

The sermon

Intro

How do you respond to suffering? How do you interpret your suffering?

Maybe self-pity? Why me? Why is my life harder than everyone else's?

Maybe it's comparison, jealousy. Why don't I have it as good as that person?

Maybe you think God doesn't care. My life is hard. God must hate me. If God loved me surely he wouldn't let me suffer.

Maybe you think God's powerless. He isn't in control. He isn't really working "*all things according to the counsel of his will*" (Eph 1:11).

Maybe it's pride. God must think I'm really strong to give me this. I must be the best of all Christians to be given this suffering.

How we see our suffering matters.

READ PASSAGE

Body

Passage Focus

Paul has a request for the Ephesian believers. "*So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory*" (3:1, 13). Paul's concerned they're losing heart because of his suffering.

BIG IDEA: Don't lose heart when you're suffering (or see your suffering correctly).

Point 1: Don't lose heart because your suffering can serve someone else's good (3:1-2)

For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles-

Paul reveals something we haven't discussed: he's writing from prison.

This is Paul's 1st Roman imprisonment. "*Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who guarded him*" (Acts 28:16) for "*two whole years at his own expense*" (Acts 28:30). Meaning Paul's chained to a Roman guard 24/7 (Acts 28:20) while renting a place with the financial gifts his friends were bringing.

Paul's in prison because he's serving Jesus' will. And Paul's in prison "*on behalf of you Gentiles.*" Meaning Paul's in prison for their good.

assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, – 3:2

Paul's been made a steward = responsibility = preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, and this responsibility was given to Paul by Jesus "*for you*" = for the Ephesian believers' good.

My basic point again: Paul's suffering is serving the good of others.

Application

So if you're suffering today, have you considered the possibility that God has given you this suffering to serve another person's good?

Paul believes his imprisonment is the cause of good to others. This makes his suffering worth it.

My job is really hard. Could it be that your job is providing your family with material good? My co-workers are really ungodly and I'm not used to all the cursing and dirty jokes. Could it be that you're there to serve their good by speaking the gospel and showing them how to follow Jesus?

Maybe you're struggling to see how your suffering is serving the good of others. Let's continue.

Point 2: Don't lose heart because your suffering can be God's grace to you (3:2, 7-9)

assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, – 3:2

Paul's stewardship/responsibility stems from God's grace. It's a gift given to Paul.

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, – 3:7-9

Here we see “*the gift of God's grace*” is Paul “*was made a minister.*” This wasn't something Paul aspired to or chose for himself. God chose to pour out his power on Paul so that Paul would “*preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.*”

When Jesus confronted Paul on the Damascus road, Jesus said this to Paul:

But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, ¹⁷ delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles- to whom I am sending you ¹⁸ to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.' – Acts 26:16-18

This appointment was an act of grace.

Grace

When we think grace we think salvation in Christ. Here grace is appointment to a task.

With grace the general idea is kindness freely given, not as a result of obligation. Unmerited favor.

God was in no way obligated to make Paul the apostle to the Gentiles. Paul was a violent opponent of the church who separated mothers from their children by imprisoning them, and possibly executing them. Paul did nothing to merit this stewardship. Paul was an unbeliever when God appointed him. By the working of God's power, Paul was transformed into a man willing to suffer imprisonment for the good of others.

Application

In **Philippians 1:29**, Paul speaks of suffering for Jesus' sake = persecution granted to the Philippian church. The word “granted” is the verbal form of grace. Persecution was an undeserved gift of God.

Is this how you view suffering? How is a task that results in imprisonment a gift of grace? How is persecution a gift of grace?

Well they're both from the hand of God and they're both undeserved. In each case, the hardship exists because Paul and the Philippians are in Christ. If they weren't in Christ, the suffering wouldn't be happening. In other words, their suffering is a consequence of being in Christ.

It might be that your suffering is a consequence of being in Christ. Losing your job or having a family member reject you could be a consequence of being in Christ. In which case your suffering stems from God's grace. If you hadn't experienced grace, the suffering wouldn't have happened.

Suffering can be a good thing. We can suffer because we're in Christ. Maybe that isn't your situation.

James 1:2-4 says trials produce character development/spiritual depth, a good thing. Maybe that's why you're suffering? Let's continue.

Point 3: Don't lose heart because our suffering can serve the spreading of the good news (3:3-6)

Paul connects his stewardship with a mystery.

how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. – 3:3

It sounds like Paul wrote a letter to the Ephesians that wasn't preserved for us.

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. – 3:4-5

The mystery was something unknown by previous generations, but known in Paul's time. The Old Testament prophets didn't know it, but the foundational apostles and New Testament prophets do.

Mystery here means a truth once hidden, but now revealed. Something hidden in the mind of God and disclosed at his appointed time.

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

The mystery is threefold:

1. *"Gentiles are fellow heirs"* = the promises given to the Jews now belong to the Gentiles too.
2. *"members of the same body"* = a universal church and local churches where believing Jews and Gentiles become one in Christ.
3. *"partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel"* = in Christ the Gentiles become fellow heirs.

The Old Testament revealed the salvation of the Gentiles (Isa 42:6; 49:6), the suffering servant = Jesus (Isa 53:1-12), the new covenant (Jer 31:31-24), and the indwelling Holy Spirit (Ezek 36:26-26), but the Old Testament didn't reveal the Jews and Gentiles in one body as a unified people. We receive the same inheritance.

Paul was imprisoned because he preached. Paul's imprisonment served his preaching. I'm thinking the prison guards chained to Paul 24/7 overheard everything Paul said to his gospel co-workers that visited. Those guards know things we don't know! Do they have a clearer picture of the end-times? Not to mention Paul's personal testimony in the Acts trials. Paul's imprisonment furthered the gospel.

Application

Could it be that your suffering is providing opportunity for you to speak the gospel to the unbelieving world? I suspect much of your suffering is physical. I suspect there's relational suffering as well.

Your physical suffering is opportunity to testify to the goodness of God. When someone asks how are you doing? we might respond honestly. I'm really struggling. It's hard. I don't enjoy waking up in the morning. Life isn't the same. I can't think straight because of the pain. But this morning I read Psalm 25, I poured out my heart in prayer to the Lord, I had a nice call from a Christian friend and there were glimmers of joy. God is sustaining me. I think I'm drawing closer to him.

Physical suffering can be opportunity to speak about God to the world. How we see matters!

Point 4: Don't lose heart because our suffering reveals God's wisdom to the demons (3:10)

I'm guessing this isn't the first comfort in your tool bag, but it's in there.

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

God's "*manifold wisdom*" (many-sided, various, diverse) wisdom was made known to demons "*through the church.*" The existence of the church displays God's wisdom! See 6:12 where "*the rulers and authorities*" are "*the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.*"

Paul's in prison for speaking the gospel. When Paul spoke the gospel, people were converted and churches were formed. As churches were formed, God's wisdom in saving sinners and uniting them in local churches, including ethnic enemies, displayed the many-sided wisdom of God's salvation plan to the demons. People who would have never associated with one another become one in Christ. The demons saw it. Do you see God's wisdom in the local church?

Application

In order for God's wisdom to be displayed to the demons, Paul had to suffer. Could it be that your suffering is displaying God's wisdom to the demons?

The wisdom of God in bringing the effects of the fall to an end through Christ. The wisdom of God is sustaining us in our suffering with his grace. The wisdom of God in creating local churches where member to member ministry to suffering saints happens. God displays his wisdom "*through the church.*"

How we see matters!

I've said many times we're saved for community. Why the local church? Endless reasons. Here the local church exists so that the demons can see God's wisdom! We're saved for community so we can show the demons God's wisdom! The person who says I don't need the local church is saying I don't care about the demons seeing God's wisdom.

Point 5: Don't lose heart because our suffering serves God's eternal purpose (3:11)

This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, – 3:11

This refers to the mystery that displays God's wisdom to the demons = Jews and Gentiles in one body.

The church is God's eternal purpose. God planned the church before the creation of the world. The church is "*realized in Christ Jesus our Lord*" = through the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. – Acts 20:28

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, – Ephesians 5:25

Jesus died for the church = the people who compose the church. Jews and Gentiles in one local church, us in one local church, is God's eternal plan. Jesus died so that there would be local churches spread throughout the globe. Jesus died so the demons would see God's wisdom through the local church.

Application

In order for there to be an Ephesian church, Paul had to suffer.

Is there a way in which your suffering serves God's eternal purpose, the church? You enduring relational hostility for speaking the gospel could encourage a brother or sister to speak the gospel. You enduring physical suffering in the strength God supplies and sharing your testimony with sinners could be used of God to build the temple.

Can you see any ways in which your suffering serves God's eternal purpose? How we see matters!

Point 6: Don't lose heart because we have access to God while we're suffering (3:12-13)

in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him. – 3:12

Through faith in Jesus, we can confidently approach God. We don't have to wonder if God will hear. Because our sins are remembered no more, we can approach God without going through any hoops (e.g., animal sacrifices or Hail Mary's). We can approach God without fear (boldness) because we're already accepted. So we can speak frankly and freely and pour out our whole heart. Yes with reverence. But we can be raw and honest. We don't have to hold back. We don't have to be afraid. We don't have to go through a manmade ritual. We can let it fly!

¹⁶ *Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. – Hebrews 4:16*

Application

Christian, you're not alone in your suffering. God is with you. God's grace is sufficient. You can have peace and joy and obey because God is able to strengthen you. This isn't pretending nothing's wrong and putting on a fake smile so people think you're a strong Christian. It's laying your anguish before God and saying I can't do it. I need your help. This is too much for me. It's begging God to help us endure well.

If you're not suffering, you still have access and you still need God.

So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory. – 3:13

In what sense is Paul's suffering their glory? Maybe Paul's suffering for preaching the gospel is the cause of their future glory? Maybe Paul's suffering for the gospel is what they glory in? To see a Christian endure suffering to build the church is a glorious thing!

How we see matters!

GOSPEL

You wouldn't call yourself a Christian, you're thinking about Christianity, you don't know if you're a Christian.

The big picture is there's a God who created us and we've rebelled against this God. We go about life doing things our own way. God doesn't take this, our sin, lightly. So he'll punish sinners on the day of judgment.

On the other hand, God is a merciful and rescuing God. So he sent Jesus to the cross to die in the place of sinners. Sinners like you, sinners like me. Jesus' death is good news! More than you know.

How should you respond to this good news? Turn from doing life our own way by trusting in Jesus' death and resurrection. If you do, God will treat you like you never sinned and lived Jesus' perfect life. Jesus' death, and only Jesus' death, is worthy to take away all your sins!

Confess your sins to God. Acknowledge your guilt. Acknowledge Jesus' death. Ask God for forgiveness on the basis of Jesus' death. And trust that God forgives every sinner who trusts in Jesus. Then join yourself to the local church.

Conclusion

Suffering, it's all how we see. It was the Father's plan for the Son to suffer. Does that mean the Father didn't love the Son? Surely not. It just means the Father can will one whom he loves deeply to suffer (Jesus) so that others can be rescued from their sin (us). Might God will us to suffer so we can be a means of others being rescued from their sin?