

2) GOD DECLARES THE GLORY OF THE GOSPEL THROUGH HIS PEOPLE (vv. 8-13)

In vv. 7-8, Paul marvels at the kindness of God in taking a man hellbent on destroying God’s people and making him a man devoted to declaring the gospel to God’s people. Paul never got over the mercy God showed in saving him. Nor should we, brothers and sisters. Would you take your worst enemy, adopt them as your own child, and enlist them in your family business? That’s precisely what God has done for you.

You might not be a minister in the sense of being called to a pastoral office like Paul. But if you are a Christian, even if you have only been following Jesus for a single hour,



God has commissioned you as an ambassador for Christ. Missions, the work of urging people to follow Jesus, isn't a special Christian thing. It's an every Christian thing. To be a disciple is to make disciples and that by the same power of God that animated Paul's ministry.

Remember that the next time you feel weak, scared, or incapable, whether your present mission field is Bolivia or your own backyard. The power of God (v. 7) is at work in you, equipping you, enabling you, empowering you, to speak of Jesus. It's not a dreadful duty. It's an incredible privilege and a gift of the Spirit. The degree to which we see ourselves the way Paul did, as undeserved recipients of God's grace, is the degree to which we will be glad ambassadors of the same.

As a minister of the gospel, God charged Paul to do two things, which are really two sides of the same coin. The first is found in v. 8, "to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ." You know what that means, Christian? It means we will never run out of things to say about Jesus. His greatness, as Ps 145 says, is unsearchable. You will never read or meditate on the glory of his person and work and realize, "Well, there's the end of that. What's next?" No. Were the Lord to give you a thousand years, friend, you would never exhaust the glories of Christ!

So don't wait until you feel like you've understood or grasped all there is to know about Jesus before you speak of him. We'll never arrive at that point, even in heaven! There will always be more. More majesty. More beauty. More splendor. More goodness. Our job is simply to be faithful with the measure of understanding we have been given.

Paul describes his second responsibility in fulfilling God's mission in v. 9: "To bring to light for everyone what is the plan of mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things." Do you realize, Christian, that the gospel with which we have been entrusted isn't God's plan B? It's not like he created a perfect world, witnessed Adam and Eve's sin, and said, "Oh man, what are we going to do now?" No. From eternity past, long before creation, Almighty God resolved to redeem men and women as a people for himself from every nation on earth to the praise of his glory.

When you're suffering on the path of faithfulness to God's mission, remember that behind it all, beneath it all, in front of it all, stands the sovereign, immovable plan of God. And don't speak with timidity, focusing on what you think or you believe as if the truth of Jesus runs no deeper than your own opinions and experiences. Share your opinions and experiences, but when you're talking about the gospel, speak with the boldness that comes from knowing you are talking about the eternal plan of God. The



gospel isn't a religious theory. It's a divine reality. It's the greatest true story in the universe.

The Apostle Paul remained faithful in preaching and illuminating the gospel even in suffering. But what kept him going? What will keep us going? The same thing Paul knew would compel the Ephesians to keep going and not lose heart. In v. 10, Paul reveals the ultimate aim of all his preaching, all his labor for the cause of Christ, implicitly inviting us to join him in embracing the same. "So that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places."

If you could choose one place for the world to look to perceive the glory of God what would it be? The stars in the heavens? The intricacies of the human body? A piece of music that moves your soul? A painting of perfect proportion? Indeed, the heavens declare the glory of God, as do men and women who bear his image and imitate his creative handiwork. But none of those things are the high point. No, when God wants to show the world the full spectrum of his perfections, the unspeakable magnificence of his wisdom, he doesn't say look at the stars. He says, "Look at the church. Look at my people."

Say what, God? We're riddled with conflict. Our leaders make the front page, and not for good reason. We hurt, offend, and sin against one another. We make mistakes. We form cliques. We practice prejudice. We forget the gospel. We take resources that should be used to store up treasures in heaven and build palaces on earth. We sing, "It's all about you," and then live like it's all about us.

How is that organization, that assembly of the saints the fireworks finale of your manifold wisdom? 1 Cor 1:27-31, "But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.'"

Friends, we are not God's chosen display of his glory because we are strong or wise but because we are foolish and weak. And it is through our weakness, through our frailty, through our hypocrisy and ineptitude that our Redeemer King shows the world just how strong and kind he really is. As the Lord reminded Paul in 2 Cor 12:9, "My power is made perfect in weakness."

Our God is jealous for his glory. He does not want the world to look at the church and think, "Wow. Look at how amazing those people are." He wants the world to look at the church and think, "There is no other explanation for the good I see in their lives apart from the present reality of a God who saves."

The organized institution of the church is immeasurably more than a spiritual supply wagon designed to keep Christian trudging along toward heaven. We are a climactic, blood-bought display to every spiritual power in the universe of the supremacy of God's glory. And that has serious implications for not only our attitude toward the church as members, but our goals and methods in the work of international missions.

If our mission activities – whether we are distributing Bibles or teaching sustainable farming – neither proceed out of the local church nor result in the planting or building of the local church, then we have exchanged God's mission strategy for an enterprise of our own. Because the church has been the centerpiece of God's mission strategy, it remains the centerpiece of God's mission strategy, and will always be the centerpiece of God's mission strategy until the day Christ returns to present his bride to himself in spotless splendor.

God is not glorified simply because we are busy in the work of missions. We have to ask, "Are we busy with the right things? Is his strategy our strategy?" And that's why we are committed to prioritizing mission efforts designed to plant and build local churches. It's one of our distinctive values as a denomination. Biblical missions proceed out of one church with the goal of forming another church because it's through the church that God is making known his "manifold wisdom."

He declares his glory through the way we live the gospel as a church, different people, with different personalities, many of whom would not be friends naturally, learning to love one another in the power of the Spirit. He declares his glory through the way we speak the gospel as a church, with different gifts, in different ways, learning to share the truth of Jesus in the power of the Spirit. Through our words, our deeds, and our relationships, the church is a foretaste on earth of the cosmic reconciliation to come, an embassy of heaven, the pattern and the means by which God brings his redemptive work to fulfillment, and a living, breathing testimony to his triumphant power.

CONCLUSION



The existence and activity of faithful churches declares to the world that the power of sin has been broken, the truth of the gospel will prevail, and King Jesus will not be denied the reward of his suffering. The bride of Christ will not fail to magnify the glory of Christ. It's the eternal purpose God is accomplishing through Christ, even in the midst of suffering. And it's why a life devoted to serving, supporting, planting, and building the local church is a life that is never wasted.

So with the Ephesians, let us not lose heart (v. 13), even when we suffer, even when our reputation in the eyes of men takes a hit, even when we look weak and foolish in the world's eyes. For this we know. We are the centerpiece of God's mission strategy in the universe. And what God has purposed to accomplish will surely come to pass.