

## Hope in an Unlikely Mystery

Ephesians 3:7-13

*Therefore, having this ministry, by the mercy of God, **we do not lose heart***  
2 Corinthian 4:1

**Introduction:** One of the things that unites all of us together and with people throughout the world for all time: *life is exceptionally full and difficult*. We try hard around here not to frame the “how are you doing” questions with “busy”, since busyness is a foregone conclusion. One of the things I love about the church family is that we have an opportunity to share burdens together, sharing our current experiences so we can pray for each other. This last week I sat with our Tuesday night Shepherding group and our Wednesday staff meeting and was struck with multitude of challenges that we face as families each day. These are not all bad or painful, but they are comprehensive. And the truth is this: we ALL face it, and we ALL can be lulled into thinking that our plight is worse than others or that no one else understands. In the midst of a full life, it can be exceptionally easy to **lose heart, to get discouraged, and allow this to de-motivate and depress us**. Losing heart comes from many sources:

- **Circumstances that are hard and unrelenting** – So much of life is out of our control, from responses of others to physical well-being. Getting news from a job, from governmental decisions, or from family can cause growing frustration or overwhelming feelings.
- **People are disappointing** – People in our lives rarely live up to our expectations and thus constantly let us down (or at least our hopes for them). We cannot control their lives or decisions and often we are left to pick up the pieces. The ones we love the most can cause the most discouragement, knowing that we cannot give them faith or fix them on our own.
- **Sin is stubborn** – Most of our discouragement comes from our own indulgence in sinful actions and desires, exchanging joy in Christ for temporal satisfaction, whether it’s lust or selfishness. Battling sin can easily feel like a losing battle even though we know that the power of sin has been broken and the penalty of sin is paid for. The presence of sin persists, and so easily keeps us away from what we actually need most.
- **Get caught waiting for “someday”** – There is a someday we all long for, the time when we’ll be with our Savior forever, seeing Him for what He is (1 John 3:2). But often we think, “if only \_\_\_\_\_ happens, then we’ll be happy, fulfilled, etc.”. We wait for *circumstances* to go our way, thinking THEN life will make sense and be enjoyable, instead of enjoying the process and what God has for us now! The only “someday” where things will be made right is after Christ returns. Until then, we live in faith, hope, and love.
- **Pain is real and the flesh is weak** – When Paul told the church at Corinth not to lose heart, he reminded them that our outer self is wasting away, that we experience momentary light affliction (an understatement), and do this all in jars of clay (2 Cor. 4: 7, 16-17). In the church at Ephesus, he reminded them not to lose heart because Paul was in prison for 5 years because of the message that saved them (Eph. 3:13). In other words, the answer to “NOT LOSING HEART” is NOT a change of circumstance or taking us out of it, but believing in something far greater, both in **purpose and mission** (see 2 Cor. 4:1, 18).

As Paul finishes this parenthesis of the mystery of the gospel and unity in the church, and BEFORE he prays for them to understand the massive love of Christ for them, he concludes with

*“So, I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory”*

*Do not lose heart...* How do we do that? What did he cover earlier that would fight against discouragement? What we’ll see is that he gives us hope **in some unlikely places, since the gospel itself is presented as the most unlikely source of salvation** (1 Cor. 1:18-31). Hope is born out of mystery, and this mystery displays unlikely sources to fight discouragement.

**Most Unlikely Force: servants** (3:7-8a)

*Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God’s grace, which was given me by the working of His power. To me, though I am the very least of all the saints...*

If you wanted to turn the world upside down, how would you go about it? Mark Zuckerberg has the goal of connecting everyone around the globe, even those without Internet access yet<sup>1</sup>. To reach this goal, he’s acquired apps such as WhatsApp and Instagram, and has sought to hire the best of the best in the industry, but also just saw the largest stock drop in history, losing about a quarter of the stock’s price while losing users. But this is not how God chose to reach the world. He chose to use the least likely. He chose to use **servants, and these servants turned the world upside down** (Acts 17:6) by proclaiming another king besides Caesar, King Jesus (Acts 17:7).

**Paul’s self view** – Paul did not choose his outcome. In fact, his choices led him to persecute, imprison, and kill followers of Jesus. His commitment to religion was impeccable, and he was so zealous for Judaism that he was willing to stop anyone who stood in the way. But notice he said the he was **made a minister**, not that he chose to be one. The word for minister here is the word “diakonos”, a word for table waiter and servant, with the word “doulos” a synonym for slave used in 1 Corinthians. Servant described the activity, where slave is the relationship to the master. This position embraced humility and giving up control of one’s life. For post-conversion Paul, this was a privilege and joy, not a burden. He recognized that he was the “least of all the saints”, which was not hyperbole but rather a recognition of who he was before conversion. He literally made up the word “leaster” (elachistos) to describe who he was before Christ. But being a servant did not mean being **powerless**. On the contrary, Paul had access to power like never before. Before Christ, he did everything on his own, working tirelessly but unsuccessfully at finding peace with God, and in his unworthy state, persecuted the church of God (1 Cor. 15:9). But God’s **grace was not only brought salvation, it enabled him**. God’s grace freed him to work harder than he did before, but not by his own strength but with the grace that God worked in him (1 Cor. 15:10). It was the power to truly affect change, to be useful in God’s hand, to be an instrument of change. Who was Paul now? A simple slave, a third level galley rower on a ship, a nobody whose goal was to point everyone to Christ.

**Our identity** – What gives us encouragement in this? “We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty” (Luke 17:10). We embrace the fact that we have been given a true MINISTRY given to God’s servants, a ministry that was so valuable that God had His Son live, die, and rise again to make us ministers, ministers of a NEW covenant (2 Cor. 4:1). It means that there is no higher rank than servant, minister in God’s household, and has called us ALL TO MINISTRY. We are all slaves, regardless of our gifts, talents, responsibilities, or whether we plant, water, harvest, send, or go. Whether we

<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Kama, Washington Post, “Facebook’s dream of connecting the world is dead”, Feb. 3, 2022.

speak or serve, we do it all **by the strength God provides** — so that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 4:10-11). Whenever we stop thinking of ourselves as servants, we start thinking that we deserve more; we get miffed when we don't receive thanks, and crave recognition. We begin to think we are indispensable or irreplaceable instead of instruments in the Redeemer's hand. This morning we take heart, because God has chosen each of you to be a minister, a servant of the King, a slave of Christ who has been enabled by the grace He provides, a grace that is lavished on us.

**But what does this ministry entail?**

**Most Unlikely Source: *Gospel to the Gentiles* (3:8b-9)**

*...this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery, hidden for ages in God who created all things.*

We can call a lot of different things “ministry”, and really any service in the name of Christ can be ministry. But the true goal of ministry is laid out here for Paul, which should be the goal and drive for every minister of Christ:

- 1) **Preach the Unsearchable Riches of Christ** – We Preach Christ! That is our mantra, meme, and motto. Here it is clear once again that Paul was to preach Christ to the Gentiles, all non-Jews of all nations, which does not diminish proclamation to Jews, by religion or culture, but includes all people everywhere. Our message is that Christ is Lord, that He is the Son of God, and that He is Savior. Words like “unsearchable, unfathomable, unimaginable” are tough words to describe, since by definition they mean something hard to comprehend. But it does not mean that we don't try, it means that we will never reach the end or bottom of the riches of Christ. The more we search, the more there is to find. We have been given the **mind of Christ** to understand His mind and instruction (1 Cor. 2:16), so that we are not ill equipped to search. **What does this mean practically?** It means that we are not trying to get people plugged into the church or involved in a program; we are proclaiming Christ so that they would know Him. Our goal is not a better morality or safer communities, it is to present the riches of Christ which cannot be exhausted. But we do not proclaim what we ourselves have not tasted. We preach what we have experienced. So, growing in our knowledge of Christ and proclaiming him work together.
- 2) **Proclaim Revealed Truth – *Why does this matter?*** Our job is to “bring to light” the revealed plan of God that had been hidden for ages. This means that our ministry is one of **REVELATION, presenting truth about God that only God can use to open the eyes and soften the hearts of sinners**. Our goal is to “bring to light”, to expose the darkness. *“Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them...but when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible”* (Eph. 5:11, 13).
  - **We expose the darkness by living differently** – We know that the darkness hates the light (John 3:19), which is why HOW we live matters. We do not live outwardly holy lives because we are trying to earn anything or make ourselves look better, but to match up with an inward change that was produced by Christ. When we live consistently according to the light of Scripture, it shines brightly in the darkness.
  - **We expose the darkness by calling out the truth** – This last week I was reminded again at how deceptive sin can be. Multiple counseling times have exposed the fact that the prince of the power of this air has convinced many that **REBELLION** against God will breed happiness and satisfaction, particularly when it comes to sexual identity and pursuit. Multitudes of young

people are brought down a path that Romans 1:18-32 explains. They reject God and His plan, start worshipping the creation rather than Creator, so God gives them over to their lusts as they exchange the natural for unnatural, leading to a debased/depraved mind, looking to surround oneself to those that approve of your choices. Calling out this downward spiral will be met with fierce resistance and cancellation. Calling out this downward spiral is the most loving thing we could ever do. Staying silent may bring less friction and name calling, but will ultimately prove to show self-love, a desire for man-pleasing rather than God, and fails to proclaim the riches of Christ as the most valuable, satisfying, and pleasurable source in the world.

The gospel is the most unlikely message, one that is laughed at by the wise and misunderstood by the simple. It seems like a weak message (believe in a crucified Savior) but is the source of the greatest power. It is the word that God's grace brings to life, that cuts through the darkness, that makes hearts of stone to hearts of flesh, that allows deceived minds see. It is the message our youth are getting this weekend, explaining a Holy God, sinful Man, and worthy Christ, and a response of repentance by faith. This is the message that plumbs the depths of Christ and also brings the depressed hope, the anxious peace, the lustful contentment, the rebellious to friendship, and those under judgment to sonship. God does the work of revealing the mystery, and unites all believers into His church, the most unlikely source of wisdom.

**Most Unlikely Wisdom: Church (3:10)**

*...so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.*

We've seen before that the church is a far greater deal than we typically commit our mental bandwidth. The church not only displays God's glory through the gospel in Jesus Christ, but also shows His wisdom that was determined before the foundation of the world. As the gospel is revealed to people's mind and heart, they are transferred into God's church, each being equal in Christ, whether Jew, Greek, Gentile, or anything else. But we rarely think about how the angels and demons think about the church, or if they care, but God's wisdom was seen by these powers.

**1 Peter 1:12** says, *"It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, **things which angels long to look.**"*

In all the prophecies and revelation in the OT, neither the prophets themselves nor the angels understood fully what was to come. They did not see God incarnate, a suffering servant, or a not yet governmental ruler. **They could see God's holiness at Sinai with the Law, they could understand God's love at the cross, but they could only understand God's wisdom**, His multi-variegated wisdom! Again, the fact that Gentiles could be saved but also brought into the kingdom the same way as Jews, without having to convert to Judaism, was something angels could not have seen but by which were absolutely stunned. When Paul mentioned rulers and authorities in the heavenly places, it not only meant the holy angels but even the fallen ones. What was the message of the church to this second group? That the prince of the power of the air did not win, that his authority is temporary, that the gates of hell would not prevail against the church. The church displays God's wisdom whenever salvation is revealed and unity is obtained with the most unlikely of people. Satan can blind, deceive, and influence the minds and hearts of people around the world and even the course of thinking in a culture itself, but he CANNOT stop God's wisdom and formation of the church.

So, we take heart in the fact that God uses the church to display His wisdom in the world, and it is known by the angels and they are left in awe.

**Most Unlikely Result: Bold Access (3:11-13)**

*This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in Him. So, I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory.*

Nothing takes God by surprise and He leaves nothing on the table, meaning He always accomplishes all that He sets out to do, and is never thwarted or frustrated. The church was not an overreaction to the failure of Israel, and a lashing out of retribution, replacing them with another entity. No, the church was planned out from the beginning, as was Israel's role for the time past and future. God's church was revealed exactly at the time and in the way He planned, through Christ Jesus our Lord.

But there is something Paul adds here that is monumental to all of us. In the church we have life, unity, belonging, mission, and purpose. But there is another blessing, and that is ACCESS to the riches, access to the Father Himself. Access is not something to be downplayed.

A couple of months ago I took our dog to the groomer (no fur, but her hair sure grows fast). When I got there, they said they only took cash or check since their credit card machine was broken. The problem is: I never carry cash, a checkbook, or a debit card. I have enough money in the bank backing up a transaction, but no access to get it out! Paul said we have riches in Christ, of His grace and glory, but that is no good to us unless we have access.

It is no small thing that we have access to God by faith in Christ. This was reserved for priests in the OT, which meant minimal direct communion with God. But Christ changed all of that, and allowed for us to go directly to God through Himself, since our sin, which caused the denial of access, has been forgiven by Him (1 John 2:2). Christ is our Advocate and intercessor (Heb. 7:25-26), and allows us to approach God with **boldness and confidence**, to not only seek mercy and find grace in times of need, but to be in the presence of God Himself. We approach God in prayer not only to ASK of Him, but to simply GET HIM. If all we ever do is ask God for things but do not ever simply seek Him, we are doing it wrong and are settling for getting \$20 out of the ATM when we have access to unlimited resources.

Are you at all discouraged this morning? Overwhelmed? Frustrated? Depressed? Losing heart? Be encouraged that God uses the most unlikely people and power to glorify Himself and display His mystery. We are unworthy sinners given the immense opportunity to be ministers of His powerful grace through the gospel. We have been brought into God's family that shows the epitome of God's wisdom, and given bold access to God Himself. So, if we are struggling, we remember these things, and stop waiting for someday, and pursue God in Christ today. Circumstances may not change, busyness won't go away, pain is real, and people will be people, but God never changes.