

Citizens & Saints
Beyond What You Can See • Message 5
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Prayer Points for Prayer Time:

- **Pray that God would give you faith when you cannot see.**
- **Pray that you would remember the riches you have in Christ.**
- **Ask God to use Brookwood for His greater purpose.**

Worship Psalm:

“Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need.”

Matthew 6:33 (NLT)

Scripture Reading:

For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—Surely you have heard about the administration of God’s grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets. This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus. I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God’s grace given me through the working of his power. Although I am less than the least of all the Lord’s people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.

Ephesians 3:1-13 (NIV)

A. Introduction

A few weeks ago, our youngest turned ten. And, as parents do, we wanted a picture. Not just any picture. We wanted the picture. A picture to commemorate his double-digit birthday.

You know what I mean—the birthday picture where everybody is looking at the camera, the lighting is good, and your child has this expression that says, *I am deeply grateful for the family God has given me and overwhelmed by the privilege of turning ten.*

That is not the picture we got.

We got goofy faces. We got the unimpressed face. We got the “why are you making me do this?” face.

Because there are moments you want to capture. You want the picture to look like the moment is supposed to feel.

Your life doesn’t always give you the picture you expected.

And honestly, that is a much bigger struggle than birthday pictures.

There are moments in the Christian life when what we see happening doesn’t seem to match what we believe to be true about God.

We believe God is good, but this doesn’t look good.

We believe God is powerful, but we feel powerless.

We believe God is wise, but what is happening makes absolutely no sense to us.

And that is exactly where we find Paul in Ephesians 3.

Listen to what Paul has already told us about Jesus.

Back in chapter 1, Paul says that God raised Jesus from the dead, seated him at his right hand, and placed him “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion.”

Jesus is above them all. Everything has been placed under his feet.

And then we get to chapter 3. Paul says:

For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner...

Wait a minute. A prisoner?

Paul, you just told us Jesus is above every ruler and authority. So, if Jesus rules the rulers, how did one of those rulers put Jesus' apostle in prison?

And the paradox gets even deeper.

What had God called Paul to do? Take the gospel to the Gentiles.

Paul had been entrusted with this extraordinary mission of carrying the good news of Jesus to people who had never heard it. Now he's in prison. He can't travel. He can't plant another church.

From where we're standing, prison doesn't look like a very good strategy for accomplishing the mission that God gave to Paul. That's where Paul's story starts sounding a little more like ours.

Because haven't you had moments when you've looked at what was happening in your life and thought: *God, this doesn't make sense.*

If you're powerful, why didn't you stop this?

If you opened this door, why did it close?

If you're working, why can't I see it?

Sometimes the hardest moments of faith aren't the moments when we stop believing in God.

They're the moments when we still believe what we know to be true about God and we can't reconcile it with what we're seeing in front of us.

And Ephesians 3 doesn't give you a neat explanation for every circumstance we will ever face.

Paul doesn't tell us that eventually we'll understand everything God allowed. Instead, from a prison cell, Paul teaches us something about how to live when we can't understand.

And this is the truth I want us to carry through this passage:

When you can't see what God is doing, remember that God is doing more than you can see.

Paul couldn't see everything God was doing from that prison cell.

But he knew enough about the One who held his life to trust Him beyond what he could see.

So first, rely on God beyond what you can see...

B. Beyond What You Can See

1. RELY on God BEYOND what you can see.

(Ephesians 3:1-7. C/R: 2 Corinthians 5:7)

Look again at how Paul describes himself in verse 1:

For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles ...

Ephesians 3:1 (NIV)

We focused on the word *prisoner* a moment ago. But now notice the words that come after it. Paul doesn't simply say *I am a prisoner*. He says, *I am a prisoner of Christ Jesus*.

From a human perspective, Paul is a prisoner of Rome. Roman authorities have put him in chains and determine where he can go.

But Paul does not believe that Rome is in control of His life. Paul belongs to Jesus.

And that means Paul refuses to let his circumstances tell him what is ultimately true about his God. That's often where we get into trouble.

Something happens that we cannot understand, and we begin interpreting God through what has happened to us.

Do you allow your circumstances to dictate your picture of God? Or does God always determine how you interpret your circumstances?

We take what we can see and use it to determine what must be true about God. Paul does the opposite. He takes what he knows to be true about Christ and uses it to interpret what he can see. He knows Christ is Lord. He knows his life belongs to Christ. So even with chains around his wrists, Paul can say:

I am a prisoner of Jesus Christ.

That doesn't mean Paul understands everything Christ is doing. It means he knows who is sovereign even when he doesn't understand what God is doing.

That's faith.

Faith isn't pretending you can see what you cannot see. Faith is relying on the God you know when you cannot understand what He is doing.

For we live by faith, not by sight.

2 Corinthians 5:7 (NIV)

And then notice what happens in verses 2–6.

Paul mentions his imprisonment and then almost immediately begins talking about purpose.

Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you.

Ephesians 3:2 (NIV)

That's an interesting way for a prisoner to talk.

While Paul is in chains, he is explaining that this is God's care.

The word *oikonomia*—a stewardship, an administration, a responsibility entrusted to someone.

Paul looks at his life and doesn't primarily ask: *What has happened to me?*

He asks: *What has God entrusted to me?*

That's a very different way to see your life.

Our instinct is often to ask, *Why is this happening to me?*

Paul's chains are real. But Paul refuses to believe his chains tell the whole story.

There is something bigger happening than what Paul can presently see.

And then Paul starts talking about a mystery.

That is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets.

Ephesians 3:3-5 (NIV)

For generations, God was working out a plan that human beings could not yet fully see.

Their inability to see God's plan didn't mean that God didn't have one.

And eventually God revealed what had previously been hidden. That's the mystery Paul describes in verse 6:

This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.

Ephesians 3:6 (NIV)

God had been moving history toward something far bigger than anyone could fully see. Jew and Gentile, people who have been separated for generations, were being brought together into one body in Christ. And Paul has been given the privilege of announcing it.

So, think about the irony.

The man sitting in prison is part of a plan that has been unfolding for generations. Paul can see the prison. God sees the plan. Paul can see a moment, but God sees the whole story.

And that's why our inability to see what God is doing is never evidence that God isn't doing anything.

And then look at verse 7:

I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power.

Ephesians 3:7 (NIV)

Notice the order here. Paul does not say, *I became powerful*. He says, *I became a servant*. Paul is not the central character in the story; Jesus is. And that means Paul doesn't get to decide what God's power has to look like.

If I were Paul, I know how I would probably want God to demonstrate his power. Open the door.

Break the chains. Change my circumstances. Get me out.

And sometimes God does exactly that. He did it for Paul in Acts 16. But here, Paul recognizes the power of God while the prison door remains closed.

Sometimes God's power gets you out of the prison. And sometimes God's power is at work while you're still sitting in it.

Maybe you've been praying:

God, change this.

And you should keep praying.

But don't make the mistake of assuming that because God hasn't changed *this*, God isn't doing *anything*.

Paul's chains haven't disappeared. But grace is still being given. The gospel is still advancing. God's purpose is still unfolding. God's power is still working.

Paul doesn't know everything God is doing. But he knows enough about God to rely on him beyond what he can see.

You don't need to pretend you understand.

You don't need to pretend the disappointment doesn't hurt. You don't need to manufacture an explanation God hasn't given you.

But you can refuse to let the limits of what you can see become the limits of what you believe God can be doing.

You have to rely on God beyond what you can see.

When you can't see what God is doing, remember that God is doing more than you can see.

2. REST in the RICHES of God.

(Ephesians 3:8-13. C/R: Romans 11:33-36)

But that raises the question: How can Paul be so confident?

How can a man sitting in prison believe that God is doing more than he can see?

Paul's answer isn't that he has figured everything out. His confidence comes from what he knows about Christ and what he knows about God's wisdom.

Paul specifically wants us to see 3 reasons why we can rest even when we cannot see what God is doing.

Riches

Look at verse 8:

Although I am less than the least of all the Lord's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ.

Ephesians 3:8 (NIV)

I love this statement. Here is a man sitting in prison talking about riches. From the outside looking in, Paul doesn't look very rich. His freedom has been taken away. His circumstances are restricted.

And yet Paul says, *Let me tell you about riches.*

Not too far from here, near Kershaw, South Carolina, sits the Haile Gold Mine. Gold was discovered there in 1827. And for almost two hundred years, generation after generation has gone back to that same piece of ground looking for gold.

The earliest miners could pan the creeks and get what was relatively easy to reach. As technology improved, miners learned how to reach gold earlier generations couldn't get to.

And nearly two hundred years after the first discovery, they're still mining gold from that ground today.

Generations have dug there, and yet there was still more to discover. Not because somebody put new gold in the ground. It had been there all along.

They just hadn't reached it yet. And I wonder if that's something like what Paul means when he talks about "the unsearchable riches of Christ."

Some of you have been following Jesus for forty or fifty years. Keep digging. Because you haven't reached the bottom.

Every time you discover something more about Jesus, it isn't because Jesus became richer. It was there all along.

You can spend an entire lifetime mining the riches of Jesus and never hear the sound of your shovel hitting the bottom.

There is always more.

Paul has learned something we desperately need to learn:

Your circumstances are a terrible measuring stick for how much you possess in Christ.

Paul's circumstances say, *You have nothing.*

Paul says, *You have no idea what I have.*

He has what he calls:

“the unsearchable riches of Christ.”

The word translated *unsearchable* carries the idea of something that cannot be fully traced out or explored. There is no bottom. Paul isn't saying Christ cannot be known.

Grace you cannot exhaust. Mercy you cannot exhaust. Forgiveness you cannot exhaust. Hope you cannot exhaust.

And that matters when life doesn't make sense. Paul looks at the riches of Christ and realizes his prison cannot possibly be the whole story.

But Paul goes even further.

Wisdom

Look at verse 10:

His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms.

Ephesians 3:10 (NIV)

There's another enormous phrase: *the manifold wisdom of God.*

The word *manifold* means something like multifaceted, many-sided, richly varied. And I think that's particularly important when we're talking about the things in life we don't understand.

Because we see one side. God's wisdom is many-sided.

We see this moment. God sees how this moment fits within his eternal purpose.

God is using the church to display his wisdom *to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places*.

Think about how dramatically Paul has expanded the picture.

We started this chapter in a prison cell. Now we're in the heavenly places.

Paul's circumstances look small. God's purposes are cosmic.

And maybe that's part of our problem when we struggle with the wisdom of God.

We're trying to evaluate a manifold wisdom from a single vantage point.

We have today.

We have this diagnosis.

This infertility.

This unanswered prayer.

And from the angle where we're standing, we say: *God, this doesn't make sense*.

But Paul is reminding us:

Where you're standing isn't the only place from which the story can be seen.

You have one angle. God has every angle.

And that's why faith doesn't require us to understand everything God is doing. It requires us to trust the wisdom of the One who does.

Purpose

Look at verse 11:

... according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Ephesians 3:11 (NIV)

That is what it means to rest. I don't know what God is doing. But I trust that God knows what He is doing.

And then Paul brings us to verse 13:

So please don't lose heart because of my trials here. I am suffering for you, so you should feel honored.

Ephesians 3:13 (NLT)

Notice the *so*.

Paul has just spent these verses talking about the unsearchable riches of Christ, the manifold wisdom of God, the heavenly places, and God's eternal purpose.

So...Don't lose heart.

Don't lose heart because this isn't the whole story. Christ is richer than you know. God is wiser than you understand. His purposes are larger than you can see.

Some of us have been waiting to trust God until God explains himself.

Rest in who God is. You may never understand every reason for the chapter you're living in right now.

But you don't have to see everything God is doing to know something about the God who is doing it.

His riches are unsearchable.

His wisdom is manifold.

His purpose is eternal.

This is why Paul can say in Romans 11:

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! "Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?" "Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them?" For from him and through him and for him are all things.

To him be the glory forever! Amen.

Romans 11:33-36 (NIV)

Paul's response to what he cannot fully understand is not frustration that God has not explained everything.

It is worship.

God's wisdom is deeper than Paul can trace.

God's purposes are bigger than Paul can see.
And all of it is ultimately from Him, through Him, and for Him.

So do not lose heart!

Because when you can't see what God is doing, remember that God is doing more than you can see.

Closing.

I told you at the beginning about trying to get a good picture of our youngest on his tenth birthday.

What I didn't tell you is that there was something I had forgotten in my frustration.

Our youngest came into our family through foster care. And for the first several years of his life with us, whenever we took a family picture, we couldn't show his face publicly.

There were rules we had to follow to protect him.

So we would take the picture and then before we could share it, we would cover his little face with an emoji. Some of our extended family had never even seen his actual face.

And this week, as I was getting frustrated because this ten-year-old boy would not give me one normal smile for a birthday picture, it suddenly hit me:

I get to show his face. I get to complain about the goofy face because I get to see the face.

I get to take the picture. I get to share the picture.

And what felt frustrating to me in one moment was evidence of something much bigger that I had forgotten. The picture hadn't changed. My perspective had.

And I wonder how many times we do something similar with God. We look at one frame of our lives and say, *God, I don't understand this.*

This isn't the picture I wanted.

This isn't how I thought this chapter would look.

This isn't what I prayed for.

And maybe God will eventually let us see why some things happened. Maybe he won't.

But he does remind us that what we can see is never all that God can see.

Paul could see the chains. God could see the gospel going to the nations.

So maybe today you are looking at a picture of your life that you do not understand.

Don't pretend it doesn't hurt.

Don't pretend you can see what you cannot see.

But don't let one frame convince you that you know the whole story.

Rely on God beyond what you can see.

Rest in the riches and wisdom of God.

And do not lose heart.

Because when you can't see what God is doing, remember. God is doing more than you can see.