

## I. Intro

A. I hope you had a good week. I hope you are enjoying the weekend. I hope you are taking in all the wonderful colors of this fall moment. I hope this Sunday finds you leaning into God – more like Jesus than last week. I hope... well, I hope for a lot of things. And so do you. And our hope shapes us. And in the absence of hope we suffer. We shut down. Because we need hope. We need the right kind of hope in the right kind of things. And many lack that.

B. We instinctively know that hope is important. And you're not surprised to hear that are lots of study's that support this idea. Two hope-related references come to mind for me.

1. The first is Ernest Becker's 1973 Pulitzer Prize winning book, *The Denial of Death* in which Becker – a cultural anthropologist – argued that our culture's pivot into secularism was robbing people of hope in something beyond, which was leading them (us) to seek ultimate meaning in things like sex, money and power.

2. The second reference to hope comes from Rodney Stark, a sociologist of religion at the University of Washington while we were out there. He did not become a Christian until after he retired. He noted that part of the reason Christianity spread was because when the plagues broke out, Christians stayed and cared for those who got sick (which led them to develop immunities and led lots of people to become Christians).<sup>1</sup> And that the reason they did this was not because they were more virtuous than others. It is because they were shaped by their hope in life after death.

C. Hope matters. Our expectations of what lies ahead shapes how we live today. And I am bringing this up because it's a big topic in Ephesians 3. The word itself – *elpis* in Greek – is not in the chapter. But it's the big topic.

II. This is week four in this quick study of Ephesians – which is one of the letters Paul wrote from a prison cell.

A. In chapter one he talks about our need to know God.

B. In the first half of chapter two he talks about the way we are rescued by the work of Christ - and Christ alone. We are saved by grace through faith.

C. In the second half of chapter two we are called to unity – we see how important our unity is to God, and learn that a big key to being unified as a church is to understand that our identity as a child of God should not only be more defining than anything else. It should be more defining than everything else put together. (I'm not saying that we think that way. But we are supposed to think that way).

D. Today we turn to chapter 3, and we are called to a rightly ordered hope in the right things.

**III. For this reason** (in light of the Gospel and with the unity of the church in mind) **I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles.** Two things to note here.

A. First, most people would think Paul would identify as a prisoner of Rome, not of Christ. But that is not how he sees it. His hope in the Gospel and confidence in God's plan so overwhelms everything that he doesn't allow himself to be defined by minor details, such as being in jail. That is just a light momentary affliction that is producing in him an eternal weight of glory. Eternity changes everything. He looks past this momentary inconvenience.

1. You may need to fight for this perspective. I do. If I don't, I end up giving too much importance to very temporary things. We end up being shaped by things like our grades or performance review, or whether our team won, or the status of the a deal, or an election. And we can be overwhelmed by things, end up feeling like a victim and lose hope.

2. Some of you have some real problems. I do not want to diminish them. It is easy to have first world problems and think they are real problems. But some of you are facing some real hardships. Let me note, Paul was as well. In 2 Corinthians 11, Paul rehearses some of them. He writes:

a) **Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.**

3. It might be worth reflecting on how you define yourself: Are you a prisoner of Rome or a prisoner of Christ? Are you being defined by "light and momentary afflictions?" or are you aware that many of your struggles are just "light and momentary afflictions" that really do not matter. Eternity Changes Everything.

B. Second, don't miss that Paul - the quintessential Jew. The one who climbed the Jewish religious ladder faster and higher than any of his peers – was called to serve the Gentiles.

1. In Philippians 3 he lays out his Jewish pedigree. He says, **If anyone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.**

2. He was the most Jewish of Jews, but his apostolic assignment was to take the Gospel to the Gentiles.

IV. Reading on we turn to V2 and the first of two rambling, hard to follow side notes. **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.**

A. When theologians use the term *mystery* it means something specific and different than the way it is used today. For starters, it refers to something we're not going to be able to fully grasp, like the nature of God. Secondly, it refers to something we are not going to be able to figure out – a riddle we are not going to be able to solve. It's something hidden from us by God, so the only way we will get it is if He shows us.

B. The Gospel is a mystery. According to 1 Peter 1:12 - keep looking at the Gospel because it has depth and power that can never be exhausted.

C. The Ten Commandments are not. We can figure out that life works better if we don't like, steal, commit adultery or murder. But the Gospel – the idea that we can be reconciled to God by grace. In a world where there is no such thing as a free lunch – and where people want to be gods – the idea that God lowered himself to become one of us and then died in our place. And that he actually won by losing. This is a mystery.

D. And this is why one of the very first apologists said, "We believe because it is absurd." No one would make this up.

E. We should regularly marvel at the Gospel. We should be amazed by God's grace extended to us. We should take some clues from the angels who –

V. **V4: 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.** (This is what we looked at last week. Paul was particularly taken by the fact that Christ's death destroyed the barrier separating Jews and Gentiles, thereby uniting them. Remember, last week we looked at the unity of these two very different groups as a case study we can apply with others).

VI. OK, verses 2-6 are a side bar from his main point. We now turn to verses 7-12, which is a second side bar. (Paul would not likely get high marks in a writing composition class). He is all over the place.

A. In this second side bar He writes again about the irony that he – a very Jewish Jew – has been called to reach the Gentiles. He then talks about how he is not qualified by his own merit, before pivoting to the boundless riches of Jesus and then the importance of the church.

VII. Then in V 13 he says: **I ask you, therefore** (in light of all these things) **I ask you not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you...** Do not despair. Have hope.

A. Paul's imprisonment was a discouragement to his friends. He was called to be an apostle to the Gentiles. To that end he had introduced them to Christ and eternal life. He had helped them. He was their spiritual leader. But now, for doing those things he was suffering in prison. A first century Roman prison at that! They feel terrible.

B. He recognizes that. He doesn't deny their suffering. He doesn't diminish them. He doesn't say ignore your pain or "suck it up." He engages them over the reality of their suffering.

C. The Bible is very realistic about the inevitability of suffering and disappointment in this world. Paul is not lecturing students but pastoring hurting people. And so, he talks for a moment about how their suffering can be helpful to their growth and focus.

VIII. And then – verses 14 – 19 he tells them that he is praying for them: **For this reason, I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name.** (He notes God's role as creator). And he then says. I am praying that:

A. God will strengthen you in your inner being

B. So that Christ will dwell in your hearts

C. And then - vs 17: **And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge - that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.**

D. He says – for you to have the hope and disposition you need to navigate your many concerns – I pray that you will grasp (big word) a greater awareness of God's amazing love for you. And this will fill you up. That you will abound in hope.

E. We then get something like a benediction - verses 20-21 – we get something that feels like a benediction. **Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.**

F. Which is a bit odd coming in the middle of the letter. But Paul is going to move in a very different direction for the next three chapters.

IX. OK, I want to highlight two things. The first is an observation about Ephesians and reading.

A. This is week four in our study of this letter. My expectation is that you have gained some awareness of the heft of this material. You are aware that it's dense. It's deep and profound. It's full of big and important ideas. And – and here is my point – it stands in contrast with much of the other stuff you read. I want to note that a lot of what we read these days – a lot of what comes our way in texts and articles (think sport's scores, celebrity gossip, marketing material, weather) is not like this.

B. And even when what we are reading is important – when it's big issues, global issues. It's often delivered in sound bites that make it, well, not like Ephesians.

C. So, reading this takes work.

D. A few weeks ago we had Phil Yancey here for a Lakelight event. And in my preparation to interview him, I ran across an article he wrote a few years ago for *The Washington Post*, titled “The Death of Reading is Threatening the Soul.” In it he said that he had stopped reading long or weighty books because it was too hard.

E. So I asked him if he'd gone back to this, and he said he had. That it had been hard, but he had worked to structure his life so that he could read weighty things like the Bible. I want to say to you, you can as well. It is not easy, but it is important.

X. The second thing I want to do is reflect for a moment on hope. Paul is writing to encourage them in the midst of their struggles. It's worth noting how he goes about doing that.

A. Last week I shared that Paul's advice about achieving unity really surprised me. After reading his set up, I looked at the advice I was giving to people who were not getting along with someone. I noted that I advocated five things: Forgiveness. An eternal perspective. The listening exercise, prayer and humility. And then I noted that he did not suggest any of those. He had stressed the importance of unity and our need to ground our identity fully in Christ.

B. So, I did it again this week. This time, after noting that Paul wanted them to have hope, I thought about my advice to people who are discouraged. And here I need to admit that my counsel is somewhat legendary – for being bad. Part of what I have been learning about myself is I have one default approach to discouragement.

1. It's all about trying harder. Resilience. Grit. I have lacked nuance or an appreciation for lament.

2. I say a few other things to people who are discouraged and despairing – hopeless: get off social media. Dial back the news. Spend more time outside. Get a physical. But not much. Much of what I have said (or implied) is that you have to try harder.

C. Paul doesn't dismiss the importance of grit and resilience. Of "pressing on." But in this passage what he focuses on is being full of Jesus. Of being yielded to him.

1. Ephesians 3 can make it look like Paul is confused. In various other places – such as Col. 1 - Paul notes that Christians have Christ. When we yield to Jesus God comes to live in us. Lots of mystery there. But we are "in Christ" and "we are baptized into Christ." So, Paul is writing to Christians and what he says to them is, they need Christ. It can look like he is confused, but he is not. What he advocates is more of Christ. That we are more fully yielded. Enamored. That we cultivate deeper intimacy. That we overflow with Him.

2. You need to know that it is possible to be a Christ follower but to grieve the Holy Spirit. To restrict God's control of our life. Indeed, it's not only possible, there is some suggestion that it's common. Ephesians was written to a wide spectrum of people. (There are no lists of names at the end. It's to lots of people, but he assumes this b/c it is true of so many.

D. How do we do this? Well, he doesn't specifically say. But we can note two things.

1. First – he prays that it will happen. Paul says, "I kneel before the father." This was serious prayer. You can imagine it was for himself but also for them. He wants this for them and at one level seems to believe the way they will get it is as a gift from God, so he prays.

a) I'm struck by the intentionality.

b) Felicia Wu Song – What we have discovered in our digitally saturated society is that we have a remarkable endurance and capacity to remain attuned to our devices—it is the first thing we greet in the morning and it is the last thing we take into bed with us at night... What would it be like if we were to cultivate such a permanent state of expectancy for God's desire to communicate with us? What if my antennae were always outstretched toward checking in with God as much as I am always checking my smartphone? What if I was filled with great expectancy that there would be a word for me? And that I could trust that that word would not be a word that simply demanded something from me but a word that came to nourish me?"

2. Second, he prays specifically that:

- a) they will grasp what is going on. And again, this is an important word. It means more than just understand. It implies being moved.<sup>2</sup>
- b) And what it is that they are to grasp: **how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge - that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.**

3. Paul's prayer highlights that such grasping is a gift of the Spirit, requiring divine power to fully experience and live in the reality of God's incomprehensible love.

4. I think it also suggests that we will not just read God's Word, but also meditate on it. That we will pray and contemplate until it explodes inside us.

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<sup>1</sup> See: *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (1996).

<sup>2</sup> The word that is used here for "to grasp" – *katalambano* – is a strong word. It can mean to "comprehend" but it carries the sense of fully understanding or seizing something, not merely in an intellectual way, but in a deep, experiential manner. Paul prays that believers might grasp the breadth, length, height, and depth of Christ's love—a love that surpasses knowledge. The use of *katalambanó* emphasizes the profound and transformative nature of truly coming to know Christ's love. It suggests more than just cognitive awareness; it points to an internalization of the truth that reshapes the heart and life.