

Through, Not Just To

Well, good morning. If you've got your bibles, go ahead and turn with me to Ephesians 3. This summer, we've been making our way through this letter that a guy named Paul wrote to an ancient church in the city of Ephesus. And we've said that **the overarching purpose of his letter is to explain to this church how God is putting things back together in the world at large.** How he's taking all the things that are broken and off about the world we inhabit, and returning them to the way he intended them to be all along. And specifically, **how you and I—meaning followers of Jesus, down throughout history—are participants in that.** That God's purpose for his people isn't just that we would "get saved" and bide our time until we die and go be with him, but that we would become active partners in God's plan to put things back together. And Paul's gonna continue the endeavor to explain that to us today. Specifically today, **he's gonna talk about his own role in that plan. What does Paul see as his individual purpose in partnering with God to set things right on planet earth?** That's what we're going to hear about today.

But another theme you may have noticed as we've worked through this letter is this word "grace." You may have noticed as we've been going through the book of Ephesians that the word "grace" comes up a lot. Grace is kind of a big deal to Paul, to put it mildly. It's a recurring theme in Ephesians, in the Bible, and in church world in general. Within Christianity, grace is kind of *the thing*. **And because of that, it becomes very important that we know what we mean by "grace."** Because I think there are some definitions floating around out there that miss the mark a little. One popular Christian author is quoted as saying that grace is simply "letting yourself off the hook." Another person has said that grace is just essentially taking a "chill pill" when it comes to stress and anxiety. Just in the last month, many people cited "grace" as the reason that a prominent Christian leader should keep his ministry job after he made some immensely harmful comments about and towards women. These are all perceptions people have of what *grace is*. But I would argue that each of these are very truncated, cheapened definitions of grace. And so **part of what I think this passage does is lifts our eyes a little bit and gives us a bigger, more expansive vision for what grace is, and what it does.** So let's take a look, starting in v. 1...

Let's take a look, v. 1:

[1] *"For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles—*

So here it appears that Paul is starting into a *prayer*. And he eventually comes back to his prayer (which we'll see next week), but as soon as he starts it in v. 1, he just gets distracted for a bit. Do you guys ever get distracted when you pray? This is the story of my life a lot of days. I will start off intending to pray about something and then five minutes later I'm getting something done around the house or responding to an email and I'm like "how exactly did I get *here*?" Paul in v. 1-2, sort of gets distracted. Now, Paul gets distracted with things like the mystery of the *gospel*—which I'm guessing is a little more noble than the things we get distracted with. But it's a distraction nonetheless. **What Paul does starting in v. 2 until v. 13 is that he goes on this Holy Spirit-inspired rabbit trail.** And next we see what it's about, v. 2:

[2] *assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you,*

Okay, so here's our word, "grace." Paul says "assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's *grace* that was *given to me, for you.*" **Now there's a tiny little phrase in there that absolutely central to how Paul thinks about grace.** But it happens so quick in the verse that if you blink, you're likely to miss it. It's the phrase "given to me, *for you.*" Now to me, that's an interesting way to say that. Because almost all of this think of grace as something *given to us*, right? That's what Marcus unpacked two weeks ago, that in many ways is what the entire New Testament is about—God's grace *given*, to us. **But Paul tacks onto the end today this other dimension of grace—that it is given to us, for others.** Meaning in Paul's mind, the grace *given* to him, is not *just for him*. It's also for *other* people (like the Ephesians), *through him*. **In other words, Paul's understanding of grace is that it not just comes to him, but that it comes to him for the purpose of working its way through him. Grace goes through us, not just to us.** (I made that rhyme so as to be the most memorable). God's grace evidently isn't just a one-time exchange, from God to us. **It's more like we are a conduit, a channel that receives God's grace, and then transmits it to others. So we aren't meant to be just recipients of grace, but also dispensers of grace to others.** This is how grace was intended to function.

One of the most incredible followers of Jesus I've ever known about embodied this idea of grace by constantly calling himself the "mailman." Any time he would bless someone or be generous to someone or help someone, and they would thank him for it, he would respond by saying "I'm just the mailman." And what he meant by that was that he saw it as his job to "deliver" God's grace to people, like a mailman would. Everything he received from God, whether it was money or influence or abilities or talents—he saw all those things like mail in the back of his truck, just waiting to be delivered. "I know it's supposed to go to somebody, I just gotta figure out who." This guy knew that ultimately the reason God *gave him* those things is so that make their way *through him* to someone else. He was just the mailman. **And the only reason a mailman has mail is to deliver it.** The reason he had all that stuff, is so that he might deliver it to others. And I think that's a great picture of how *Paul* thinks about God's grace—that **it's not just to us, but also through us.**

So let's find out more about what he means by this, v. 3. Paul's gonna go into more detail about what the grace given to him for others is:

*[3] how the **mystery** was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. [4] When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the **mystery** of Christ, [5] 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.*

So Paul says that the grace given to him for the Ephesians can be described as a "mystery." When we hear the word *mystery*, we think of things like mystery novels, or creepy movies, or a crime that Sherlock Holmes is about to solve. But what Paul means by the word *mystery* is sort of different. **For Paul, *mystery* means "something that once wasn't widely known, but now is widely known."** So less Sherlock Holmes and more Kanye West...stay with me for a second. There was a time in history, when none of us really knew that Kanye was crazy. I know that's hard for us to imagine now, but it was true at one point. Now, there were definitely *moments*—every once in a while he'd do something like interrupt an awards show speech or claim he was running for president, but we were like "ahh, that's just Kanye being Kanye." But now, especially after the past few months, we're all like "ohhhhhh, that's why Kanye kept doing crazy stuff—he's actually *crazy*. That makes so much more sense now." At one point, *nobody*

knew about it. Now, literally *everybody* does. Believe it or not, that's more how Paul is using the word "mystery." It's something that once wasn't widely-held public knowledge, and now is. That's why in v. 5, he describes it as "not [being] made known to those *other* generations, as it has *now*."

And then Paul says this mystery has been made known to *him* "by revelation"—meaning God himself directly revealed it to Paul. Whatever this mystery is, it was revealed to Paul in some special kind of way. So what is the mystery? Well, v. 6 tells us. Take a look:

*[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.*

So here's the mystery: **that Gentiles—which is just a word meaning "all non-Jewish people"—can now also belong to God's family, just like Jewish people can.** They can be also be a part of what God is up to in the world. Now, I'm aware that that news is not all that groundbreaking for us to hear today. I don't know that anybody upon hearing that, just texted their friend and said "you're never gonna believe what I heard at church today—non-Jewish people can be Christians too!" I think most of us, regardless of our familiarity with the bible, were pretty clear on that.

But here's why it's a big deal for Paul. **From the very beginning of the bible, God had chosen the Jewish people—the nation of Israel. He chose them to be his handpicked representatives on planet earth**—we talked about this in week 2 of the series. What God was doing to put the world back together, very much centered around the nation of Israel. **But at the same time, it was never just about them.** As you read through the Old Testament, what you'll find is all sorts of clues, and breadcrumbs, and allusions, that God choosing Israel was never *just* about Israel. Not for a second. It was always about the rest of the world knowing who God was. **The purpose was always that God choosing Israel was about the rest of the world.** It was always about God making himself known to the rest of creation, *through* the Israelites. **God's grace, as it were, was meant to go through the Israelites, not just to them.** Does that sound familiar at all to you? That's how it was always supposed to work. That's *always* how God's grace, God's favor, God's blessing was meant to function—for the Israelites, and for us today.

And while the Scriptures talk about that a lot, for a long time it was not widely understood or embraced by many Jewish people. They had a tendency to overlook it or forget about it. **But now, Paul says, God is making it widely known to everyone.** And Paul sees *himself* as a central piece of that. Let me show you what I mean, v. 7:

[7] 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. [8] 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, [9] and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things,

So Paul says 'part of what God did in revealing this mystery to me, is that he made me a central part of making this mystery known.' And pay attention to the language here as well—Paul says in v. 8, that "this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ..." Which means once again, **God's grace to Paul is not just that it made him feel a certain way, or that it released**

him from some internal pressure he had put on himself—but that it also *worked its way through him to other people*. That’s what grace does in Paul’s mind. It *motivates you, it compels you, it drives you to action*.

But in saying that, he also highlights that God did this *even though* Paul is “the very least of all the saints.” In the Greek—the original language—it’s actually even stronger. He actually says something more like “I am *less than the least*”—**this is hyperbolic language. Paul considers himself on the very lowest rung of the ladder in God’s family.** Now why would he say that? Why does Paul think he is “less than the least” of God’s people? Well think about Paul’s story for a moment. The first time we hear about Paul in the bible, his name is actually *Saul* and he is helping with the execution of hundreds of followers of Jesus. He was a Jew, and not just that but a very *ethnically-proud* Jew. And so when he saw followers of Jesus in the early Church, he didn’t see it as this exciting new development in the story of Israel. He saw it as a heretical cult, threatening everything he stood for. So driven by his ethnic pride, Paul oversees and approves of the murders of all these followers of Jesus. **Once you know that, it explains why he would call himself “less than the least of God’s people.”** He says that because he was previously trying to *stomp out* the whole thing. He was conspiring against God and God’s people. **He once stood opposed to everything God was doing, but now he is a central piece of carrying it all forward.**

Now, to me, this is either evidence of God’s incredible power, God’s amazing sense of humor, or a little of both. **God picks a guy who is one of the most violently opposed people to what God is doing, and makes him the primary means of telling everybody about what God is doing.** The equivalent of one of Hitler’s officers becoming a missionary to Jewish people or a leader of ISIS becoming a missionary to Americans. My point is that when Paul writes that he is “*the very least of all the saints*,” you can almost hear the self-deprecating chuckle in his voice. ‘Yep, and for some strange reason, as proof of God’s unbelievable grace, he made *me* the one telling everybody about this.’

Now, let’s finish out this passage and then we’ll take a step back and talk a little about what all this might mean for us. Look with me at v. 10:

[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.

So the word “manifold” here—or your translation might say “multi-faceted”—is literally the word “multi-colored.” This is another nod to what Ant talked about for us last week—the **plan of God has always been to create this family of people from every race, color, tongue, and tribe on earth, to make up his new family. Which means—put very plainly—a person who refuses to repent of hostility or exclusion towards other races cannot be a part of God’s family.** Because that goes against the very purpose and intention of what God is doing in the world. So **if you’re not a fan of races other than your own, God’s family is not somewhere you want to be.**

And Paul’s point here—and don’t miss this—that part of what this new multi-colored family does is to “make known God’s *wisdom*. **Paul says that when this new family made up of Jew and Gentile learns to live together and at peace with one another—what it does is that it proclaims to everyone watching how incredibly wise God is.** It puts on display the beauty and glory of his plan for the world.

The fact that all these different races and ethnicities could learn to live together as one big family puts on display the incredible wisdom of God.

We love a good redemption story, do we not? I mean we just eat it up. Did anybody watch the show *Parenthood* back in the day? Fantastic show in my humble-but-very-correct opinion. If you never saw the show, let me describe it for you: just imagine a family has a huge falling out. Somebody says something to somebody else, and there's just this massive blow-out, yelling fight, and then imagine building that tension and that conflict for three or four episodes, and then watching those two people suddenly emotionally apologize, get over their differences, and reconcile with each other, and it just makes you sob uncontrollably for an entire hour. That's the whole show. You don't even need to watch it now. But America just could not get enough of that show. To the point that there's talk of rebooting it now (which I really hope they don't because that ruins everything always). Here's my point: **if fictional characters on a TV show learning how to get over their differences and live life together, grips our collective hearts in that sort of way, imagine the wisdom of God put on display by different people from different backgrounds all over the world learning to live life together in the context of the church. I believe that would *scream* to the world the wisdom and power of God. And Paul's saying that indeed it does.**

And then, v. 11:

[11] This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, [12] in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him.

So all of this was accomplished, was made real and tangible through Jesus and what he accomplished on the cross. As our passage last week told us, Jesus in *his* death also put to death the hostility between Jew and Gentile. Between us, and those different from us. **Jesus' death on the cross is the great equalizer, because it shows us that we are ultimately no different from the person next to us. The person standing next to me in the God's family may talk different than me, may look different from me, may vote different from me, may act different than me—but we're exactly the same when it comes to the most important thing—our need for a savior.** And in light of that we can live at peace with one another and obtain boldness and access through faith in Jesus.

Okay, with the time we have left let's unpack some of what this might mean for us, and in doing that we'll come back around to v. 13. Admittedly, this passage is very specific to Paul's story and his cultural context. It's written by a guy given a very specific calling from God to a very specific cultural issue of the day. It deals with things that were very important in Paul's day, but probably aren't as big of a deal to most of us. So it might be easy to think that while this passage has some interesting details in it, it's not all that relevant to us.

But I think there are universal truths about grace in this passage that are relevant to *all* followers of Jesus. We've talked already about how grace, according to Paul is something that moves *through* us, not just *to* us. So I want us to close out by talking about **at least four ways that God's grace moves through us and not just to us. Four things that God's grace produces in us as a result.** Let's talk through what they are:

Grace makes us servants.

When Paul says in v. 7 that he was made a “minister”—that word more literally is just the word “servant.” When God showed his grace to Paul, he made Paul a *servant*. **One thing that happens as the grace of God starts to take root is that it forms you more and more into a *servant* of other people. One of the best ways to find out how you’re doing spiritually is to look at your immediate response to serving someone else.** In those moments, are you quick to weasel your way out of it? Are you quick to come up with reasons internally that you shouldn’t have to serve them? Or even if you *do* serve them, are you frustrated and irritable as you’re doing it?

Or, when given an opportunity to serve, do you think “because of God’s grace, this is what I am *here for*”? Do you think “yep, since Jesus served, I am now glad to serve as well”? **Our eagerness and willingness to serve is a good indicator of us grasping God’s grace. The more we come under the agenda of Jesus, the less our own agendas matter to us. And the less our own agendas matter, the less we’re bothered by the needs of others. And the more we serve.** Grace makes us servants.

Grace makes us proclaimers.

Paul says in v. 8 that “this grace was given me—to *preach* (or *proclaim*), to the Gentiles, the unsearchable riches of Christ.” God’s grace makes us *proclaimers*. Now don’t get intimidated here. This isn’t to say that you need to be able to stand up on a stage and deliver a sermon. That’s just one method of *proclaiming*. **It’s simply to say that when God’s grace has transformed us, we now have the desire and the responsibility to express that to other people.** We aren’t all *preachers* in the conventional sense of the word, but we are all *proclaimers*. Take a look with me at 1 Peter 2:9, on the screen:

*But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his possession, so that you may **proclaim** the praises of the one who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*

Here, **Peter** is talking not to those who are preachers by *trade*, but to *all* followers of Jesus. We are all *proclaimers*. So if not through getting up on a stage and preaching, how do we do this? Well, as **Peter** seems to allude to, **this often happens in the context of our stories.** How God “called us out of darkness into his marvelous light.” Some of you have seen God’s grace in *incredible* ways in your life. God has rescued you out of stuff that you had been caught up in for *years*. God’s grace in your life has been *drastic*—much like Paul’s story. For others, maybe your story isn’t all that drastic. Maybe your story is that you grew up in a Christian family, never really got into anything all that bad, but because of that you’ve had *years* of growing and learning how to follow Jesus. **But whether your story is drastic and dramatic, or very run-of-the-mill, let me ask you this—who have you told that story to lately?** It might be that one of the most powerful things you could do is tell that story of God’s grace to as many people as possible, as a way of *proclaiming* who God is and what he’s able to do in a person’s life.

That certainly has been true in my life. A lot of you know this, but the way I became a follower of Jesus was I was at a Baptism service, where I heard person after person just share their story on video. Some of them were really articulate and well-spoken, some of them weren’t that way at all. Some of them had really dramatic stories, some of them had very normal, boring stories. But God used them all, in their own way, to show me who he was for the first time. Simply by a few people being willing to share their stories. Grace makes us *proclaimers*.

Grace makes us humble.

Paul in v. 8 calls himself “less than the least of all the saints.” In 1 Timothy he calls himself “the worst of all sinners.” In 1 Corinthians he calls himself the “least of all the apostles.” **Statements like this tell us that Paul walks around with a substantial dose of humility. When God’s grace came into the picture, it made Paul very confident in how great God was, but very aware of how *not great Paul* was.**

And this is what grace does for all of us. **It makes us very confident of God’s work in us, but very skeptical of ourselves.** Put another way, grace makes us *self-suspicious*. If Ephesians 2 is true—that by default we are all prone to walking around in spiritual death and God has to come and make me alive through Jesus—I should be very *suspicious* of myself. I should always be suspicious of my own “rightness.” The message of the bible has shown me that I am very prone to self-deception. That even when I’m “right,” I’m likely *wrong* in how I communicate or assert my rightness. That, in many ways, is what humility looks like.

Can you imagine what would change in your relationships with others, in your marriages, in your friendships if we all took this posture? If you started by being suspicious of our own “rightness”? If, in the next conflict you had with someone, you approached it with an attitude of “I’m probably wrong in this, *somehow*.” Can you imagine the tension, the hostility that would prevent? I think it would make all the difference in the world. God’s grace makes us humble. And lastly...

Grace makes us faithful sufferers.

Okay, I’m gonna test your long-term memory here—the very first week of the Ephesians series, **one of the things we said about this book is that “Paul never states theological truth without” what? Pastoral intent.** Meaning that Paul never unpacks things about God in this book simply for information’s sake. He always does it to practically help the Ephesians with something that matters. So what’s the pastoral intent behind this passage? Well, take a look at v. 13:

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

Paul says “hey, in light of all these incredible things God is accomplishing in the world among Jew and Gentile, and in light of how he is using me as his servant to make all of that known—don’t sweat over what I’m suffering currently. Yeah, prison sucks. But it’s a drop in the bucket when you consider all that is being accomplished. Don’t lose heart, Ephesians.”

Man, **what a vision Paul has for what God is doing in the world, right?** When Paul thinks about what God is doing in the world, he has such a birds-eye view on it all. As a man currently imprisoned and suffering, it would be so easy, as I think it would for any of us too, to turn his focus inwards onto himself: “*well this is awful. Why would God let this happen to me? Why would God make me suffer when I’m doing everything right?*” But instead, it’s just the opposite. **Paul’s attention turns, in the midst of his suffering, to encouraging the Ephesian church. To what God is accomplishing in him and through him. Paul sees it as one more opportunity to remember and remind others that God’s grace moves *through* us, not just to us.**

Now that being said, notice what Paul *doesn't* say. He doesn't say "hey team, cheer up! God loves you—turn that frown upside down!" He doesn't say "don't hurt." Doesn't say "don't grieve." Doesn't say "don't mourn." He says "don't *lose heart*." That's what Paul wants the Ephesians to fight for here: **Knowing what God is doing in the world and being a part of it doesn't make suffering any easier, doesn't make it any less difficult, doesn't make it any less heartbreaking. But it does give us perspective.** Because of what we know about what God is doing in the world, we know how the story ends. We know it ends with us, and Him, in the new heavens and new earth—and him making everything we hate about the world a distant memory. And when we know that—we get to stare suffering in the face and say "this isn't all there is. This isn't the end of the story. God is taking the world somewhere and I'm a part of that." Grace makes us *faithful sufferers*.

So God's grace moves through us, not just to us. And some of the ways it does that is by making us servants, making us proclaimers, making us humble, and making us faithful sufferers. So let me just ask as we close, as you honestly evaluate your life, has grace produced a desire and willingness to serve others, even when it's inconvenient? Has it produced a pattern of proclaiming who God is and what he's done to those you come into contact with? Has it produced in you a humility, a suspicion about yourself? And has it made a way suffer faithfully, to hurt while keeping the end in mind? Because those are all evidences of grace flowing *through* you, not just *to* you. So I'll close by asking, are those things true of your life? If so, let's thank Jesus for his grace that made it possible. And if not, I pray that you experience grace for the first time this morning.

Let's pray.