

One for the Angels
The Truth about our Life in Christ
Ephesians 3:1-13
Pastor Bryan Clark

I've had the privilege two times to go to India and be a part of training young men who would become church planters into various rural areas of India. I don't care much for the travel but these students were absolutely fabulous. I just fell in love with the people. I don't think I've ever taught in an environment with students more eager and more appreciative than these students were. But there is something very sobering about knowing that these people whom you've built a relationship with, these people who you've genuinely come to love, would be sent out into areas that would be hostile to the gospel, to understand some of these students would likely, in the name of Jesus, be physically beaten. Some would be arrested and some may die. It actually is beyond sobering—it was very upsetting. It was upsetting to be a part of that, and every instinct was to say, "*Don't go...Don't go! Let's just play it safe here!*" But, frankly, you just couldn't stop them. They were filled with such joy, such excitement and such courage in the face of such adversity. Because they had finally found something that was worth *dying for*, they realized they had finally found that which is worth *living for*.

That's what we want to talk about this morning. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Ephesians 3 as we continue our study of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. We pick it up in Chapter 3, Verse 1. Paul opens with the words: **For this reason.** Well, for what reason? For the reason of everything that he's talked about in Chapters 1 and 2—this glorious theology of what is ours on the basis of God's grace. If you look at verse 14, you see the exact same words in the Greek language, and virtually all scholars agree that Paul started to talk about what he ultimately talks about in verse 14 and following. But in saying **for this reason**, it caused his mind to go back to this wondrous theology of Chapters 1 and 2, and he just couldn't quite move beyond that but regressed back and essentially says, "*I gotta go through it one more time before we move on.*" So, in a sense, it's kind of a review of the wonder of that theology before the conversation continues in verse 14.

For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—
(*NASB, Ephesians 3:1)

He refers to himself as a **prisoner of Christ Jesus**, but we're also reminded that he was a prisoner of Rome. He was writing this as a prisoner under the arrest of Nero, awaiting sentencing. If you want to get the back story to this, it starts in Acts 21. I mentioned last week that Paul, in Jerusalem, was accused of taking a Gentile (actually, an Ephesian) beyond the court of the Gentiles, in deeper into the temple courtyards. And because of that, he was captured by the Judaizers, dragged into the streets, and they intended to beat him to death. The only thing that stops that is the Roman soldiers. They stopped; things get ordered a little bit, and Paul has a chance to give his defense. You can read about his defense in Acts 22; everything is going nicely until in verse 22 he gets to the part where he says that his calling is to take the message of the gospel of grace to the Gentiles, and that the Gentiles are included in this magnificent promise from God. The text says that the people said that, at that moment, they stopped his defense and, based on what he just said, determined he must die. It wasn't just that Paul was declaring the gospel; it was specifically his commitment to present the gospel to the Gentiles that got him arrested and ultimately executed. The rest of the book of Acts, on through chapter 28, is a series of arrests and trials that Paul experiences for the sake of the

gospel. So he's reminding them that, ultimately, he's a prisoner of Christ because Christ called him to that mission. You would imagine that these believers in Ephesus were quite upset that Paul is now sitting in a Roman prison cell and may very well be executed for his faith because of his commitment to bring the gospel to them! But the heartbeat of this text is Paul saying, "*Don't! Don't fret because I'm sitting in prison, because if this mission costs me my life, I'm telling you, it was totally worth it that you might know the truth of the gospel of grace!*" Verse 2, he says:

... if indeed you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace which was given to me for you;

Ultimately, what he's saying is that he was given this mission. There was a calling on his life, and the calling was on the basis of God's grace. It wasn't because he was a high performer. It wasn't because he was really smart. It wasn't because of any other reason other than God's grace. But on the basis of God's grace, God called him to take the message of the gospel to the Gentiles. So he says he has this stewardship—to steward his calling. We often talk about stewardship as it relates to time and talent and treasure, but we also have this stewardship of the gospel, that this is the message that we now know and believe, so what do we do with it? How do we steward it in order to serve others who do not yet know? Verse 3:

... that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief. By referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit;
(Vs. 3-5)

Basically we're going back to what we talked about last week—this mystery that God revealed to Paul—that the Gentiles were to be invited into the wonder of the gospel. So, starting in verse 6, he gets more specific. He says ***to be specific, that the Gentiles...*** As we read this part, it is good to remind ourselves, *we're* the Gentiles! Because of Paul's commitment to take the gospel to the Gentiles, the Gentiles have come to know it. And over the last 2000 years there have been people who have given their lives to steward the gospel so that ultimately it would get to you and that you would know, "This is what God has done for you!" So, as you read this part of the text, what he's saying is, "*This is for YOU,*" and he will ultimately give his life for that message.

... to be specific, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs ... (Vs. 6a)

Fellow heirs—co-heirs! Before the foundation of the world, for reasons only God really knows, God chose *you* to be holy and blameless before Him. In love, He predetermined *you* to be adopted as sons in order to make you a legal heir of the family fortune, in order that He might lavish the riches of Christ upon you, that He might give to you (bless you) with every single spiritual blessing that He has to offer, that He, of all the things He has created in the universe, might determine that *you* are His treasure. You are His favorite! You, on the basis of God's grace, have been made a co-heir of the riches of Christ. The second thing:

... and fellow members of the body... (Vs. 6b)

Co-members of the body! Imagine the description that we talked about last week that, at one time, the Gentiles understood that the God of all gods dwells in *there*, and we are forbidden to go *there*. We are on the outside looking in, and we will always be on the outside looking in—no access to

this God! But the mystery of this revelation that God brought to Paul was to tell them that now, because of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, the veil has been torn; the walls have come down and now you, together, actually make up the new temple of God. God doesn't dwell *there* somewhere! God dwells *within you*—within *us*, together as the body of Christ. And thirdly ...

... and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel, (Vs. 6c)

Remember the gospel—this message—is *good news*. The gospel literally means “good news”. It is the idea that we are fellow partakers of the promise. To understand that God made these magnificent promises, that no matter how hard life gets, no matter how many times this world breaks our heart, no matter the suffering, no matter what we go through, there is this realization that this world is not my home. I don't have to settle for this. There is a better place—my soul longs for that—and one day that place will be realized. Imagine if those promises were all out there, but daily you were reminded that they don't apply to you. You are on the outside looking in—sorry about that! The message of the mystery that had come to the Gentiles is that *you are now co-partakers of the promise!* They *do* apply to you—they *are* yours!

This week several of us got an email from one of our teammates, which was just a reminder of how many ways this world breaks our hearts. At the end of that email there was a reminder that, “*How do people go through these things without the hope of the gospel?*” I ask myself that question all the time. How do people get through the struggles, the heartaches, the tragedies, the unexplainable things in this world if they believe that this world is all there is? How do you process that? But for us as Christians, because Christians throughout history have stewarded the message of the gospel, someone made known to you this magnificent truth that this world is *not* all that there is, and that the hope of the gospel is that one day the world that my soul longs for will be realized, and I cling to the promises of God. That's what gets me through the struggles and the tragedies and the heartaches of this life. So Paul says, “*This is my calling, to take this message to you, that you might know these magnificent truths.*” Verse 7:

... of which I was made a minister... (Vs. 7a)

That word means a *servant*. It doesn't mean a clergyman. It's the idea that he has been made a servant of God to take the message, to steward it, and to proclaim it to those in darkness.

... of which I was made a minister, according to the gift of God's grace which was given to me according to the working of His power. To me, the very least of all the saints, (Vs. 7-8a)

Again, there's this realization that God has granted each of us as Christians, on the basis of His grace, an invitation to be part of something that will matter forever. The overwhelming majority of people that will live on this earth will live and die, having invested their lives in nothing more than the ordinary, temporary, stuff of this world. But on the basis of God's grace, He's invited us to be a part of something that will matter forever! That is the invitation—the call of God's grace.

And Paul says, “There's nobody on the face of the planet that deserved it less!” The literal Greek word is: “I am the *leaster* of all of these.” Paul wasn't offering some false humility...kick a rock...”Woe is me.” He understood that, at one time in his life, he was on a mission to persecute, arrest and execute Christians. Just process that a little bit—that *that* was Paul's story! He was on a mission to persecute, to arrest, and to execute Christians! Only God knows how many Christians

were persecuted and ultimately put to death because of Paul. And en-route to another assignment, God drops him on the road to Damascus and reveals Himself to Paul. And Paul says, “*If there’s anyone on the face of the planet that doesn’t really deserve a calling, it’s ME!*” Regardless of what you have done, regardless of your past, regardless of what’s been done to you, regardless of your story, don’t ever believe that God can’t use *you*. God is in the business of taking everyone and anyone who will trust in Him, and inviting you to be a part of something that will matter forever! That’s what Paul’s talking about—this magnificent calling on his life!

To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, (Vs. 8)

Unfathomable—the uncountable! It’s very interesting as you go back through Ephesians and look at the language that Paul uses. It is very extreme. As a matter of fact, I went back through and listed all these terms Paul uses that are so “over the top”. You get the sense that he’s feeling this reality: *I can’t find words to describe what God has done!* This *unfathomable* that God has *lavished* because of His *surpassing glory*. There are these “over the top” expressions of Paul struggling to say, “*I can’t even describe to you what God has done!*”

As a preacher, on a weekly basis, I find the same struggle. I just can’t find words to describe how *magnificent* this truth is! His calling...

...to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God, who created all things; (Vs. 8b-9)

The God who *created the universe*, the God **who created all things**, is the God of re-creation. He’s the God of new creation. He’s the God who put in place this plan *to the praise of the glory of His grace* to take those who were dead—by nature children of wrath—and make them absolutely magnificent in the heavenlies. He says this is **the administration** of God. We have that word in Chapter 1. This is God’s plan that he has been carrying out since the beginning of time, that God would bring together these two worlds—this heavenly realm where today I stand perfect—perfectly righteous, perfectly accepted, perfectly loved, perfect in every way because I am *in Christ*. It has nothing to do with my ability to perform. It has everything to do with what Jesus has done *for me*. Each of us stands equally perfect in the presence of God, seated with Christ in the heavenlies. Yet there is this earthly realm—this realm in which we live where there are struggles and heartaches and the ups and downs in our struggles and our walk and our performance. But the promise is that one day these two realms will be summed up together *in Christ*, and the heavenly realm, which is the ultimate reality, will ultimately prevail, and that reality will define my story forever. That’s what he just said there.

So let’s just stop and think about this for a minute. For reasons only God understands, before the foundation of the world, God chose *you*! He predetermined that you would be His adopted son, to make you a legal heir of the family fortune in order that He might lavish His riches upon you, that you might experience *the unfathomable riches of God’s grace*, that you might receive virtually every spiritual blessing that God has to offer, and that God has offered it all to you simply by faith.

For 2000 years men and women have stewarded the message of the gospel—passed down from generation to generation—in order that, at some point in time, someone would make known to you this magnificent truth that has changed your life! Do you realize that our community and the world

are filled with people that have no idea that God has done this for them? But *you* know; you *know* this has changed your life! You understand every day when you go to work there are people all around you who live lives of despair. Their hearts are broken; their souls are shriveled up. They wonder if there's any reason to go on living. Life has beaten them up. There's one disappointment after another. It's one struggle after another. It's one empty pursuit after another. They live lives of hopelessness and despair, and they wonder, "*Is there anything more than this?*" They have no idea that this is what God has done for them!

We know the truth. We're not smarter; we weren't more moral; we didn't do anything to deserve this. But for whatever reason, God, in His goodness and His grace, unveiled this to you and *you* know the truth! How can we not share this magnificent truth with those around us in despair? Let us never forget: This is *good news*! Don't ever assume that the people around you don't want to hear it. I would suggest to you that they *long* to hear this! Their souls are dying; they're shriveled up. They're seeking whatever and anything that might possibly satisfy the longings in their soul.

I think sometimes, because we reduce the message of the gospel down to kind of this "ticket to heaven"—one, two three, here's your ticket, and now because you have your ticket, you're obligated to try harder for God. Because of that framework, we turn the good news into bad news and we make the presentation more of a confrontation—like an intervention! And then people respond poorly and we wonder what happened. Never forget: *this is good news*! Imagine the privilege of sitting down with somebody and explaining to them everything we've talked about in Ephesians 1 and 2 and saying, "*This is everything your soul is longing for and, by the way, God offers it to you freely as a gift, no matter what you've done.*" How does the news get any better than that?

By the way, there *is* a problem. Ephesians 2:1-3 says you are, by nature, a child of wrath and you are destined for God's judgment because of your sin, and *that's* a problem! But *this* is what God's done, and *this* is what He offers freely, and it's the most wondrous news anyone could ever hear!

We talked about this last spring: *Make sure you make sure that the main thing is the main thing.* Don't get distracted in all kinds of arguments and conversations that are not necessary. You don't need to get in political arguments; you don't need to get into arguments about all kinds of social things. Until someone enters into a life-changing relationship with Jesus Christ, nothing of substance is really going to change their thinking. That has to be the strategy. That has to be the point. We need to be strategic in saying that the conversation we need to have is a loving, compassionate conversation about what Jesus has done for you. We need to be very strategic that we make sure that is the conversation we have. We don't need to argue with those who don't want to hear it. We don't need to enter into debates. We don't need to force something on somebody that doesn't want it. But we do need to be very sensitive to realize there are people all around us in our schools, our workplace, and in our neighborhoods who *do* want to hear it. Their souls are dying; they're longing for something that will satisfy. We need to be faithful stewards of the message that we have received. How can we take what we've been given and lock ourselves in a fortress and just wait until Jesus comes back, knowing that the people around us are in desperate need for the message that has changed our lives?

So we are to be stewards, like Paul, of this magnificent message of hope. But we still wrestle with the question: *Why would God do this?* It just all seems too good to be true! We've already learned that *it's to the praise of the glory of His grace.* God has been gracious from eternity past, and the result of this story is that God can take someone who is dead and destined for wrath, and make that

person a magnificent trophy of His grace *to the praise of the glory of His grace* in order to display, to show the surpassing greatness of the riches of his mercy. In Verse 10 we get it again: *Why would God do this?*

So that the manifold wisdom—the multicolored wisdom of God **might now be made known** [not *to* the church but] **through the church**.

That this grace and mercy of God would be made known *through* the church because *you* are the trophy of God's grace. To whom?

To the rulers and the authorities in the heavenlies.

I have said multiple times in this series that God has made you a trophy of His grace in order that He might display you in the heavenlies, that the angels would *gasp* at the wonder of what you have become. The only thing missing in verse 10 is the word “gasp”. I am assuming that if you are God's magnificent treasure—his work of art—that the angels will gasp! But that's what he's talking about. The angels and the demons—all that God has created in the universe—that He will take one who was dead, without hope, and all on the basis of His grace, make you absolutely magnificent in order to put you on display for eternity before the angels and the demons, and they will *gasp* at the wonder of what God has done—*to the praise of the glory of His grace*! Verse 11:

This was in accord with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord,

In other words, this has always been the plan. This has always been the purpose. This is always where history has been headed and will culminate. Verse 12:

... in whom we have boldness and confident access through faith in Him.

Access to what? It's actually *to whom*—access to the presence of Jesus Christ, seated with Him in the heavenlies.

One of the things I've wrestled with over the years, and especially in the last few years, is: *What is the life-changing power of grace?* I fear we reduce it down to that, on the basis of God's grace, we have a ticket to heaven and, therefore, we're obligated to try harder, even though we know trying harder has never worked. That isn't it. I think what *is* it is realizing what the text just said—that on the basis of God's *grace* we enter confidently and boldly into the presence of Christ Jesus on our best days and on our worst days, to understand access into the presence of God is not based on our performance; it is based on the grace of God. And *that* is the life-changing power of grace. I *can* dwell in the presence of God 24/7 for the rest of my life, and to realize that when I'm in the presence of Jesus, everything good happens. I am reminded that I'm passionate for righteousness, that I do want to live for Him! I do want to serve Him! There is *true* confession. There's *true* repentance. My soul is filled with life. I remember, “This is what I want! This is what I live for! This is what it means to *live*!”

Everything good happens in the light. But when I forget that, I find myself dwelling in the dark room with my shame and my guilt and my struggle, somehow trying to convince God that I'm really sorry for my sin. And if You beat me up enough, maybe I'm worthy of Your forgiveness. *Nothing good ever happens in the dark!* The life-changing power of grace is realizing that on my best day and on my worst day, I boldly and confidently come into the presence of Jesus and He loves me, and He accepts me, and He celebrates me, and He dances with me! And *that* changes my

life, which then leads to verse 13. **Therefore**, because this message is true and **therefore**, because these Gentiles—these Ephesians—have come to know the truth...

Therefore I ask you not to lose heart at my tribulations on your behalf, for they are your glory.

Therefore, if it costs me my life, it was totally worth it to deliver you this message, because this message has changed your life. This message is your glory!

What would possess ordinary, everyday Americans to leave the comforts of home and pack up their family and go to Mongolia, to go to India, to go to West Africa, to go to Poland, to go to Spain, to go to Ecuador, to go around the world and live in conditions far more difficult than most of us can imagine. The answer is: it is because they have encountered a life-changing message that has changed their life, and they just can't stand the thought of staying *here* when there are people *there* that don't know God did this for them! They're compelled by the calling of God to go and to steward this message that others might know.

Years ago the church sent Patti and me on a mission's trip to Guyana and Brazil. We spent about half the time in Georgetown, Guyana, with Ken and Karen Glover. Georgetown, Guyana, has virtually *nothing* that is appealing. It is a very difficult, smelly, dirty place to live. Being kind of overwhelmed with all of this, I remember asking Ken and Karen, "I mean, what do you like about this place?" They didn't hesitate for a moment. They said, "Well, we love the people." It was like: *Well, duh! They're not there as tourists!* They are living in a very difficult environment because they *love* these people and they want them to know the message of Jesus that has changed their lives.

For 2,000 years, Christians have suffered; Christians have been persecuted; Christians have been imprisoned; Christians have been executed for the sake of the gospel. But from generation to generation, the message has been stewarded and passed down in order that, at some point in time, someone would share that magnificent truth with you, and that truth has changed your life.

Now it is our turn to be stewards of the gospel. It is true to say that no Christians in the last 2,000 years have ever lived with the degree of comfort and freedom that we live with today as Christians in America. Every three minutes, somewhere in the world today, a Christian is executed for his or her faith. We live in remarkable freedom. But we are no less responsible to take our risk, to take our steps of faith, to have the courage to be stewards of this message that has changed our life, and to share it with people next door and around the world. If our brothers and sisters are willing to be tortured and put to death for the sake of the gospel, certainly we must be diligent to do our part to make sure there is not one single person in our community or around the world who hasn't at least heard: *This is what God has done for you, and He offers it to you freely as a gift of His grace.*

It's only when you've finally found that which is worth dying for, that you have finally figured out that which is worth living for.

Our Father, we celebrate today that this magnificent message of truth was brought to us. God, that we might know, and now our calling is to be stewards of this message that people next door and around the world might also know. God, give us the courage to be faithful stewards of this magnificent message of the gospel. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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Lincoln Berean Church, 6400 S. 70th, Lincoln, NE 68516 (402) 483-6512
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