



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Prisoner of Jesus the Messiah

Ephesians 3:1-13

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Ask yourself what happens when the church is being faithful in its gospel calling and life. As we've worked through the first two chapters of Ephesians, Paul has explained that the church is God's new temple. It's a people purified by the blood of Jesus so that God can draw near in the person of his Spirit to dwell with us. That's always been God's plan for humanity and for creation. The garden was his temple and he placed us there to steward it well, on the one hand, and on the other, to dwell with him and to enjoy his presence—life with him. And ever since we rejected that calling, God has been working to restore us to it. And so the church, this people washed clean of sin and death by Jesus, and then filled with his Spirit, this new temple, we're the working model of God's coming new creation in the here and now.

And if we're faithful in being that working model, what happens? The ideal, the hope is that people hear our proclamation of the kingdom and they see the first beginning of God's new creation when they look at the church. In the midst of the darkness, the church should be light. In the midst of death, the church should be life. The church should be here to show a better way through the cross. To prophetically wipe away the tears of the hurt and mourning and to confront the principalities and powers, the false lords and the corrupt systems of the world with the truth of the gospel and the lordship of Jesus. And people do hear and see and experience the faithfulness of the church. In us they meet the living God and the Lord who died for them and they encounter his

glory and they kneel in faith and are, themselves washed by Jesus and filled with the Spirit. But our idea of the faithful church often stops there. Maybe that's because we think of the church, not in terms of faithfulness, but in terms of success. Butts in the pews. Money in the plate. Acclaim by the world. And yet for the first Christians the opposite was true. They were small. They were poor. They were persecuted and imprisoned and martyred by the world around them.

And that's because, when the church is faithful in living and proclaiming and witnessing the presence of God's new creation and the Lordship of Jesus, the principalities and powers—that was how Jews like Paul thought of the unseen powers, once placed by God to oversee peoples and nations, but now in rebellion against him—those principalities and powers, earthly kings, and the powerful people invested in those kingdoms and the corrupt systems that run them—Brothers and Sisters, if we're doing our job showing that God's new world is breaking in and that Jesus is setting things to rights, those powers will fight back. They will try to shut us up or shut us down. They will throw us in prison. They will kill us. Or they will try to corrupt us. They'll divide our loyalties: Sure you can worship Jesus, but you'll also need to kneel to Caesar. They'll get us to adulterate the gospel with materialism and commercialism or politics. They'll convince us we can have one set of values in the church and another in business or in government.

With that in mind, look at Ephesians 3. Paul writes, "It is because of all this that I, Paul, the prisoner of Messiah Jesus on behalf of you gentiles..." Paul sort of interrupts himself there for rhetorical purposes, but we should pause here too. Paul was in prison. Probably this is when he was in prison in Rome, but it could have been in Ephesus. And for a lot of people in his word, that meant that Paul was out of favour with God. How often do we hear that sort of thing today? There are

parts of the church that have been corrupted and compromised by the idea that faith means health and wealth, happiness and prosperity. That you can name it and, by faith, claim it. And if you don't get it, well, then you don't have enough faith or you're out of favour with God. If we were to turn over to Second Corinthians we'd see that that's how the Corinthians interpreted Paul's imprisonment. But this is pagan thinking.

But Paul knew better. In verse 13 he tells them, "Don't lose heart because of my sufferings on your behalf. That's your glory!" In other words, he's imprisoned *because* he's been faithful to the calling God gave him. He's imprisoned because of his great faith. He wants the Ephesians to understand the paradox of the cross: God's power is made perfect in weakness. We're prone to forgetting this. When we bail on a church because we think it's too small, when we start adopting sales tactics as if the gospel is something to sell, when we cozy up to corrupt leaders and rulers looking for favour, when we think we have to project or pursue strength in order to win, we've lost the plot that is centred on the cross of Jesus. You can't adulterate God's new creation with the old. If we do, we lose our witness and we stop challenging the principalities and power of the old with the lordship of Jesus and the glory of the kingdom.

So Paul was in prison because he was being faithful, because he was establishing, just as God had called him to do, these little communities that were breaking the rules of the old order: bringing Jews and gentiles, men and women, slave and free together into a single family. This was the family through which God will make his glory known throughout the earth. Remember the priests mocking Jesus on the cross, to come down if he was really the son of God, then they would believe. But Paul knew—and the people in those little churches in Ephesus knew—it was because Jesus

is the son of God that he had to stay on the cross. It was through his weakness, through his death that the great enemy, death itself, would be defeated and the battle won. Weakness is the powerful way of the cross.

Paul had got the attention of the powers of the present evil age and it landed him in prison, but instead of thinking that God had failed, Paul knew that this was actually the sign, the proof that the gospel and the Spirit were doing their work, that they were truly rising to challenge the old gods and kings. So he goes on in verse 3, “I’m assuming, by the way, that you’ve heard about the plan of God’s grace that was given to me to pass on to you? You know, the mystery that God revealed to me, as I wrote briefly just now. Anyway... When you read this you’ll be able to understand the special insight I have into the Messiah’s mystery. This wasn’t made known to human beings in previous generations, but now it’s been revealed by the Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets. *The mystery is this, that, through the gospel, the gentiles are to share Israel’s inheritance. They are to become fellow members of the body, along with them, and fellow sharers of the promise of Jesus the Messiah.*”

God’s great mystery, his secret purpose that was there all along, promised to Abraham and to Moses, to David and to the Prophets, but missed by so many people in Israel—and of course totally unknown to the gentiles who did know about those promises—that mystery hit Paul like a ton of bricks the day he met the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus—or maybe it was three days later when Ananias prayed for him and his eyes were opened. Paul started to rethink everything his Jewish Pharisee brain knew—and it knew the whole story—but suddenly he was looking at it through a new lens, through the reality that this Jesus who was crucified as a false Messiah had been raised and

was, in fact, the Messiah after all. And if that were true—well, that wall outside the temple, the one carved with the warning that gentile must not pass on pain of death—that wall was now irrelevant. In fact, that whole temple had become irrelevant because of Jesus. He’s said this back in 2:19 and now he says pretty much the same thing again, “The mystery is this, that through the gospel, the gentiles are to share in Israel’s inheritance. They are to become fellow members of the body... fellow sharers of the promise in Messiah Jesus.” In Greek he drives this point home with real force using three words that all begin with the prefix *syn* that means “with”. The gentiles are *with*-inheritors, *with*-body, and *with*-partakers—to put it very literally in English. For those in the Messiah, the distinction between the Jews and the rest of the world is gone. And we often read right past it, but this was absolutely key, heart of the gospel stuff for Paul.

Israel’s story reached its climax and the promises were fulfilled in the Messiah and in his death for the sins of the whole world. In that moment the whole sacrificial system, the whole system of purity and impurity, the temple itself became irrelevant for everyone—whether or Jew or gentile—for anyone who throws himself or herself at the feet of Jesus in faith and love to be purified once and for all and forever by his blood, to be filled by God’s Spirit, and thereby to become a part of God’s new temple.

When the scales fell from Paul’s eyes, he was the first to really grasp all this. The other apostles back in Jerusalem were still debating whether gentile believers had to be circumcised or not. So Jesus sent Paul to go announce to the gentiles that it’s not necessary. There’s now a single people defined by faith in the risen Messiah. Of course, Paul first went back to Jerusalem to make sure his fellow apostles understood this, too. But his mission was to proclaim the good news to the nations. I expect most of

the his first converts were those gentiles who were already on the fringe. The “god fearers” as the Jews called them. Greeks and Romans who encountered Jewish society and saw something they’d never seen before. In a world of moral filth, they saw in Israel a passion for holiness, a desire for justice, a hope of God setting the world to rights—a hope few in the gentile world had. And they couldn’t go to the temple, but they could sit in the synagogues and hear the scriptures read and there they heard about the faithfulness of Israel’s God. And so they hung around, on the fringe, longing for what this family had, but knowing it was not theirs and thinking it never could belong to them. Hoping that maybe there could be a place for them, even if on the fringe, in this story of hope. And Paul came to them excited, to announce that in Jesus, they were co-inheritors, fellow body-members, and fellow partakers of all those promises God had made to his people. That in Jesus and the Spirit, the could actually become the temple of the living God...not on the fringe, but actually the temple in which he dwells.

Imagine the excitement those first gentile believers felt. Like children in an orphanage, waiting and longing for years to have a place in and the love of a family, now they were part of the family. They’d escaped from the fickle gods and moral filth and hopelessness of paganism and were now sons and daughters of God.

So having made clear this point that is so central to everything, Paul goes on in verse 7: “*This* is the gospel that I was appointed to serve, in line with the free gift of God’s grace that was given to me. It was backed up with the power through which God accomplishes his work.” I have to think that Paul never ceased to marvel at this. The guy who made it his career to round up Christians so they could be brought before the Jewish council—and stoned like Stephen—that evil guy was called and chosen by

God to proclaim this good news. Washed clean by the blood of Jesus and made an apostle. If anyone understood grace, it was Paul. If anyone knew the power of God made perfect in weakness, it was Paul. And so he goes on in verse 8: “I am the very least of all God’s people. However, he gave me this task as a gift: that I should be the one to tell the gentiles the good news of the Messiah’s riches, riches no one could begin to count. My job is to make clear to everyone just what the mystery is, the purpose that’s been hidden from the very beginning of the world in God who created all things.”

Paul, the least deserving of anyone having been such a great persecutor of Jesus and his church, has been given the grace to proclaim the riches of God, his immense wealth. The riches of the Messiah. Sonship in God’s family. The inheritance of the word. And one day that world set to rights and fellowship with the living God forever. This is good news. Not good advice, like, “Hey, let me tell you about Jesus. Try him out and see if he works for you and if not, oh well.” No this is good *news*. Sin and death are defeated, the corrupt principalities and powers are on borrowed time, God’s kingdom has come. And those powers have heard the proclamation of Paul and his churches and they’re angry. Maybe if it had just been all talk, maybe if they’d just proclaimed it as good advice, maybe if they’d let themselves be corrupted by the desire for strength and power, but no...the principalities and powers, the king and gods of the present age are angry, because they’ve seen this good news at work. Caesar was the great peacemaker who had forged all the peoples of his vast empire into one with his sword and his armies. But this crucified Messiah who came out of a weak and conquered people, whose missionaries had gathered a bunch of largely poor people, women, and slaves—their unity across all their difference brought about by a message of grace—that was a real threat to the

order of the old world. The Lord Jesus was the real deal. Caesar was a cheap copy. And while the Caesars of the world will one day be brought down, they won’t go down easily. And yet, it’s in just this that the church has its greatest witness the power of God, the power of the cross, the power of the good news. God’s power is made most manifest when we are at our weakest—laughed at, imprisoned, martyred. Those things are proof of the power of the gospel.

And now Paul brings the first part of the chapter to its climax in verse 10: “This is it: that God’s wisdom, in all its rich variety, was to be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places—through the church! This is God’s eternal purpose, and he’s accomplished it in Messiah Jesus our Lord. We have confidence and access to God in him, in full assurance, through his faithfulness.”

I’ve heard and read Tom Wright say that if you want to understand what Paul is really getting at in this first half of Ephesians, look at the 10s: 1:10, 2:10, and 3:10. In 1:10 we see God’s purpose to bring all things together in heaven and on earth in the Messiah. In 2:10 we see the church today, justified by grace through faith, called to have the vital role to play in God’s plan to bring everything together in the Messiah. And here in 3:10 Paul reminds us that when the church is faithfully the church—that fellowship of people from every nation, tribe, and tongue who have given their allegiance to the Messiah, then the principalities and powers are put on notice and called to account. As Paul says here: “God’s wisdom, in all its rich variety, was to be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places—through the church!” For two thousand years God’s promises to set creation and humanity rights was out there, but how was it going to happen? Brothers and Sisters, it’s through the church being the church, with uncompromising allegiance to Jesus,

living in the power of the Spirit, refusing to compromise, refusing to give an inch to evil men, to wicked systems, to the gods of the present age. Not one inch. Because, the resurrection and ascension of Jesus tell us, in those famous words of Abraham Kuyper, “there is not one inch in the whole domain of human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!”

And knowing that with full assurance, uncompromisingly living that out, we the church are, as Paul put it in Chapter 2, we’re God’s *poiema*, his beautiful, finely crafted handywork. We put on display God’s wisdom in all its *polypoikilos*, the ESV translates it “manifold”. I’m tempted to translate it a little more freely as something like “all the colours of the rainbow”. Think of the vision of the church in Revelation 7—an uncountable multitude from every nation, tribe and tongue. The church is meant to display the polychromed, Technicolor glory of God’s new creation and, in doing so, to reveal the shabby drabness of this wicked old age and its gods and kings. But what the church has done instead is to fracture. This colour here and that colour over there. It’s to our shame. And perhaps it’s because we ourselves have lost the glory of that Technicolor world the church is meant to represent, we seem to be perpetually drawn back to the shabby drabness of the present age and it’s cheap attempts to do what only Jesus and the Spirit can do. Again, we treat the church and the gospel like commodities to marketed and to be bought and sold. We try to divide our loyalty between Jesus and mammon or sex or power. We become captivated by the ugliness of violence and war. Or we sell our souls for a mess of political pottage, losing our vision of new creation and our passion for goodness, truth, and beauty and instead of trusting in the God who will bring it about, we trust in horses and chariots and chase after lesser evils instead of the good. Brothers and Sisters, that what the

principalities and powers, that's what the devils want. They want us to think that we can bring God's kingdom by using the world's ways. But it won't, it can't work. Because doing so simply paints the church with the same shabby drabness of their world and casts a veil over the glory of God and the goodness of the gospel. It removes us as a threat to those powers.

But when we are faithful to being the church. When we are uncompromising in our loyalty to Jesus. When we love one another and are truly one, instead of fracturing our witness to the unity of the people of God, that's when the world and its rulers take notice. They recognise that, as Paul wrote back in 2:6, we are already seated with God in the heavenly places in the Messiah. That doesn't mean we're somehow above the mess. Instead it means we're right here in the midst of the mess, taking on the corrupt and evil powers of this age with power of the cross of Jesus for the sake of the people around us. We're here, with the authority of heaven, to shine the light of the gospel and to put on full display the Technicolor glory of God. Even as the powers fight back.

We've all seen it. It's not always as obvious as Paul being in prison. More often than not, it seems that when a church being faithful to preach God's word and to live out the gospel and the life of the Spirit, all hell comes at us out of nowhere. People start grumbling and creating divisions. People leave over stupid things. World or national events distract us from the gospel. or divisions become obstacles to faithfulness. Those are times for prayer and to double-down on faithfulness to Jesus and the gospel when we're tempted to give up or tempted to compromise. But Paul would tell us to be prepared. When you're being faithful, when a church is putting on display the manifold wisdom of God—new creation—the enemies of the gospel will see, they'll feel the threat, they will strike back.

That's why Paul was in prison. And he tells them, "That's your glory."

Think again back to the Solomon's dedication of the temple. That stunningly grand and beautiful building, skilfully and purposefully crafted so that the glorious presence of God could dwell with in it. So that God could shine forth from it. That was the glory of his people on display for the sake of the whole world. And Solomon and all Israel watched as the cloud of glory descended and filled the temple. I always struggle to visualize just how amazing that must have been. But the key takeaway here is this, Brothers and Sisters: that glory now indwells us. We are now God's temple, his skilfully and purposefully crafted handiwork, purified by the blood of Jesus, so that he can dwell in us. And if we, by his grace and sure of promises, are faithful to be what he has made, we will shine forth that glory: life in the midst of death, light in the midst of darkness, hope in the midst of despair, glorious Technicolour in the midst of dreary mud puddles, new creation in the midst of the hold.

Let's pray: Almighty God, consider the heartfelt desires of your servants, we pray, and stretch out the right hand of your majesty to defend us against all our enemies, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*