

Rooted in Christ's Purpose in Suffering

Preached by: Matthew S. Black

Text: Ephesians 3:6-13

Series: Rooted in Christ

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Introduction: Open your Bibles to Ephesians. We are continuing our series: "Rooted in Christ". The title of the message is: "Rooted in Christ's Purpose in Suffering".

Suffering can be so brutal, we wonder if God loves us so much why do we have to suffer so much? Some seem never to suffer. Do you ever feel like God is picking on you? Like you've just gotten over one trial just to enter into another?

Not Again – Spiritual Depression

"Not again!" I remember thinking as my thoughts raced downward to a deep depression. I remember being clinically depressed for more than two years – my seventh and eighth grade years of Jr. High. I remember how happy I was when I came to know Christ, and that I had been delivered! I thought I would never struggle with depression again.

Then came the day in Spain when I was ready to preach and all the sudden my thoughts broke loose like a sewer brake in the kitchen. My mind was filled with the garbage of my old life, and I couldn't seem to control it. Worse of all, an overwhelming depression hit me. I realized this was spiritual warfare. What could I do? "Not again!" I didn't want to go through this again.

Not a Slave to Depression

God was faithful to bring me through that, and He used it to teach me how to renew my mind and to not to be controlled by "what I feel like". I am a servant of God not a slave to depression or any other emotion!

Not Again - Miscarriage

I can remember as a young married couple how exciting it was to hear the words "You're gonna be a Daddy!" from my wife. What joy filled our hearts. We went in for the ultrasound at 13 weeks. We were so excited. The good news – it was twins! The bad news – there was no heart beat. The torture of the loss and of seeing my wife suffer. After that we begged God to give us children. We found out Jill was with child again, but at 11 weeks, the baby again did not survive. We began to wonder. Of course the Lord did bring us Katie, but he doesn't do that for all.

Unexplainable Burdens of Suffering

For all of us God brings unexplainable burdens of suffering that seem almost cruel.

- Some of you have lost your jobs, and you are afraid of losing your house and your livelihood.
- Some of you have lost your health. God has asked you to live with perpetual pain and discomfort.
- Some of you have lost your eyesight.
- Some of you have lost a child.
- Or perhaps you are watching someone very close to you suffer and it is killing you.
- It seems sometimes God takes part of our soul.

Paul has a message for all of us this morning: Don't lose heart! God has an eternal purpose for your suffering!

Who We are in Christ

We are learning in Ephesians 1-3 who we are in Christ. This is Paul's method in all his writings. We must know who we are in Christ before we can do what God wants us to do. You are not simply a citizen of this earth. You cannot keep your focus here on the things that are passing away. You need to keep your eyes on the heavenly kingdom!

God has Some Eternal Things for You to Accomplish

There are lives to be changed. There are eternities to be impacted. There are disciples to be made. And your suffering is vital. Suffering seems to severely distract me. It comes in many forms. Sleepless nights, worries and anxieties, the aching and throbbing of your heart because of finances, the sheer terror of what could happen with your health, the agony of broken relationships – even physical or emotional abuse and a thousand other things. It may come from watching a loved one, friend or child go through deep suffering.

What shall we do with suffering? Someone (CS Lewis) said, "Suffering is God's Megaphone". Some don't know what to do. You may even be experiencing panic attacks and severe anxiety because you don't know what to do with suffering. You may be experiencing many sleepless nights and tear-filled days. Life hurts doesn't it?

And you must be wondering, is this God's plan for me? Recently a lost family member told me that she can't take watching her son go through depression and anxiety, so she herself had to go and get herself medicated. There is a far better solution in Scripture than numbing the pain through medication. You may be asking then: What should I do with my pain? Paul answers question this in Ephesians 3:1-13.

This morning I want you to remember 4 things when you go through pain and suffering in your life.

We see how he addresses suffering – his suffering, and how it was confusing to the Ephesian believers. It was distressful to consider that this apostle was in prison. We see this in **Ephesians 3:1 and 13**, "1 For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles— 13 So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for

you, which is your glory.” Everything in between verses 1-13 tell us who we are in Christ so that all our suffering can work for God’s glory.

We often want to lose heart because of our suffering or the sufferings of those we love. We must not lose heart. Why? Paul gives 5 reasons here.

- Our **Platform** in suffering (vs. 1)
- Our **Power** in suffering (vs. 2)
- Our **Privileges** in suffering (vs. 2-6)
- Our **Purpose** in suffering (vs. 7-11)
- The **Paradox** of our suffering (vs. 12-13)

I. Our **Platform** in suffering (vs. 1)

Use Pain as a **Platform** for Gospel Ministry.

Ephesians 3:1, “For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles—”. Paul wrote the prison epistles from a jail cell! Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon! He did not have a pity party. O how God wants us to be productive in our suffering. We ought not waste our suffering, but use it as a platform for Gospel ministry!

II. Our **Power** in suffering (vs. 2)

Ephesians 3:2, “assuming that you have heard of the **stewardship** of God’s grace that was given to me for you”

Paul, the Grace Dispenser

What was Paul **dispensing**? What was Paul to be a steward and a manager of? Look at it here: He speaks of “the **stewardship** of God’s grace that was given to me for you” (verse 2). Dispensing the **Grace of God**! Imagine Paul is said to be given a special dispensing of the grace of God to give to Gentiles. And in this verse we are going to see first of all that Paul was called by God to be a dispenser of God’s grace—he was to be a manager, a steward of God’s favor toward men. Wow! Imagine all the things people manage today—restaurant managers, sports team managers. They all have so much to think of to make sure everything goes right. Paul says he’s been made the manager of something completely different. He says God has dispensed to me His grace—His unmerited favor in Christ, i.e. the Gospel—I’ve been given the grace of God, and I am to give it out freely.

III. Our **Privileges** in suffering (vs. 2-6)

Ephesians 3:3-5, “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.”

The word mystery means “something that is beyond natural knowledge, but has been opened to us by divine revelation.” A mystery is like a secret, or an open secret. It is something that was in shadow form in the Old Testament but is now revealed. The New Testament is in the Old concealed. And the Old Testament in the New is revealed.

What is this mystery?

Ephesians 3:6 (ESV), “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.”

Smells and Bells

It’s not about “smells and bells” any more.

- It’s not about keeping Gentiles and unclean people out of the holy place.
- It is not about cleansings and **purification rituals**.
- The **showbread** of the Tabernacle and Temple are gone.
- The lights of the **Menorah** candles are no longer needed!
- There is no **basin** in our place of worship. We do not need to take a bath before we meet God.
- No more do we need to put **bells** along the bottom of our robe so that if we die in God’s presence our friends can drag us out of the Holy Place.
- We no longer have the bells of worship and the smells of incense and burnt offerings.

You don’t need to become Jewish to follow Jehovah Jesus! The reality has come. The ceremonies and blood soaked altars are done away with because they are fulfilled in Jesus.

Model Corvette

All of this was just a model of the real thing. We are now so privileged to have the reality. It’s like Will was playing with his toy Corvette the other day. Showing me how the doors open. Showing me the shiny engine. But you know what? We’re not going to go very far in a model Corvette. What Will and I needed was for Bill Kroll to pull up in his real Corvette! Kroll’s Corvette has a real engine. Probably has leather seats – unless he’s too cheap to get them! You get what I’m saying? What use is a little model Corvette when you have the real thing? Now it’s great to look at the model, but we need to drive around in the real thing. So after the service there will be free Corvette rides with Mr. William Kroll.

Seriously though, I'm not worried about Corvettes. I'm concerned that we realize what privileges we have in Christ!

In 1 Cor. 10, Paul describes the wilderness wanderings of Israel and then says something shocking! **1 Corinthians 10:1–11** (ESV), "Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come." There is a heightening and an intensification of what was concealed in the Old. It is revealed in the New Testament!

The Offense of the Gentiles: God is all about calling the Rejects!

Ephesians 3:6, "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."

What the mystery reveals is something we all need to remember. It's not about ceremonies – it's about souls. God predicted in the Old Testament that the Gentiles and all the nations of the world would be brought in through Abraham's seed. But it was a surprise that it would be done in this way through the church of Jesus Christ. That all Jewish ceremonies and the Temple would be done away with, and that Gentiles would be fellow heirs!

The Gentiles? They were hated by the Jews. They were the rejects. There was no greater hurdle in the ancient world. It would be like saving Nazis and Jewish people and putting them together.

It is as if God is calling a million Abrahams from pagan UR! God is intensifying and heightening it all! God's all about calling the rejects! I qualify!

IV. Our Purpose in suffering (vs. 7-13)

A. God's Purpose for us in our suffering.

Ephesians 3:7-8, "**1. for the Gospel Ministers – I am nothing, God is everything**
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..."

Paul the Diakonos

Paul said he was a "minister" – a diakonos. He was a common servant. A house servant. This is all we are. If you want to be used of God you must never think of yourself as anything more than a servant of Christ. The moment we lose our sense of servanthood, we forfeit our spiritual power. The more our opinion of our own importance goes up, our usefulness goes down.

The Smaller we Are the Greater God's Power

Paul says in verse 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.**” The smaller Paul was in God’s sight, the greater was his power and usefulness. All that we have at the end of the day is God’s power.

Preaching to the Graves

At the end of the day, I can go outside and preach to the dead in their graves and say “come forth”. But I can not raise men to life! I have no power in me to change sinners dead in their trespasses and sins. But if God pours out His grace in me by the working of His power, I can raise dead men and women to life!

Small Paul

Then he says in verse 8, “To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given...”

Paul is using a play on words here. He takes the Greek word for “least” or “smallest” and adds an ending that comes out with the word “LEASTEST”. Some think he was playing off his Latin Name Paulus, which means Little or Least. The idea is:

- “I am little by name, little in stature, I am truly the least of all Christians.
- I am “Small Paul”.
- He believed himself to be the “Chief of Sinners” and
- the “Least of All the Apostles”.

Paul was personally Privileged (Testimony)

Paul gets into his testimony now. He assumed most everyone knew who he was. He was a Pharisee of Pharisees, and he had been

- **Romans 11:13** (ESV), “I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry”.
- **Acts 9:15–16** (ESV), “the Lord said to him [Paul], “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. 16 For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.””
- Paul later says in **Romans 8:18** (ESV), “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.”

B. God’s purpose for the world in our suffering.

...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 [OF REDEMPTION] hidden for ages in God who created all things.

The Riches of Christ

We are to use our suffering as a platform “to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ”. No one is outside the grace of God! No one is without hope! This is

God's plan hidden for the ages. No matter how spiritually impoverished and depraved a person is, we "preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ" (vs. 9).

Paul Writing from the Jail Cell

Humanly speaking, Paul was a pauper. He owned nothing. Everything He had was either destroyed by those who persecute him or simply given to those in need! He counted all things as "refuse" for the cause of Christ. So how can Paul speak of riches.

The Prison Epistles

Paul wrote Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon are the prison epistles. He wrote them while he was under house arrest during his first Roman imprisonment. He calls Himself in **Ephesians 6:1**, "an ambassador in chains".

Mamertine prison

Later Paul was in the mamertine prison in Rome. Scholars are somewhat certain that 2 Timothy was penned here. Think of it – it was not climate controlled. If Paul ate, someone had to bring him food. The prison is still there today. It is where Peter and Paul were held before their deaths in AD64 and AD 67 respectively. They were essentially forgotten.

Now how could Paul write from these types of situations, whether under house arrest or in the Mamertine prison, and speak of the "unsearchable riches" we have in Christ.

He was preaching about how wealthy he was. You see the richest person without Christ is a pauper. Paul felt sorry for those around him with their plush homes and designer chariots. They were paupers. What they had were toys that wouldn't last. Paul preached the unsearchable, untraceable, inexhaustible riches of Christ.

Our Position

We always have to remember our position in Christ. We are rich! We are kings, priests, heirs of God! We are chosen, redeemed and forgiven. All our sins are gone! We are Sons and Daughters of the Most High God. We are love. Jesus loves me this I know!

C. God's purpose for the angels in our suffering (vs. 10-11).

Our Audience is cosmic rulers in the spiritual realm!

Verses 10-11, "so that through the church the manifold [MULTI-COLORED] wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.
11 This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord".

Tear Back the Veil

O if we could tear back the veil, we would see mighty, powerful angels of unimaginable strength. Angels are formed in ranks. They have territories of the earth assigned to them. We see this by their title here – they are called "rulers and authorities in the heavenly places".

We are Teaching the Angels

Ephesians 3:10-11 tells us that we are teaching the angels. Verses 10-11, “that through the church the manifold [MULTI-COLORED] wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. 11 This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord”.

V. The Paradox of suffering (vs. 12-13)

A. In Suffering we often Feel God has Forsaken us.

The opposite is true. In all our suffering He is more with us than we can imagine!

Ephesians 3:12, “in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him”. **Alexander Solzhenitsyn** said that he never met people who were happier than Christians in prison. He said the happiest people should have been the most thoroughly miserable people. He was in the Russian gulag.

B. In Suffering we often Feel there is No Purpose.

The opposite is true. Suffering is not a waste of time. It brings about our own and others' glory. There is coming a day when all that we are positionally in Christ will be unveiled in us physically.

1 Corinthians 15:52-55, “...in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. 53 For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. 54 ... then shall come to pass the saying that is written: “Death is swallowed up in victory.” 55 “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” 56 The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. 57 But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

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

- Through suffering we are conformed to the image of Christ.

James 1:2-8 (ESV), “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, 3 for you know that **the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.** 4 And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”

The testing of your faith produces a stronger more fruitful faith.

- Through suffering we evangelize, and it works to the **glory** of others!

Literally Paul is speaking of glorification! When a person is saved they are on a journey that cannot be thwarted. Glorification. When you are saved, God sees you complete in Christ! He sees you as His spotless Bride! He sees you as redeemed and cleansed and forgiven.

Our suffering results in our glory!! Suffering, persecution, and tribulation are those things which demonstrate that you are truly a Christian.

Conclusion: Alexander Solzhenitsyn suffered so greatly in the Russian Gulag. He famously said he never met any truly happy Christians outside of the prison. It was said of him that the more misery he suffered the more happiness he found in Christ. Understand, Solzhenitsyn was not a masochist. He understood the words of Christ, “for me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” And the more the world was taken away from him, the more he had of Christ.

Please don't lose heart over suffering. It may be in your own life or in the life of another. Will you say to God this morning: “I am content to suffer – whatever it takes to draw me closer to you”. All our earthly ambitions must be lost in Christ.

- Do you seek to be married? Don't seek it. Give it to God, and be content to serve Him whether single or married.
- Do you feel that you must have children? Give that to God. Be content to have only Him!
- Do you long for job security? Be content where He has you.
- Do you long for the day when you will just feel normal again physically. Be content to bear the Cross of perpetual illness and disease if it is what God intends to use to draw you nearer to Christ.