Ephesians 3:1-13

The Mystery Paul Died For

Sermon

Maybe some of you have heard of the book, "End of the Spear". It's written by Steve Saint, the son of missionary Nate Saint. Nate Saint was a missionary who had a passion to spread the gospel to the tribes of the Amazon. These were people groups who had never heard the gospel nor had they ever come in contact with others from the outside world. One tribe of interest was the Waodani. The Waodani were a particularly fierce and dangerous tribe of people. The normal and common way for the Waodani to handle disputes was to spear the other person to death. This was a regular practice not only with the tribe's enemies, but with each other within the tribe. The result was a tribe of people who had families with a history of spearing one another. When this happened it was expected for a family member to avenge the speared family member. But they needed the gospel, so Nate and 4 other missionaries went in to minister to the Waodani tribe. It wasn't long before the Waodani turned on Nate and the others and all 5 missionaries were speared to death.

What on earth would inspire a man like Nate Saint to be willing to go to a hostile, dangerous people group like the Waodani knowing that it could cost him his life? Jesus Christ had given His life to save Nate, and Nate felt compelled to bring that message to a people group that had never heard it. The love of God so overwhelmed Nate that he had to share God's love with the Waodani. Our passion and love for God and the gospel must become greater than our love for our own lives…otherwise we will never be willing to suffer for the sake of the gospel. Only a passion for something greater than your own life will give you the strength and grace to lay down your life. A mother will willingly suffer for her child, because of her love for the child. A man will willingly lay down his life for another because of his love for the other. Do you love God and the gospel so much that you are willing to face suffering for the sake of the gospel?

Paul is writing this letter to the Ephesians from prison. In v.1 he mentions his imprisonment – **"for this reason, I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles"** – and then having begun to pray, he sets his prayer to the side. He doesn't want for his imprisonment to discourage the Ephesians. Suffering can often be taken as a sign of God's disapproval. So he abandons his prayer, momentarily, but then picks it back up in vv.14-21.

Paul wants for the Ephesians to know that the glory of the mystery revealed to Paul by God was worth dying for. His chains and his suffering were NOTHING in comparison to the glory of the gospel – "don't lost heart Ephesians!".

Here is the message to us this morning church: Do not be discouraged but rejoice when you suffer because the glory of the gospel is worthy of the suffering we endure.

This is how Paul saw it. Paul gives us in this passage two reasons why he was not discouraged in the midst of his own suffering.

1. **Paul was willing to suffer because - The *mystery revealed* to Paul was worth dying for (3:2-6)**

You probably noticed that Paul consistently uses the word "mystery" in this passage. The Greek word for mystery is pregnant with meaning. To the Gentiles in Ephesus, this word (μυστηριον) was used by the occult (which was prevalent in Asia Minor) for "mysteries" that were to be kept secret from others. However, in the Bible this word is not used to conceal truth, but to reveal truth that was formerly concealed. Daniel revealed the interpretation of Nebuchadnezzars dream which was called a "mystery". Jesus spoke of the "mysteries of the Kingdom" (Mt. 13:11) when He told parables which hid truths of the gospel from the faithless but revealed the truths of the gospel to His disciples. The manner in which the saints would receive their resurrection bodies in the last days was formerly concealed – so Paul speaks of the "mystery" of the rapture of the church in 1 Cor. 15:51. In fact it was the apostles who were called to be stewards of various "mysteries" that were formerly concealed but now revealed to them by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 4:1).

Look at the end of v.4 – **"the mystery of Christ which was *not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit" (3:4-5)** The writers of the OT received revelation from God, but many things they received were not fully known to them. What was concealed to them was now revealed to God's "holy apostles and prophets" – Paul is talking about the apostles of Jesus who were given revelation and commissioned to proclaim the "mysteries" to the world.

Now the word "mystery" is used in Ephesians far more than any other book. What is the truth in Ephesians that was formerly concealed but now revealed? Paul tells us in v.6 – **"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." (3:6)** God has reconciled the Nations to Himself and to the Jews (formerly hostile groups) by placing both into one new body. The OT spoke of a day when the Nations would be brought to God. However, what was concealed, was the ***manner*** in which this would happen. Some thought that the Gentiles would come to Judaism and be converted as Jews into the law of Moses (this would mean circumcision and adherence to the law). Some thought that the nations would be brought to God simply to be punished and judged. No one could have conceived of the mystery Paul was now writing – that through the blood of the promised Jewish Messiah salvation would spread to the entire world – the way to

God is now open to all! Both Jews and Gentiles, two distinct people groups, united into one body, one church, one new family of God.

If I wrote my mom a letter and I said at the beginning, "I want you to take your medicine." And throughout the letters I used different words like, "medicinal", or, "medication", and then at the end I closed with, "Mom..please take your medication." You would know what that letter is about. The book of Ephesians uses words over and over to tell us a major theme – people who were once hostile to God and to one another have been "united with Christ and united to the body of Christ, the church". Paul uses at times rare and unique words to emphasize this idea but it can easily be missed in English. In chapter 2:5-6 Paul said that we are "co-living" and "co-seated" and "co-raised" in union with Jesus. He uses rare compound words much like "co-conspirators" meaning, people united in a conspiracy. Then in 2:19-22 the Jews and Gentiles are "co-citizens" and "co-joined" and "co-built". This union language was unique and would stand out to the reader. Now Paul in 3:6 says we are "co-inheritors" (fellow heirs) and "co-inhabitors" (same body – co-embodied) and "co-partakers" (partakers) - all of the promises and inheritance given to the Jews is now given to the Gentiles as well who are united into the body of the Messiah "through the gospel" that they received by faith. This is the mystery given to Paul in Ephesians.

There are problems that are far too great for any human to solve. How can we resolve the tension and hostility between man and God? How can we resolve the tension and hostility between one another – Jews and Gentiles who had a history of violence and hatred? Does someone fit that description in your life? These are huge problems! And Paul saw the solution as worth dying for. But God's solution came forth in His plan to bring reconciliation to all through Jesus Christ in the gospel. Look at v.9 – Paul was called by God to **"bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things." This plan always existed in the mind and heart of God – but it was "hidden for ages".**

Your sin is against an eternal God and therefore deserves an eternal payment that you cannot pay! But the eternal Son of God took that payment for you when He died in your place on the cross – problem SOLVED. How could the tension between Jews and Gentiles be resolved (it's still going on today in the middle east)? How can you resolve the bad history and hostility that exists between you and _____? You can remind yourself that God loved you so much that He sent His Son to die for you WHILE YOU WERE HIS ENEMY. Surely you can forgive the sins of others against you when God has forgiven you of far worse. This is how the miracle of reconciliation happens! The gospel totally levels the playing field and it gives us NO EXCUSE to remain hostile to others. There is no, "yeah but he…", or "yeah but she…" It becomes "yeah but WE ALL HAVE SINNED AND FALLEN SHORT OF THE GLORY OF GOD." The gospel gives us a glorious banner that hands over our lives, "justified freely through the gift of the gospel of Jesus

Christ" – forgiven, righteous before God because of the gift of righteousness given to us in Jesus who died for our sins and credits to us His righteousness as a gift – a gift we could never earn, we could never pay back, but we must continue to TRUST IT AND KEEP IT CENTRAL TO EVERYTHING IN OUR LIVES.

The gospel is not only what saves us (not just the doorway into Christianity)…the gospel must remain the center of your life. If you were to move the Sun (I'm not sure how far) away from its distance to the planets in our Solar System, everything would become chaos and fall apart. Do you feel like your life has become confused, chaotic, and things just seem "off". Can I ask you, what is at the center of your thoughts? What have you begun to rely on/trust in? What fear has replaced the gospel and become central to your thinking? How would you describe yourself, and if the gospel isn't central to your answer…what is? Once you've identified the center…how does God want to replace that "center" with the gospel? Me: "Pastor"

You and I through the gospel are now free to love and free to forgive because we are loved and forgiven by God. For Paul, the freedom and forgiveness and peace and security he experienced in knowing that God had saved him was far greater than the prison bars that were holding him. Paul is saying, "don't feel sorry for me! God has gifted me with a precious revelation – you and I can be reconciled to God and to one another through faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

When we suffer, our suffering can redefine who we are...we have to keep the gospel central to who we are. I'm a forgiven, loved, blessed, child of God…not a "cancer victim" or "unemployed" or "divorced" or "_____". Has your suffering become the thing that defines you? Replace that with the truths of the gospel.

2. Paul was willing to suffer because - **The *ministry entrusted* to Paul was worth dying for. (3:7-13)**

Do you remember the "hair club for men" commercial, "I'm not only the hair club president, but I'm also a member". Paul was entrusted with the gospel message that had ***saved him***. He was not only a minister, he was a member. The gospel changed EVERYTHING for Paul. Talk about an identity shift! Paul described himself as "crucified with Christ" and "no longer living" and a "prisoner of Christ Jesus". Paul couldn't be imprisoned, because he was already a prisoner of Christ Jesus. Even in prison they couldn't stop Paul! In Philippians Paul tells the church how in prison he preached to the whole imperial guard and to the other prisoners. "You want to throw me in prison? I'll preach to prisoners and guards". He goes on to speak of his own death and the dilemma he had – to live or to die. To die meant to be with Christ which was far better. To live meant more opportunities to minister to others – he concluded, "**For to me, to live is Christ**

and to die is gain!" (Phil. 1:21). You lock me up, I'll preach Jesus. You set me free, I'll preach Jesus. You kill me, GAIN! I'LL GO TO BE WITH JESUS. How can you stop a man like this? You can't. His life was CONSUMED WITH JESUS!

Paul tells us that his ministry was empowered by the grace of God – **"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." (3:7)**. Paul knew that he was unable to carry out this ministry in his own power, it was too big, but God's grace enabled Paul. He goes on to describe ***how*** this grace and power enabled Paul's ministry, **"To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, 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." (3:8-9**). Grace and power were given "to preach" and "to bring to light". This is how Paul is arguing here about his ministry. He'd been given mysteries and unsearchable riches far too great for Paul, but God's grace and power enabled Paul to carry out his ministry.

If you've seen the Disney movie Aladdin, there is this classic line that the genie makes, "phenominal cosmic power, in itty bitty living space". The genie had glorious other-worldly power, but it was confined in the tiny vessel of a lamp. Paul was the "least of all the saints", a tiny vessel, and yet God had entrusted to him "the unsearchable riches of Christ" to preach, and the "plan of Gods mystery" to bring to light. Like the vastness of the ocean contained in a tea cup. Or the magnitude of the Grand Canyon captured on a photograph. How could something so vast and so glorious be conveyed through such a tiny vessel – Paul was a conduit of the grace and power of God that was poured into him. God poured in, and Paul poured out. The privilege of being a conduit for the vast glories of God far outweighed Paul's suffering.

Now in v.10 Paul gives us a further purpose of the mystery of Jew and Gentile church: **"so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places." (3:10).** The church now serves as a demonstration, or exemplar of reconciliation to "rulers" and "authorities". Remember, that "rulers" and "authorities" in Ephesians as well as Colossians (the sister letter to Ephesians) are angelic beings (1:20-23; 6:10-18). How does the church "make known" the "manifold wisdom of God" to angelic beings? It was angelic beings, fallen angels, demons and Lucifer, Satan, who brought about the fall. The plan of God in Christ is to restore and reconcile all things – things in heaven and things on earth. Therefore, the church of reconciled individuals, reconciled to each other and to God, PREACHES the triumph of God reconciling all things that the devil and the demons have destroyed. When you see a flag of the united states, what does that represent to you? Hopefully it represents unity – 50 states all united under one constitution (this unity seems pretty fragile these days). When the astronauts placed the American flag on the moon what were they saying, "Victory! We got here first!" The church is a flag of victory planted into

the ground by God "making known" to all the angels, both allies and enemies of God – "God has victoriously triumphed over the hostility that the devil brought to things in heaven and things on earth". Paul shares the same idea from the same prison to the church in Colosse: **"by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. [15] He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him." (Col. 2:15**). Like a flag of victory stuck in the ground, shaming His enemies…so the church is a display of this victory to all angelic beings. This reminds us how important church unity is…because we are to be a flag of triumphant reconciliation to the world and even to angelic beings!

Paul goes on, **"This was according to the eternal purpose that He has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord." (3:11).** Paul is coming to the end of what might be called his theological section of Ephesians (chapters 1-3). The only thing he has left to do is to pray in all that he's said, and then in chapter 4 Paul begins his exhortation in light of his theology. He's coming to the book end, and in 3:9-11 he draws the readers mind back to God's plan first shared in 1:9-10 – **"making known to us the mystery of His will according to His purpose, which He set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time to unite all things in Him, things in heaven and things on earth".** Now Paul putting his finishing touch on the first section of Ephesians as he brings us full circle. The glorious "eternal" and cosmic "plan" of God to reconcile all things – things in heaven, things on earth, has finally been realized in Christ Jesus. Therefore, we have, v.12 – "**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." (3:12-13).**

Paul saw the glorious reconciliation that God planned through Jesus as good reason to suffer. Jesus had suffered for Paul to provide boldness and access to God and now through his ministry boldness and access were provided for the Nations as well.

A few things to take away this morning:

1. **When you face suffering, remind yourself of the glories of the gospel**. Remember who you are and that you have perfect access and boldness. The idea here in v.12 is that of a frankness of speech and familiarity with God. When my kids want something they just burst into our room (although we're trying to teach them to knock) – If you have believed in Jesus for salvation you can come to God anytime with anything and He will hear you because there is no longer anything preventing you from access to Him. ***Suffering is not an indication that God has forsaken you, it is an invitation to receive comfort from the one who suffered first for you.***
2. **When you face suffering, focus your attention on the well-being of others.** That's what Paul did! He saw his imprisonment as "on behalf of the Gentiles". When in prison he found people to share the gospel with. How can God use you in your situation to bless

and ministry to others? When kids get a shot at the doctor one tactic is to distract them by having them look away. When you serve others it takes your mind off of your own sufferings and brings joy to your heart as God pours into you and you pour out onto others.

3. **For Christians, suffering has great purpose. For non-Christians, suffering is vanity.** The writer of Ecclesiastes describes the pains of the world that they are purposeless and continual. We're born, we live, we die, then we're wormfood as they say. No purpose or meaning behind the suffering that we are all to face in life. For the Christian, trials and sufferings draw us closer to God. They perfect our faith. They create perseverance within us. They cause us to long for our heavenly home. They create opportunities for us to bring glory to God and to praise Him even when we suffer.

After Nate Saint and Jim Elliot were killed by the Waodani Indians, the sister of Nate Saint and the wife of Jim Elliot, Elizabeth Elliot (perhaps you've heard of her) decided to go to the Waodani Indians to continue the work that Nate and Jim had started. Can you imagine the conviction and faith it had to take for them to do this. Instead of acting in hatred and vengeance, something the Waodani's knew well, they responded in love and reconciliation. Many of the Waodani Indians came to faith including one Indian named, Mincaye, he was the one who had speared Nate Saint, the father of Steve Saint. Steve eventually was invited by the missionaries to come to the Waodani…Mincaye was so broken and convicted over the fact that he had speared Steve's father. According to Waodani ways it was Steve's right and privilege to avenge his fathers death. Mincaye finally told Steve that he was the one who speared his father…and he took out a spear and held the tip to his chest and placed the spear in the hands of Steve. But the love of Jesus Christ kept Steve from enacting vengeance. How could he kill Mincaye who was now his brother in Christ. Jesus had paid for his sins and for the sins of Mincaye's. Rather than avenge his father, God filled Steve's heart with an intense love and forgiveness towards Mincaye. The two of them became friends and even spoke together in many venues on the love and reconciliation that can be found only in Jesus.

When we are wronged or face hostility from others, the gospel of Jesus Christ challenges us to reconcile and to forgive because we have been forgiven and reconciled. When we face suffering, the gospel of Jesus Christ challenges us to glorify God in our suffering because Christ suffered on behalf of us.

Pray