

The Gospel for the Ages

Ephesians

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Bible Text: Ephesians 3:11-13

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It was Charles Spurgeon who said, "The true Gospel is no new thing. It is as old as the hills," and that is a good way for us to think as we approach the preaching of God's word today and the way that we try to approach God's word week by week here at Truth Community Church. We are not out to preach the latest theories of men. We are out to be faithful to the eternal Gospel and the eternal purpose of God which he established and which he revealed in the pages of Scripture in which we now have recorded for us and that we are able to go back and study and study again and again. We're not trying to be relevant to our modern day, to do that is to make yourself obsolete before you're finished speaking. What we want to be relevant to is not the modern trains of thought in the world today, we want to be relevant to God. We want to be relevant to his eternal purpose. We want to be in line with what he has declared to be timeless truth that alone can save the souls of men and that's kind of behind the passage that we are going to see here as we go to God's word again in Ephesians 3.

I would invite you to turn to Ephesians 3 and the ironic thing about true biblical preaching is that the more you simply try to be faithful to the text, the more that you actually have an abiding relevance to the ongoing needs of men. The needs of men don't really change over time. There is need for a Savior. There is a need for the forgiveness of sin. And though the outward trappings of life change over the course of generations coming and generations going, the fundamental need of the human heart is the same and that is what we find as we come to Ephesians 3. As we plunge into the eternal truth of God, we ironically find the confidence and the assurance that actually sustains us through the storms of life far more than trying to preach a clever message with smoke and mirrors would ever do. That stuff, as you know, fades away as soon as the lights go down and they take down the Styrofoam pillars, as someone once said. We come to God's word because we believe that it is the eternal truth of God and that it alone has that which has enduring, abiding value. Ephesians 3:11 will reinforce this for us in a very powerful way here this morning. Paul says,

11 This was in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, 12 in whom we have boldness and confident access through faith in Him. 13 Therefore I ask you not to lose heart at my tribulations on your behalf, for they are your glory.

Paul here in Ephesians 3 in these verses, is concluding an extended explanation of his ministry. He has said throughout Ephesians 3 and explained how he was a particularly appointed apostle to carry the message of the Gospel to the Gentiles and we saw that in verses 1 through 10. Paul uniquely brought the great riches of Christ to non-Jewish people so that they could see the mystery of Christ which was now revealed in the Gospel and Paul went on and described in verses 8 through 10 that as he proclaimed the Gospel and as God worked and saved people, both Gentile and Jewish heritage, that there was carrying out an eternal purpose that was bearing witness of the wisdom of God even to angels in the spiritual realm. The Gospel has a broad testimony and a deep testimony that goes far beyond anything that we see here as we gather together at a time like this. There is testimony going on. There are repercussions of the Gospel that take place in the spiritual realm that we would only know by the fact that God's word speaks to it. Paul says, "I am proclaiming great riches of Christ so that men and angels alike will see the unfolding of God's mystery."

Now, as we move into our passage here in verse 11, Paul is going to bring that whole realm of thought to a close with a lofty view of how the eternal purpose of God affects our perspective on life. There is a vertical dimension to what Paul wants us to see and there is a horizontal dimension to the way in which we should interpret life itself. As we see ourselves going through sufferings, as we go through the difficulties, as we see others in the service of the Gospel going through difficulties, what should we think about this? How do we properly interpret it so that we do not fall into discouragement or despair but actually we see in a strong way the purpose of God being carried out? Paul says that we view life in a completely different way, through a completely different prism, with a completely different perspective than unsaved men do because we understand the purpose of God that is at work in everything that happens.

So that's what we're going to be looking at here this morning. First of all, I just want to as we go through this passage, talk to you about God's purpose. If you are taking notes, you can title that with your first point of today's message. We need to look at God's purpose and here's the thing, beloved, all of the things that we have talked about in Ephesians from the beginning of chapter 1 until now, they all take us to a transcendent level. They teach us to look beyond the things of this life. They teach us to think beyond what is happening to me today or what does my week ahead look like. We need to realize as those who have been saved by the eternal blood of Christ that the blood that has redeemed us, that we take a whole different perspective that the world cannot understand, that the world does not appreciate, that the world considers foolish and that we must understand that the world is never going to reinforce for us. The world will mock it. The world will reject it. The world will persecute it. So it is incredibly important, it is essential for us as we come together to get our mind into the eternal realm so that we see what's really happening in the things of the Gospel, so that we see what really matters in our Christian life and not get distracted by the world and, furthermore, not to be intimidated or to be drawn away by what happens around us. There is no place except in the church, in a place where the Bible is truly opened and truly preached where you can find this. There is nowhere else to find it and that's why it is so important for you and me

to be committed to the local church, to be committed to its ministry, to be committed to the word of God. It is only in these things that we see God's purpose being carried out.

Beloved, we must condition ourselves and reinforce ourselves, remind ourselves and remind each other that we look at the Gospel from an eternal perspective, particularly in our day, where teachers are trying to profit by pandering to earthly desires for prosperity and entertainment and actually have no real desire in the true things of God revealed in the Scriptures. We realize that this puts us in a minority. It separates us from the world and it separates us from most of what passes for evangelicalism, at least in the American church. But we don't mind that. We don't mind that. We understand that Christ, as it were, stood alone at the cross. We understand that at the end of his ministry, the Apostle Paul would say, "Only Luke is with me." We understand that in Hebrews 11, we go through the heroes of the faith and we see that they were often without shelter, without their earthly needs, and yet they had their mind set on greater things. They had their mind set on that city that they were yet to enter into.

Well, you see, we've got to embrace that perspective. We've got to embrace, not simply understand, not simply tolerate the fact that we are pilgrims passing through this world, that our time here is brief and what happens on earth is not nearly as important as eternal matters, we have to not only see that, understand it and tolerate it, we need to embrace it and say, "This is our joy. This is our glory. This is where our hope is. This is that for which I was appointed by God before the beginning of time." And as we take that lofty perspective, as we enter into the mind of God and the intention of God, we can live through this world without being distracted by the things that we see going on around us. We understand more and more that we walk by faith and not by sight, that we are setting our minds on unseen realities rather than what we see with our physical sight. And the way that we live that way, the way that that dominates our thinking is through an understanding of God's purpose and an appreciation of what he is doing.

So with all of that in mind, look at verse 11 with me again. Ephesians 3:11. You see, what this passage does and what the Spirit of God is working in our hearts in this time, even in this hour, is to elevate us, is to take our thoughts and our minds and our mental engagement into a completely different realm and let that be what defines our perspective on life. That doesn't happen without instruction. It doesn't happen apart from God's word at all and it takes effort and, you know, we have to work at our thinking on these things. And it's as we engage these things and contemplate them and understand them and talk about them and teach on them and go back to them and pray on them that God sanctifies our minds so that we are the kind of Christian that we were appointed to be.

These things are crucial and so Ephesians 3:11, Paul having said that "the manifold wisdom of God was being made known through the church," notice that, "through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places," as that is happening, as the Gospel progresses through the unfolding of time, what is happening? Well, you say, "Well, people are getting saved. Praise God." Well, yeah, praise God that's what's happening, people are getting saved, good. It's good that we see that. It's good that we embrace that. It's good that we love that. It's good that we pray for that. But beloved, it's

more than that. It's more than the human effect of the Gospel that's at stake. What we're seeing in the advance of the Gospel through the ebbs and flow of true church history, what's happening as we gather together week by week at Truth Community Church and open up the Scriptures and teach them and we grow in Christ together and as we pray that some come to a saving knowledge of Christ for the first time, what's happening, what's the tracks that that train is running on is something completely beyond human comprehension or human control.

Verse 11, "This was in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord." Paul, through the end of chapter 2, the last half of chapter 2 and into the first half of chapter 3, has been speaking about how God brought Gentiles and Jews together into one church. The prior hostility that they had when they both came to believe in Christ was eliminated and now there was genuine peace. There was a cessation of hostilities. There was harmony now brought between 2 aspects of the human race that formally were at war with one another, who had no earthly grounds for reconciliation, as from their places of separation as they came to Christ together at the pinnacle, at the top as they came to Christ and were born again and by the same way that they were brought into union with Christ and they were brought into harmony with one another as well. There was a vertical and a horizontal dimension to it and what Paul is saying is as that reality unfolds, it testifies to even angels about the wisdom of God, that God is so wise and so powerful and so gracious that he can make that which is humanly impossible to take place and it takes place within the realm of the church. That kind of human reconciliation took place as men were joined together in Christ.

Well, what he's saying here now in verse 11 is, he's explaining the source from which that all came. He's explaining the fountainhead, where it is that the church came from. So we gather together here today, you know, just to kind of make a little present-day application of it, we come together today and many of us in this room are true Christians who have repented of our sins and put our faith in Christ and God has justified us and brought us into union with Christ and we say, "Praise God for that." Well, then, let's just ask a question: where did that come from? How did that come to be? And you know, for many of us, we would go and say, "Well, let me tell you my testimony about how I came to Christ." You go back to that point in time, "Someone shared the Gospel with me. I wrestled with it. I was convicted of sin. I repented and my life changed." That's great. Where did that come from? Oh, you say, "Oh, you know, okay, let's trace this back a little bit further," and go back and say, "Well, the Spirit of God worked in my heart and brought to mind the death and resurrection of Christ 2,000 years ago and that that blood on the cross 2,000 years ago was shed for the forgiveness of my sins." You say, good. That's right. We trace it back. We see the scarlet rope that joins all of those things together. But then we say, we push the question back even a little bit further and say, "But where did that purpose, where did the death of Christ come from?" You say, "Well, I know the answer to that question too. You see, he was prophesied in the Old Testament before he was even born. Isaiah and Micah and the Old Testament prophets. Scripture says that the Old Testament pointed to Christ and even in Genesis 3, God promised a seed that would bruise the serpent's head." So it's all laid out there for you. "Preacher, I'm surprised you don't know these things and I need to explain them to you but I'm happy to

do it for you, Preacher, since you're asking all of these questions. You can trace it all the way back to Genesis."

Very good. That's a good, good reverse overview of biblical thought but you're still left with the question: where did all of that come from? Where did all of that come from? Did this just unfold according to the way that random human interactions took place? No, you see, you push it all the way back and in a curtain that we cannot pierce, humanly speaking, Scripture takes us and pierces us through the veil of time and takes us back into an eternity, into a pre-temporal existence where only God was and in that pre-existent, eternity past time, Scripture teaches us that God established his purposes for the church way back then. And all of the review that we've taken from today and going back through our testimony and through our conversion and going back to Christ and through the prophets, all of that finds its source way back before time began where there were no men, there were no women, there was only the Triune God and God established his purpose then and everything that we have been talking about flows from that. God established his purpose before time began and now here in human time, in human history, we are seeing the unfolding and the outworking of his plan.

Beloved, that's how great the Gospel is. That's how magnificent and holy and sacred the truth of the Gospel is that it finds its source back before time began. It transcends humanity. It transcends human intentions. It transcends spiritual beings and goes right back to the heart and mind and purpose of a holy eternal God. That's what we are privileged to walk in and to discuss and to share together in the life of the church here today. Something that great and that magnificent and we don't need smoke and colored lights to dress that up. That's glorious and magnificent enough on its own that it doesn't need stuff to make it look good.

So, as you look at verse 11, chapter 3, verse 11, Paul says, "This was in accordance with the eternal purpose. Everything I've been saying," he says, "is according to the eternal purpose which God carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, which God did." It can be translated that simply, "Which God did. Which God made in Christ Jesus our Lord." When the Lord Jesus Christ entered into human history, when he took on human flesh, when he lived his perfect life, when he was crucified on the cross, when he was raised again, God was carrying out the eternal purpose which he had established before time began. You see, these things are holy, beloved. These things are lofty. These things are grand. These things are infinitely bigger than you and me. These things were true before you were born, they will be true after you were born. They were true before creation and they will be true throughout the halls of eternity. This purpose is an eternal purpose. It literally reads: it's the purpose of the ages. God, here's what we want to see, here's what we want to bank on, here's what we want to crystallize our thoughts on as we think about God's purpose. Beloved, it just changes your whole perspective of why we are here: God established his purpose for the church before time began. That means that what's happening in the realm of the true church of Jesus Christ is a carrying out, it is a moving forward of a purpose that God had and that men cannot thwart.

So when we're talking about the church here, we should think about it in the fact that we're talking about the church in its universal dimension, that all believers in Christ everywhere are a part of this eternal purpose of God and that would include you and me, those of us who truly know Christ. Yet, we should also take that and apply it to the setting of our local church, that the local church, that a true local church where the Gospel is truly proclaimed is an outworking of the eternal purpose of God and we should view it with that degree of grandeur. We should see it that high, that lofty, that it was in the church where God is working out his purposes. Oh, he carries out his providence for sure in all of the activities in the human realm, don't misunderstand me, as if there is a realm in which God is not involved. God is directing everything that happens everywhere at any time to accomplish his purposes. But when it comes to the purposes that he has for the salvation of men, he's working that out through the church, through true believers universally and he has established the local church to be a place where individuals can gather together in one place and live it out in a fellowship of relationships.

So when we come together, beloved, when we come together like this, this is something far more than us getting together and overcoming a little bit of snow to get here. This is more than coming together to enjoy friendships together as precious as those relationships may be. We need to understand and not just in the services, the one hours that we are together. It's not just that but in the whole fellowship and the gathering together in life around the word and in the context of the local church, that in that, God is working out an eternal purpose which he established for all of the ages. When we come together, there is something lofty and holy that is taking place that we don't see necessarily with our eyes. We're not always conscious of it, in fact, when we come together and we join together, a lot of times it just seems very, very ordinary. You know, look, we're ordinary people. We talked about this last week. We're ordinary people. Our conversations often seem to be ordinary but as we gather together and we open the word of God and we teach it and we submit our lives to it and we work that out Monday through Saturday as well in our living, beloved, what's happening in your life, in my life together as a church, what's happening is God is carrying out another aspect of the eternal purpose which he established before the beginning of the world. That just kind of brings a holy hush to the room, doesn't it? That kind of makes you step back and just say that's meaningful. That's significant. Our participation in the body of Christ finds its source in a plan that God designed before the world began. I say many times and it comes to me often as I'm preaching, you just realize that there aren't adequate human words to express how great that is.

Now, Paul is talking about an eternal purpose. Watch this as we are studying Ephesians together: we've already seen this theme in Ephesians before, haven't we? This has been on Paul's mind from the very beginning of the letter. Turn back to Ephesians 1. In verse 3, which kind of brings us to a way to express the holy hush that we feel as we contemplate the grandeur of what God does through his people and in his people, Paul says in verse 3, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ." That's our present enjoyment, that we have these things now. But verse 4, notice he says, "just as He chose us in Him," when? "Before the foundation of the world." God established his purpose

before time began. He chose us in Christ before he created the world. This was established. This was certain to occur. This is what he wanted to do and so he established it and then things flowed from there.

Look over at Ephesians 2:10 where Paul says this at the conclusion, so he opens on this theme of the eternal plan of God in Ephesians 1 and as we saw, we won't rehearse it now, as he comes to the end of one of his major sections, at the end of chapter 2, verse 10, look at what he says, "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works," when did he do it? "Which God prepared beforehand." Before you were born, God prepared this for you. Before time began, God prepared this for us. This is in keeping with his eternal purpose and so it's no wonder, beloved, I'll state this in a positive way, it's no wonder that we love to get together. It's no wonder that we want to be together when the doors are open and that the word of God is opened, it's because we want to be a part of that action. We want to be a part of what eternally matters. We're starting to see. We're starting to understand that whatever happens in the realm of politics or sports or Hollywood, that none of that stuff matters, that it is unrelated to the eternal purpose of God that he is working out in the church in the sense that that which captivates the attention of the world is all going to pass away. The world and its lusts are passing away, 1 John 2 says but the one who does the will of God abides forever.

Well, this just makes us want to separate from that. It weans us of our affection and our love for those things. It keeps us from getting so agitated when things don't go the way that we think that they should because in that earthly realm, because we realize that that's really not the core of the eternal purpose of God anyway. So this sanctifies us and let's us shape our affections towards that which is connected with the eternal purpose of God and it shapes the way you live. It shapes the way you think. It shapes what you care about. And it also gives us the sense just by way of a little bit of practical application, it frees us from that which Ecclesiastes says it's not from wisdom that you ask this. It frees us from wishing that we had been born in a different period of time, from wishing that, "Back in the old days, things were better. Back before liberal politics took over. Back before there was all this so-called advance and all of that," and you think it was better back then. Look, whether it was better or not, whatever better means, it doesn't matter to us because we understand something really, really crucial: because we are Christians in accordance with the eternal purpose of God, that has a direct impact on the way that we think about the world in which we live right now. God appointed you as a Christian for this hour, not one that has gone by. God has appointed our church for this hour, in this time of human history, not for a time that existed back when.

We embrace the hour that we have now. We embrace the challenges that we face in the life now saying, "Somehow this is part of the eternal purpose of God and he prepared this for me before time began and he prepared me for this hour. He prepared our church for this hour," and your mind starts to work in a realm that transcends time. And we don't waste our time thinking about what it used to be like back then. We don't waste our time thinking about what's going to happen 40, 50 years from now. We don't have to worry about that. What we focus our attention on is, "This is the hour that God has appointed for me today. This is the realm. This is the age. This is the social milieu in which God has

appointed me to live out my Christian life for this church to carry out its testimony. We don't want any other hour. We're glad that we're in this hour because we understand that this was the purpose of God right here right now. Why would we want anything else?" Why would you want a different life other than the one that God has given you as a Christian? God prepared this life for you beforehand God prepared this situation for us beforehand. So we say, "Okay, then I'm going to rise up to it and I'm going to glorify God where I'm at right now and not wish that I had something different than what I do."

Why are we in this church? At this time? In this region? In this point in history? Beloved, on the authority of God, God's word, I tell you: look beyond the human choices and realize that there is an eternal dimension in the plan of God that gives us strength and confidence and assurance right here, right now, that God by his power works things out and not just by his power but in incalculable wisdom, in immeasurable knowledge, in great, profound understanding, God appointed it for this time right now. This is the eternal purpose of God that we are living out in time.

So we come back to Scripture and we realize that there is an eternal dimension to the plan of God that far transcends what we see or experience with our human senses. Acts 2:23 says, you don't need to turn there, Acts 2:23 says that Christ was delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God. Well, if our salvation finds in one sense, its source in Christ and in his shed blood on the cross and in that act of crucifixion 2,000 years ago, and that act of crucifixion was according to the predetermined plan of God, then we realize that we're in the flow of an eternal purpose that changes our whole perspective on everything. And yes, beloved, that transcendent nature of the purpose of God is purposed in the church. Let's say it clearly, gently, affirmingly but clearly: that transcendence should increase your loyalty to your local church. The local church is where God works out his eternal plan in time. In the preaching of the word, in the practice of the ordinances of baptism and communion, as we pray together, as we share in the fellowship of ordinary folks like us, God is advancing his plan. Why would you want to be anyplace else than in the midst of and having a part in playing your part in that? This is where God does his work.

So the lowest, humblest Christian, true Christian in a local church is part of God's eternal plan and is carrying out an aspect of God's eternal plan that no one else could fill. This ennobles our purpose in life. This ennobles our view of the church. This ennobles the most mundane things that we do in the course of ministry. It ennobles it all and says that this is part of God's purpose and even these mundane things somehow fit into the plan and recognizing that attaches eternal value to it in a way that we miss otherwise. So praise God that every one of you is here in this room, in this hour, here today on March 1, 2015 because somehow, in some way that we cannot fully understand and that I couldn't trace out for you, somehow as we're to gathered together here in this room under the sound of this voice, with this diminished lighting even, God's eternal purpose is taking another step forward.

Now, you say, "Wow, that's lofty," and it is. Wouldn't it have to be that way? I mean, we sing about the precious blood of Jesus and we recognize that he is the eternal Son of God

and that there is a great eternal value in his person. Well, if he left heaven with the express intention of purchasing a people for himself and what he does through his people is going to have a lofty purpose attached to them as well so we just view everything differently as a result of it. Of course, Christ is of infinite value and so, of course, that for which he died has eternal significance as well. Here's the thing. Let's state it negatively: we are not wasting our time when we gather together. We are not wasting our time when we open God's word and teach it. We're not missing the boat when we don't find ourselves as part of the headlines of the local newspaper because we're having our latest show that we're selling tickets to. We're not missing anything. We are right where we need to be because Scripture has made this clear.

Now, beloved, having articulated God's purpose for that, this becomes very, very encouraging and has the potential to change the way that you think about God and the way that you think about prayer. Because these things are true and because God is working out an eternal purpose in the church that he attaches great value to, because we are part of that as individual Christians, we're part of that church, part of the church universal in addition to being a part of the local church here, all of a sudden, oh, this is so powerful, this affects our view of our interaction with God collectively and individually. Let's go to point number 2: the believer's privilege. The believer's privilege. What we've just been talking about completely overturns the way that most of us are conditioned to think about our walk with God. You are conditioned to think about your walk with God and interpret it in terms of what your performance has been like over the past 72 hours. Have you had your quiet time? Did you pray? You know, are your relationships with your family like what they should be? All of those things are important but that is not the defining way, that is not the defining aspect, that is not the basis upon which we interact with God at all. That's not the foundation. That's not the basis of it and these truths that Paul is bringing out take us right there and it has a great practical impact on the way that you think about your spiritual life.

Look at verses 11 and verse 12 with me now. How does God's plan for the ages affect our spiritual life today? Verse 11, "This was in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord." The purpose of God is advanced in Christ. "In whom," verse 12, watch this, "in whom we have boldness and confident access through faith in Him." Understanding God's eternal plan revolutionizes the way that you think about your walk with Christ on a day-to-day basis. It revolutionizes the way that we see our privilege before God. Scripture says, in fact, look at verse 12 with me again. Every word of Scripture is important. Every word of Scripture is inspired by God and so we want to pay close attention to Paul's argument here. He says, "He carried this purpose out in Christ Jesus our Lord in whom we," that's a statement. That's a reminder that the believer in Christ enjoys a perfect union with Christ. We have been joined together with Christ in such a way that his life is imparted to us. We have new spiritual life as a result. His righteousness, his perfect righteousness and his perfect obedience to God's law is credited to our account so that we are declared justified. We have met the demands of God's law in Christ. His sacrificial death, his shed blood, washes away our sins with perfection so that every demerit that we ever had has been taken away, every merit that Christ has has been deposited in our account and now in union with Christ, we have

privileged access to God and our access to God comes through our union with Christ, not on how long you prayed yesterday morning. Our access to God is determined by the perfection and merit of Christ, not on our flimsy, waffling, vacillating, earthly performance. Through our union with Christ, what Paul is saying here in verse 12 and it's a radical thought, but for the word of God, we wouldn't be so bold but through our union with Christ, through our identification with the Lord Jesus Christ and his identification with us, through that union with Christ, beloved, we have the same prerogative to be in the presence of God that Christ himself does. That's how perfect our identification with him is. That's how perfect his work was on our behalf. That's how perfect the union is with him. In Christ Jesus our Lord, we have boldness and confident access through faith in him.

Look at verse 12 with me again, "in Him, in whom we have." We have, this is our present possession. It's not that we will have it in the future when we're in glory and perfected with him, we have this bold and confident access now. This is the ongoing possession of the true people of God to have this kind of boldness and confident access. So combining boldness and confidence, when you combine those thoughts together, it expresses our privileged and certain access to God the Father. That, beloved, that reality that is stated for us here in Scripture. Look at it again because I know that we're prone to disbelieve this, because we're prone to have a lingering sense that somehow this depends on me and we're prone to still have remnants of trust in our flesh and it's because we have those remnants that we think that our access to God rises and falls with our performance. We have to drive that out of our thinking. It is in Christ that we have this boldness and this confident access. This was the eternal purpose of God that this would be an aspect of the reality of our salvation, that we would be his people, that we would belong to him, that he would be our Father and just as an earthly child can enter into the presence of his earthly father, so we as the spiritual children of God can enter into his presence with confidence.

So these realities make us spiritually confident and strong to overcome weakness and discouragement. Does this sound Christian? Does this sound too high and lofty for you in light of your inconsistent Christian life? Does it seem too high? Does it seem too certain? Well, let's think through that for a moment and get a couple of things straight that are really, really important. God saved you not to reward you for your performance. Salvation was not a reward for a job well done by you. That couldn't be the case because we all sin and fall short of the glory of God. You have not done a good job. You have been inconsistent. You have been unfaithful. You have sinned. And you don't deserve the presence of God. You could never deserve the presence of God by what you have done and so if you belong to Christ, it must be because of something that God wanted and that God did and it is something that is based on merit outside of yourself. That's the way that it is.

So, in the flow of what Paul is saying here, understand this, beloved, this is so critical and I need to hear this too: God saved you according to his purpose. This was what pleased God. This is what he wanted to do. This is what he purposed before the beginning of time. You are reconciled in Christ. You are reconciled through the blood of Christ and through the righteousness of Christ, not on your merit. Not on your works. Not on what

you have done. Do I need to remind you? I will remind you, look over at chapter 2, verse 8 where Paul says, "It is by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast." Not from your works, the gift of God. By grace, not so that you could boast. You dead in your transgressions were made alive by someone else. By something outside of you, you were made alive together with Christ. By grace you have been saved.

Now, here's the thing, here's what we're talking about this morning: this is what God purposed. This is what God intended to happen and so it rests in the purpose of God. Your access to God today rests on, is rooted in, is based upon his purpose. It is based upon, it is through the merit of Christ, not your own personal merit. And because it's rooted in the perfect purpose of God, in the perfect righteousness of Christ, then we have a perfect access despite our imperfect lives because it doesn't rest on our merits, it rests on something outside of us, external to us. It rests on Christ in whom we have boldness and confident access through faith in him.

You see, beloved, as Christians, you and I as a Christian, you have unrestricted access to God because it advances his eternal purpose. It's not about your temporal goodness or badness. It's not about the rise and fall of your spiritual life which you all know is variable. Understand that the variable aspect of your spiritual life is not the basis upon which you enter into the presence of God at all. We are always resting on something outside of us and that something, that someone is the perfection of Christ and because his perfection does not diminish with our performance, our access to God does not diminish with our performance. The purpose of God and the merit of Christ have opened heaven to you through faith in him.

Now, there should be a sense in you that says, "I don't deserve that." Precisely. You don't. You don't deserve that and that's the whole point. That's why God gets all the glory. That's why this humbles us to have all of these riches deposited in our account, all of these spiritual riches laid at our feet, rooted in the eternal purpose of God when we were not there to influence his thinking on it at all. God just said, "This is what I will do and I will include him and her, and him and her, and him and her in it." Then we realize that we are saved by a work of God that is outside of us and we respond in humility and praise.

Beloved, here's where I want to go with this, knowing that most of you need to hear this if not all of you, knowing what it's like to live with my own weaknesses and feeling discouraged by those just like you feel discouraged by your weaknesses and failures and, "How did that word come out of my mouth?" That kind of stuff. Knowing the sense that you have of saying and you fall into that sense of, "Well, I'll just wait a little while. I can't come to God like this. I'll just wait a little while and may be it will kind of wear off." All of that is completely wrong and unbiblical thinking. Here's the way that we need to think about our heavenly Father, here's the way we need to think through the implications of grace: God is not reluctant to receive you. He hears your prayers favorably. Not because he's so impressed with your spiritual life. If we truly knew the demands of holiness and we truly saw how sinful we are, we see the tip of the iceberg of even our remaining

sinfulness. We don't see the fullness of it. If we saw it like God saw it, we would be crushed. But, you see, that's not the basis on which God receives you. You see, stay with me here, beloved: God is pleased with his plan. God likes his purpose and his purpose includes the church. What is more, here is an undeniable truth for you: don't you think that the Father, God the Father is pleased with God the Son? In fact, he said that many times, didn't he, over the course of the earthly life of Christ. The voice from heaven spoke and said, "This is my beloved Son. In him I am well pleased." God is pleased with his purpose. He is pleased with Christ and when we approach him through Christ trusting in the merit of Christ, not on our own imperfections, now that you are in union with the Lord Jesus Christ, beloved, he is pleased to receive you as well. It's what he wanted before the beginning of time. It's an aspect of his eternal purpose. He is pleased with Christ perfectly. We are joined to Christ perfectly and therefore that access is open to us. So we come not in a hesitating way of putting our arms before our face lest God strike us for our sins. He is not going to do that. Why? How do we know that for certain? How do we know that God will not strike us for our sins? We know because he struck Christ for our sins. Christ endured the blow of his wrath on the cross for us. His wrath against our sin has been spent on Christ and the punishment that Christ endured for that placed on our account. There is no longer any barrier. We enter boldly and confidently into the presence of God.

So, it's not improved, our access is not improved when you had a good quiet time. It's not diminished if you must come to confess sin because it rests in an eternal, immutable purpose of God. It rests in a perfection, unchanging satisfaction offered by Christ and since God and Christ don't change, then our access does not change either and that's why we're bold and confident as we come before our Father. The purpose is established. The price has been paid. Charles Hodge said it this way and I quote, "We come with the assurance of being accepted because our confidence does not rest on our own merit but on the infinite merit of an infinite Savior. We have freedom from the fear of rejection or of evil. It is this that Christ has procured for us."

Do you know God like that? Are you here today and conscience of the fact that you are lost and that you are separated from God? That your guilt is great and you can't wash away the stain of your sin with the strongest lye soap? Are you at the end of your efforts to try to make yourself pleasing and acceptable to God? Well, if you are, Christ Jesus holds himself out as your Savior and says, "Come to me and I will give you rest. No one who comes to me," the Lord Jesus says, "will I ever turn away." This free and open access to heaven can be yours through repentance and faith in Christ. You say, "That's wonderful. That's gracious. That's hard to believe." This is the purpose of God. He will receive you. Christ will receive you and give you the same access because he's a gracious Savior. He is the Savior of sinners.

Now, we've walked through so many things here. Once we see God's eternal plan and our privilege before him, that changes our perspective on life. That brings us to our third point this morning. This redefines everything. We no longer think the same. This creates a seismic shift in the way that you think about life. Point 3: the believer's perspective. The believer's perspective. You know, just think with me for just a moment: we were

born into this world and we went through life before we became Christians and we were wrapped up in the things of the world. We were wrapped up in our pride or our pursuits or whatever, the pursuits of our lusts. We were totally earthbound in our perspective. We were dead to the things of God and here we are today and now we have this privileged access with him. Do you see that whatever that means that somehow it means a complete reversal of the way that we think. It completely revolutionizes the whole way that we process information. This creates a whole new mind, a whole new perspective, a whole new way of interpreting life. Nothing is the same as a result of this. We were blind and ignorant of God's eternal purpose and now Scripture lays it open to us plainly and says that we have a part in this. Well, of course, our thinking and the way that we interpret things is going to be completely, diametrically different than what it used to be in our former life.

We see this played out in what Paul says in verse 13. God's eternal purpose changes our attitude even toward suffering. Look at verse 13 with me. Paul says, "Therefore I ask you not to lose heart at my tribulations on your behalf, for they are your glory." The word "therefore" is always an important word in Scripture. As you're reading a passage and trying to connect the thought and see the whole flow of thought, Paul says, "therefore" it brings out the implication of these great truths. God has brought Jews and Gentiles together in the church. This is an outworking of his eternal purpose which bears witness to men and angels and because of his purpose, because of the merit of Christ and because we have this bold and confident access to God in Christ, "Therefore," as a result of that, Paul says, "here, let me draw out what that means for you today. Let me draw out the implications of that so that you think it through all the way to the end. Don't stop short there and leave it in a theoretical realm. Let it change the way you interpret life." Paul wants his readers to be courageous.

Look at verse 13 there. He says, "Therefore I ask you not to lose heart." Don't get discouraged. Don't despair. Why? Why would they even be tempted to do that? Well, remember what we talked about in the past: Paul writes this letter from prison. Paul is chained to a Roman soldier when he writes this and these Gentiles who had come to the Gospel, had come to Christ see their apostle, as it were imprisoned, chained. It looks like weakness and defeat and if Paul is going to be taken off the scene, "Then what's going to happen to us?" They would think. They are new Christians here and they are sorting through these things and they've got a lot of remaining sin as we'll see in chapters 4 through 6. And the very one from a human perspective at the very center of their conversion has now been isolated and confined and it looks like utter weakness. It looks like defeat. "We got off to a good start but our man's been set aside and now what's going to happen to us? This is in danger of collapsing around us." Paul says, "Don't think that way." Paul says, "I am suffering like that not because of weakness, not because your spiritual lives are in jeopardy, I'm suffering precisely because God appointed me to this office as an apostle." Acts 9:16, Jesus said right from the beginning, "I'm going to show him how much he must suffer for my sake."

So Paul says, "Don't lose heart at my tribulations." Tribulations carrying the idea of pressure. Paul was often under the pressure of hardship and suffering but, beloved, now

that we have come to this point, now we have approached his suffering and we're at this realm of his suffering, having come at it not from a human perspective, not in thinking, "Oh, this is difficult. Oh, what does this mean for me?" We've approached it from a vertical dimension. We're not approaching this horizontally as if we were driving up to it and driving into the parking lot and coming at it at a flat level, we're parachuting into this suffering from a vertical perspective, having greatly embraced and seen the eternal purpose of God and the bold and confident access that belongs to us in Christ and Paul brings that down and says, "You think about my suffering now from the perspective of what I have just been saying to you."

God's purpose redefines our perspective. Paul's suffering showed the authenticity of his work. A Roman soldier, the entire force of the Roman government, couldn't possibly hinder the advance of God's eternal purpose. Humanly speaking, that looks like a pretty outrageous statement. That was the strongest nation in the history of time up to that point. Vast expanse. Roman soldiers everywhere enforcing the Roman peace. Paul says, "Don't worry about these guys. There is an eternal purpose that is unthwartable that is being advanced." Paul's suffering was no cause for discouragement. It merely pointed to the fact that there was glory at the end of it all. "Don't be discouraged. Remember the purpose of God. Remember your access from him and from that draw strength."

Beloved, you do the same thing in the great challenges that some of you are facing in life right now. You wire into the eternal purpose of God. Let's put it this way: you believe the Gospel, don't you? You believe the Gospel. You have been born again. The Spirit of God dwells within you. God is affirming these things to your heart and conscience as you hear them preached from God's word. Now, listen to me, listen to me, listen to me: take that and work it out. Say, "God's eternal purpose is at work here. I have perfect access to God, bold and confident access to him. These trials and sufferings and difficulties that I face cannot possibly be the end of me. They cannot possibly be that which is going to leave me undone. They cannot possibly be a sign that God has turned his favor against me. It cannot possibly mean that humans are going to prevail over the purpose of God in my life. It couldn't possibly mean that because it's here on the authority of God that an eternal purpose is at work in the people of God and I'm one of them." And therefore, just like weak, struggling believers 2,000 years ago that saw their champion imprisoned at the hands of the Roman government and Paul said, "Don't you lose heart."

Beloved, on the authority of God's word, I say to every one of you and I know that some of your trials are significant and uncertain, on the authority of God's word I say, "Don't you lose heart either because the loving, sovereign purpose of God is at work in your life as a Christian and he will not fail and in the wonderful perfection of Christ, you have bold and confident access to God where you can leave these things out to him and say, 'Lord, I know that you see. I know that you hear. Help me.'" That's enough. As the psalmist said, "Depart from me you wicked ones, the Lord has heard my prayer." If the Lord has heard your prayer, that's enough. You don't need more than that. It's enough to know that the abiding, loving, sovereign God hears the prayers of his people and is faithful to them and he will be faithful to you even if you don't see how that works out today, even if this struggle goes on for a long period of time. Your perspective is

anchored in the eternal purpose of God clearly revealed in his word. Secured for you infallibly by the perfect righteousness and perfect shed blood of Christ himself.

Look over at 2 Timothy 1 as we close here. Ironically, in the Providence of God, this was our Scripture reading this morning as well. Didn't plan it that way, just the eternal purpose of God being worked out even in the timing of preaching from Ephesians and the timing of reading from 2 Timothy. 2 Timothy 1:8, let's go back to it again. Paul says, "Therefore." Therefore what? From verse 7, "God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline. Therefore," because God has given us a spirit like that, therefore because of God's purpose, therefore because of the perfect work of Christ, verse 8, therefore, here's the implication of that, "do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord or of me His prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God, who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus," when? "From all eternity." From all eternity, beloved. Don't fear the future. Don't be afraid. Go back to this purpose of God and rest there. Go back to the perfection of the work of Christ on your behalf and rest there and that which has been established from eternity past will certainly be carried out. Through the end of time to the end of the age, the purpose of God in your life is sure. Rest in that. Trust in that. Be strong and don't lose heart.

Let's pray together.

Father, help us that we might rest in your eternal purpose, that we might rest in the perfect merit of Christ and draw near to you today. Bless these dear brothers and sisters in Christ as they go through this fallen world and encourage them and even give them, Father, outward tokens of your grace that would reinforce what we've said today. Give them that kind of help, Lord, that would supplement what we have seen and would seal to their understanding even more how faithful you are to your purpose and your promises. Father, let us not look back and wish that things were different. Let us, teach us, help us, to trust in you and to move forward in the purpose of God with bold and confident attitudes toward you knowing that the work of Christ on our behalf was perfect and our brother in heaven intercedes for us without fail. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

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