

Perspective

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[0 : 0 0] Thanks very much, Rachel. Good morning, everyone. Really good to have you with us, whether you're present in person here at the church or joining us virtually. It would be helpful if you've got a Bible, if you have that in front of you as we go through the passage.

I think one of the most difficult things for many people during lockdown has been having loved ones who they're really worried about, but they've not been able to go and see or not certainly not be able to go and see as much as they would like to.

They've wanted to care for perhaps elderly relatives, to visit people in hospital or in nursing homes, or perhaps these days to be able to see their student children.

And they haven't been able to and they've found it a real burden and have really worried about them. Perhaps some of you are in that position. Or perhaps you're at the other end of that, that you're the person that someone is really concerned about and you want to say to them, look, don't worry, I'm all right, or maybe you don't.

Either way, it's very difficult. And we're thrown back perhaps as never before on our trust in the Lord, believing that he will work all things for his purposes.

[1 : 1 1] And the thing that we can always do is come to him in prayer. Now you might be saying, what's the relevance of that rather heavy introduction to this wonderful passage in Ephesians?

Well, Paul's condition as he wrote this letter was very similar in many ways to what I've just described. He was in prison and the people he was writing to, the church in Ephesus and perhaps others who received the letter, they were worried about him and his circumstances.

And he wanted to say to them, look, don't worry, you shouldn't be worrying about me. What's happening is all in God's purpose.

And so we have Paul's position as the starting point for this passage. Now we're not going to go through it consecutively verse by verse, and Paul's position is really in verse 1 and then again in verse 13.

And in both cases, he describes himself as a prisoner. A prisoner, in fact, for the sake of the Gentiles. Now if you remember the story of Paul, Paul went and he was the apostle to the Gentiles.

[2 : 2 3] And when he went back to Jerusalem, because he was seen as going against the Jewish law by some who wanted to stick rigidly to it, and because he accepted the Gentiles as equals within the church, he was arrested, he was imprisoned, he was taken to Rome.

Ultimately, he would be executed for his work for the Lord Jesus. He wasn't quite at that stage here. He was probably under house arrest, maybe in Rome.

Nevertheless, he was a prisoner and the people in Ephesus were worried about him, perhaps particularly worried because he was suffering because of them, because of what he had done for them.

And Paul wants to say to them, don't worry about me. Yes, I'm a prisoner. Yes, I'm suffering for the gospel. But there's a bigger picture here.

And when we look at the bigger picture, the temporary, the present troubles come into some kind of perspective. So I said, Paul's positioner, he's a prisoner.

[3 : 31] He's a prisoner of the Romans probably at this stage. He's in prison. But look at verse 1. Paul says, For this reason, I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus.

Now, he doesn't say a prisoner for Christ Jesus. That would have been quite correct. He was suffering for the sake of the gospel, for the sake of Christ Jesus. But he says, I'm a prisoner of Christ Jesus.

And it may have been the Jews who got him arrested. It may have been the Romans who had him in prison. But actually, Paul says, this is all part of God's purpose for me.

And I don't see myself as being just a prisoner of the Romans. I'm a prisoner of Christ Jesus. I am doing it for his sake and for the sake of the gospel.

And that makes it worthwhile. He talks in Philippians about being able to participate in the sufferings of the Lord Jesus. And because he's doing it for the gospel, Paul says, that is really worthwhile.

[4 : 36] And then verse 13, at the other end of the passage, he says, I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.

That's quite a strange phrase, isn't it? Which are your glory. What does he mean by that? Well, I think what Paul means is that the fact that he's suffering for the sake of the Gentiles and the fact that he's willing to go through that without complaint shows just how important it is that the Gentiles are now part of God's people.

And it gives them extra worth, if you like, that someone cares enough about them that he is willing to suffer for them because there is a huge principle at stake here that the Gentiles, the non-Jews, are welcomed into the church on the same basis as the Jews.

So Paul is a prisoner of Christ Jesus. It is part of his fellowship with the Lord, suffering for him. He is also someone who is showing the worth, the value of us, of those who were not born as Jews, that in God's sight, we are really important.

He's saying it is for your glory. He saw beyond the immediate position he was in and he saw the big picture. And perhaps that's a lesson for us if we are suffering in lockdown, perhaps in the way I was describing earlier, perhaps in other ways.

[6 : 08] Yes, there is a lot that we could complain about and we could say this is really, really difficult. But there is a bigger picture. We don't know what it is.

We may know bits and pieces of it. God knows the big picture and God's purposes will be fulfilled whatever happens. Whatever position we're in, we should be willing to put our trust in God and to recognize that he is in control.

And we do that as we come to him in prayer. Paul says to the Ephesians, do not be discouraged. And that reminded me of the old hymn.

Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere? We should never be discouraged. Take it to the Lord in prayer.

Let's do that if we're struggling at the moment in current circumstances. Let's bring it to the Lord and leave it with him and seek his peace and his help in it.

[7 : 10] But then in the other verses, the ones in the middle of what we've been looking at, Paul expands a bit more on what the big picture is. So he's talked about his condition, verses 1 and 13.

And the second thing I want to look at is what I've called Paul's cognition. Now I suspect cognition isn't a word you use in everyday language unless you have to be an educational psychologist.

But what it simply means is it's how we make sense of the world round about us. How we take what we see, what we hear, what we experience, and we process it to build our knowledge and our understanding.

And Paul's talking here about how he came to make sense of this relationship between the Jews and the Gentiles in the church and how all of us are together in Christ.

Now last week when we were looking at chapter 2 which also talks about a similar thing, Graham made the very correct point that this is not something new. That as we go through the Old Testament it foreshadows what is happening here.

[8 : 20] For example, in God's promises to Abraham that all nations would be blessed through him. And that's correct. There's a continuity in Scripture. There's nothing that's contradictory in the Old and the New Testaments.

And yet, here Paul says, actually there is something that's new. What's new is our understanding of God's purposes. It used to be a mystery.

It is a mystery, he says. But in the biblical context, a mystery is not something we don't understand that we've got to go away and try and solve. A mystery is something that was previously hidden that people in the past didn't understand but has now been revealed to us.

And Paul says, God has revealed this mystery to me. And we will be looking in a few minutes at exactly what that mystery is.

But for the moment, we're looking at how Paul came to understand it. And he says, this mystery was made known to me by revelation.

[9 : 25] It was revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. And that would include Paul, of course. Now, we don't know how it was revealed to Paul.

Did he have some kind of vision like Peter did when the cloth came down and he saw the different foods on and God taught him that the Gentiles were able to be part of the church as well as the Jews?

Perhaps. Perhaps not. Perhaps it's just there was a sudden insight that he got as he was thinking, as he was studying God's word. And he came to understand the significance of the Gentiles coming into the church.

And I'm sure you spent a lot of time then studying it and building up the theology of it, if you like. But it was revealed to him by God and he came to understand it through the Spirit of God.

Now, as Paul's condition, what about our cognition? How do we come to view the world around us and to make sense of it? Well, there are two ways that God does it, two principal ways that God does it.

[10 : 31] One is through the Bible. The Bible is God's revelation to us. We are not going to have new theologies being developed today because it is all there in the Scripture.

God has given it to us. But we also need God's Spirit working in us and teaching us and drawing us to the Lord Jesus.

Reading our Bible isn't just an intellectual exercise. It's not just something we read like we would a scientific textbook or something like that.

Reading the Bible is allowing God to speak to us, to reveal himself to us, and to come to understand more about him and about the world around us as the Spirit make us clear to us.

And as we come to read the Bible, whether it's in church or whether it's at home in our quiet time or who's typically sitting down to study, we should be praying that God's Spirit will open up the Word to us and reveal the mysteries, the things that were previously hidden, perhaps previously hidden, to us as well, and that we will understand them, what God is saying to us.

[11 : 45] Paul's condition and Paul's cognition. Third thing I want to look at is what I've called Paul's commission, and that's mainly in verses 7 to 11.

Paul says, I am a servant of the gospel. He says, I have been given the administration of God's grace.

Paul's specific role in the church was to take the message of the gospel to the Gentiles. Now we know what a commission is.

A commission is where someone is entrusted with a responsibility because they're deemed to have the expertise and the experience to carry it out. So an artist is given a commission to paint a portrait of the queen, or a soldier is given a commission to be an officer in the army.

They're put in a position of trust because they're worthy of it. Paul has been given a commission here, although he would say in many ways he wasn't worthy of it.

[12 : 53] He says, I'm the least of God's people, but he has been given a commission because he is the person who has been chosen by God and has been empowered by him to preach to the Gentiles.

Now as you go through the passage, there's a kind of three-stage process going on here. So the first thing is that God reveals the mystery to Paul. So Paul comes to understand God's grace to him and to the Gentiles.

So the Gentiles and the Jews are one in Christ Jesus. That's stage one. The second stage is that Paul takes what has been revealed to him and having been commissioned to God, he goes and preaches it to the Gentiles.

He goes all over the known world and he preaches the gospel and he welcomes into the church everyone who believes in the Lord Jesus. Jew or Gentile, they become part of the church of the Lord Jesus throughout the then known world.

But then there's a third stage in that and that's in verse 10 if you have the passage in front of you. Because Paul says his intent was that now through the church the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms.

[14 : 12] So in other words there's a revelation to Paul, there's Paul's preaching to the Gentiles or to anyone who would listen to him and the third stage is that the church becomes a witness of God's grace to what Paul calls the rulers and authorities.

Now probably what Paul is thinking of as the evil powers and authorities round about that the church is to them a testimony of the power of God and of the fact that God is in control and is able to bring all things and all people to himself as they trust in the Lord Jesus.

Paul's commission. The challenge for us is well what is my commission? what is it that God wants me to do? And if God wants us to do something, if God is calling us to do something, he will equip us for it.

Paul was well equipped to be the apostle to the Gentiles. He was steeped in Jewish tradition and Jewish teaching but at the same time he came from a Gentile city, Tarsus, and he was a Roman citizen.

He understood both sides and he was able to talk equally to Jews and to Gentiles. And he had the spiritual insight to be able to understand God's truths and to be able to communicate them.

[15 : 36] So what is it that God wants me or wants you to do for him? And it will be different for all of us. Well I think we can understand it to some extent if we look at what is it that God has gifted us to do.

What is the experience of our life? What are the things, the expertise, the gifts that we have been given by God? And can we use them for his glory?

I look back over my own life and I see real parallels between what I've done in service, direct service for the Lord Jesus and what I did in my secular employment.

My training involved being able to analyse things, to be able to manage finance. my job involved taking things that were fairly complicated and trying to explain them simply so that others could understand them.

And as I look at what I did and what I do in the church, these things are very relevant, they've been helpful. God has been helping me to build up the gift that he has given me to be able to use it hopefully for his glory.

[16 : 45] And the challenge for all of us is what is it that God has called us and enabled us to do. And if he has called us and enabled us to do something, we need to do it.

There's no place in the church for lazy Christians. All of us are commissioned to work for the Lord Jesus. Now for some people that work may be behind the scenes.

It may be that your work for the Lord Jesus now is to uphold the church, those who are able to be more actively involved in prayer and to bring them before the Lord and to encourage them perhaps in their service.

For some of us, what God has called us to do is to care for others, to care for elderly parents or an ill spouse or to care for children. And these are high callings from the Lord Jesus and we should see them as being part of our service for him as well as of our love for others.

But for many of us, there are things that we could be doing and should be doing in the church and in Christian service and the question is are we? Are we using the gifts that God has given us?

[18 : 01] And Paul presents this in a very positive way. He doesn't talk about the work he's doing as being a chore or as being something difficult.

Rather, he talks about the gift of God's grace that was given him. Twice he uses the word grace in these verses.

And Paul is saying being able to serve the Lord Jesus is a great privilege. It's not us giving to him. It's us taking what he's given to us and benefiting from it as we serve him.

And as we serve, we never lose out. If we faithfully serve the Lord Jesus, we do truly experience his grace in our lives. And if we don't serve him, we lose out on that gift that he's given us and the ability to serve him and to live for him as we should.

Paul's commission. What is my commission to serve the Lord Jesus? And then finally, we thought of Paul's condition, Paul's cognition, Paul's commission, and let's finish with Paul's conviction.

[19 : 17] And that is at the heart of the past. I agree, I've spoken some detail about this last week, so I'm not going to go into as much detail this morning, but it's particularly in verse 6 and then again towards the end of the passage in verse 12.

What is this conviction that Paul has that is worth suffering for, that is worth going to prison for, that ultimately will be worth dying for.

And it's there in verse 6, this mystery, this thing that is now revealed but was previously hidden, is that through the gospel, the Gentiles, people who aren't Jews, are heirs together with Israel, members of the one body, and sharers together in the promise of Christ Jesus.

Notice three words, he says the word together. We're heirs together, we're members together, we're sharers together. In other words, all the things that God has in store for us through Christ Jesus, the inheritance that is ours, it is there equally whatever our background.

There's no distinction between Jews and Gentiles or any other group. It is only through faith in the Lord Jesus. Then we're members together.

[20 : 34] We're one family, we're one body in the Lord Jesus. And there is no distinction, there is no discrimination within that. And we're sharers together in the promise.

In other words, we have the same hope for the future and the same understanding of God with us. There is no distinction.

Now, what Paul is talking about specifically here, the relationship between Jews and Gentiles and their equal acceptance in the church is theologically very important, but actually, practically, it probably doesn't mean a lot to most of us these days.

Most, if not all of us, are Gentiles and we probably don't really think that there's any distinction between Jews and Gentiles when it comes to the church. But perhaps we need to think a bit wider than that and to recognize that anyone who trusts in the Lord Jesus through faith is welcome in the church and is part of the body of Christ.

There is no distinction. Christ died for all those who will trust in him and accept him as their savior and follow him as their Lord.

[21 : 55] Doesn't matter what your gender is, what your age is, what your race is, what your abilities are, what your wealth is, what your life experience has been, these things in many ways are irrelevant because when we come to the Lord Jesus, we all come on the same basis, recognizing that we are, as Paul says, we are unworthy to come to him and yet he welcomes us and he is willing to forgive us whatever we are and whoever we have been.

and we are accepted into the church on the same basis and that those who God has joined together as one let us in no way try to separate or try to discriminate or try to say that one is better than the other.

The Lord Jesus accepts us all on the basis of faith in him and is saving death for us on the cross and we are one in Christ Jesus.

Whether Jew, Gentile, or all the other things I talked about, in the Lord Jesus there is no difference. We are all accepted on the same basis and we all have the same inheritance.

We all equally belong in the body of Christ. We all equally have the same heavenly father and that is Paul's conviction that it is only by faith in the Lord Jesus and through the grace of God that we are accepted into God's family and there is nothing else that we need to do or to be in advance.

[23 : 32] if we trust in Jesus then we are part of that great body of the church which the Lord Jesus is building up for his glory.

So Paul's condition, Paul's cognition, Paul's commission and Paul's conviction. Let's end where we started. We are living in very difficult times.

I think for all of us these times are unprecedented and they are not going to get that much easier very quickly. I think everyone accepts we are looking at quite a long winter ahead when things will remain difficult.

And so it is really important that we are able to step back from our immediate circumstances and the things that would bring us down, the things that would discourage us and to fix our eyes on the things that really matter and to recognize that whatever our current circumstances are God knows them, God cares about them and we can draw strength and encouragement from him.

We shouldn't get discouraged in our faith when we face difficulties. The difficulties that we face if we face them in the strength of the Lord Jesus they will build up our faith.

[24 : 54] They will draw us closer to the Lord Jesus. And so in these times it becomes more important than ever it's always vital that we turn to the Bible and that we seek to understand what it is that God is saying to us and to draw strength and encouragement from it.

It's important that we look round about us and we say well what can I do for the Lord Jesus? Are there things I could be doing at this time that will help others?

Well there's things in the church helping with the operation of the church and the ministries of the church or whether it's on more individual basis helping others. What is it that God is calling is commissioning me to do?

And we should all of us make sure that we have an understanding of God's great grace in the Lord Jesus of all that he has done for us in sending his son to die on the cross and make sure that our trust is in the Lord Jesus and our confidence is in him that we're not depending on ourselves but we're trusting in him for our future and bringing it to him in prayer.

May that be all of our experience. Let's pray together. Our Father we thank you for your word to us today. We thank you for this tremendous passage where Paul presents just the clarity with which you showed him the greatness of your grace.

[26 : 22] That there is no distinction in coming to the Lord Jesus. Whether you are Gentile you accept us equally and we are all one together. We pray that you help us first of all to ensure that we belong to the Lord that our trust is in him and we are following him and living for him.

And then help us in this difficult time to take everything to the Lord and leave it with him. And if there are things that concern us and things that we feel perhaps there is nothing we can do about them.

We thank you that you are all powerful and that you are able to move in every situation. Help us to have a real trust in you and to live our lives knowing that you care for us and that you work things for our good.

We thank you for your presence with us this morning as we worship together as we have learned from you. We ask for your presence in the coming week in the name of the Lord Jesus. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.