

## Gospel Friendship | Paul's Letter to the Philippians

EXCURSUS: *Missio Spiritus*

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6.1.14 (Pentecost Sunday)

Ephesians 3.1-4.3

*For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles--<sup>2</sup> if indeed you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace which was given to me for you;<sup>3</sup> that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief.<sup>4</sup> By referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ,<sup>5</sup> which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit;<sup>6</sup> to be specific, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel,<sup>7</sup> of which I was made a minister, according to the gift of God's grace which was given to me according to the working of His power.<sup>8</sup> To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ,<sup>9</sup> and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things;<sup>10</sup> so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places.<sup>11</sup> This was in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord,<sup>12</sup> in whom we have boldness and confident access through faith in Him.<sup>13</sup> Therefore I ask you not to lose heart at my tribulations on your behalf, for they are your glory.*

<sup>14</sup> *For this reason I bow my knees before the Father,<sup>15</sup> from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name,<sup>16</sup> that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man,<sup>17</sup> so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love,<sup>18</sup> may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth,<sup>19</sup> and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.*

<sup>20</sup> *Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us,<sup>21</sup> to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.*

<sup>4</sup> *Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called,<sup>2</sup> with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love,<sup>3</sup> being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*

Today, we're taking a little detour from our sermons on Philippians because TODAY is the Day of Pentecost and Pentecost is the THIRD GREAT ACT of God in the Bible (after Creation and Incarnation) AND the THIRD MOST IMPORTANT of the Christian holy-days (after Easter and Christmas). This event dramatically changed world history because of what God did. And the aftershocks are still being felt! So, we have to talk about it! We GET to talk about it!

The passage we'll consider today is LIKE PHILIPPIANS, same writer and also written from prison (you see references to Paul as "the prisoner of the Lord") and also has some themes in common with Philippians.

The apparent reason St. Paul is writing is that the ancient world was a real mess. And Paul wondered how these young Christians LOOKED at the world; how they interpret what they see or THINK they see. He wants to help them not be discouraged by some things that could easily be very disheartening and threaten their faith.

And for these early Christians it could VERY easily look like this tiny movement was NOT going to amount to anything. “We thought the New Creation was breaking in when a dead Man was resurrected but I guess it was only a ‘flash in the pan’ and I guess people will always live in hostility and fear and bigotry ...same as it ever was. AND if the HOLY APOSTLES aren’t blessed/protected by God (they’re in jail), then what about the average members?”

So, INTO that dark place, Paul writes to say, “Don’t get carried away by what you’re seeing. This is NO ‘flash in the pan’. God has actually done something and they’ll be talking about this for generations and forever!” That’s what we want to consider today – what WAS that thing, what happened and how DID it AND how DOES it change things?

- 1) The State of the World – a BIG MESS
- 2) The Spirit’s Mission – a BIG REVERSAL and
- 3) The Church on the Move – a BIG ADVENTURE.

This is some of the densest stuff that Paul wrote (long sentences!). I’m not going to dissect it, just try to unpack the big ideas.

The Letter to the Ephesian Church is divided right down the middle: six chapters, with the first three describing what God accomplished in the work of Jesus Christ and then three chapters describing what believers should do about it. In grammatical terms, the first half is the indicative (the facts) and the second half is the imperative (the commands) – fact and response.

Toward the end of today’s reading (which is mostly from the FACT section) Paul sneaks in a WHAT TO DO word and that is – (v.13) “don’t lose heart at my tribulations”. Their leader is in chains.

Paul knows how we work – we want leaders who are winners and successful. And Paul knows there are going to be people in the churches who really wonder, “If Paul’s message, if this Good News is TRUE and such a blessing then why isn’t Paul blessed?”

“Paul says this movement is going to win the whole world but here we are only a few years after the Resurrection of Jesus Christ and the movement is already shut down. Our leaders are LOSERS.”

And Paul has to sort of plead with them and say, “Don’t judge by what you see or what you think you see – don’t lose heart that I am NOT apparently successful...”

But...fact remains: he is still sitting in a jail cell.

And then they look at the world around them and the state of the world is pretty miserable! When we read the histories of the ancient world, like the work of the sociologist from University of Washington (now at Baylor University), Rodney Stark, (The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries) we LEARN that life in the Roman Empire and in the great cities like Antioch and Ephesus and Philippi – life was really tough – LOTS of crime, plagues, earthquakes, fires, high infant-mortality, food shortages, sewage, polluted water and severe overcrowding (far denser than our modern cities like New York or even Calcutta). And society was VERY segmented and stratified.

And here’s this little movement predicting that the New Creation had begun when a dead Rabbi rose from the dead in this obscure corner of the Roman Empire. AND one of the chief architects of this movement – far from being a MODEL of a blessed man was sitting in jail-cell chained to some stinky Praetorian guard. It was hard to be optimistic – hard to believe – easy to lose heart.

But Paul IS not simply urging these people to “look on the bright side” – he doesn’t want a “club” to be a little more positive or happy – HE WANTS SOMETHING WAY BIGGER. He sees their community as the “new way to be human”. He wants the church to BE what God called it to be and THAT IS an alternative society, a City within the city. He envisions, and NOTICE, Paul is really clear to say, “It’s not simply MY vision or invention – THIS IS GOD’S DESIGN, long kept under wraps but now revealed, a mystery NOW come to light – Paul, but more important, GOD sees the church as a place where the hopeless ills of society are not simply accepted... but turned upside down: God’s alternative society.

The self-identifiers we use to get people to respect us and maybe to fear us or like us – “I’m a man, I’m a Roman citizen, educated, wealthy, from a powerful family” – IN THE CHURCH, those self-identifiers aren’t necessary anymore... THE WORLD NEEDS TO SEE THIS ALTERNATIVE WAY of relating. The Church is to show this new way to the world...so much so that world leaders will have to take note!

In the Church, people who would normally be unconcerned for one another, even natural enemies, will embrace each other as family ...and the world will have to wonder at this and ask questions and some will be attracted to the way the Christians love one another.

BUT how ... because... we were all raised in our own families...with our own hang-ups and we're all busy and we're all trying to keep our heads above water...pay our taxes... stay healthy...raise our kids so...HOW? How to be IN the world and not OF the world to be a real, credible, counter-cultural alternative that will compel the world to notice? (And let me add – IT worked for the early church. Their message and their movement spread by countercultural unity. When the Roman Empire fell – the church was standing ...and was thriving!) So How?

Paul refers to this engine, the “administration of God’s grace”. He says that the calling God gave him was to “bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God”

Paul is looking back across all of human history. He’s thinking of our Fall from God, our first disobedience and how our hearts died – “the day you eat of it, you shall surely DIE”. He thinks of how humanity, made for relationship with God, in truth, beauty and goodness, how humanity fell and then descended into superstition and idolatry and despair and death. Paul is thinking of Babel, when all humanity tried to get to God by a tower and man-made mountain and tried to take God’s place – to become independent of the Maker who loved them. And in order to rescue them from that cosmic lie and self-destruction, God confused their languages so they had to scatter. And the races were born and ...racial strife was born.

And Paul is thinking of how God answered our fall – He administered grace. He chose a people, a couple, Abraham and Sarah and made them a nation and God said, “IN YOU will all the nations be blessed...” And God cultivated His Vine, the Israelites, in order to give New Wine to all the nations who were groping in the dark.

And Paul is thinking of the ONE GREAT racial divide that God approved and established – the divide between Jews and Gentiles. And how the Spirit of God was moving in the generations before Jesus Christ – moving all things like a funnel, concentrating all the Spirit’s saving activity in Israel, the people of Abraham. They were the light of the world and the city on a hill. The Spirit moves toward the Land of Israel and toward the City of Jerusalem and toward the Temple and to the altar and the epicenter of grace/truth, the Seat of God’s presence –

But now says Paul, Jesus Christ has come and HE has fulfilled the calling of Abraham's people. He is the perfect representation of God dwelling among men (John 1.14). And having finished Israel's task – being the faithful Son that the nation never was, He now stands in place of the Nation. All the Spirit's grace is condensed down and concentrated in One Person – Jesus Christ embodies Israel. He finishes Israel's mission. In HIM the Gentiles are blessed. He fulfills the promise to Abraham.

He will reverse Babel – and make ALL the nations hear the wonders of God in their own language... And now the Spirit who WAS moving all things INWARD toward the center – NOW, because of Jesus Christ, the Spirit is moving all things from the Center and OUT – from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria OUT to the ends of the Earth.

THIS is the administration of God's grace that's Paul's to reveal. In Christ, the nations of Babel are now included with the people of Abraham – fellow heirs, fellow members of the body, fellow partakers of the promise. The Great REVERSAL has taken place. The Spirit was moving like a whirlpool IN but now because of Jesus Christ's finished work the Spirit is moving OUT sending grace OUT to all the nations – from whirlpool to sprinkler. "The Administration of God's grace – the mystery revealed, the mystery of Christ, the gospel, the unfathomable riches of Christ, the manifold wisdom of God, the eternal purpose."

This is the meaning of Pentecost. This is the trajectory of human history interrupted by GRACE. This is the power behind the church.

Now, what does this mean for St. Andrews Church and for ANY Church that wants to be truly Pentecostal and to be moving with the Spirit?

For one thing, this Ephesian pattern IS the pattern of the Christian life. Before Paul describes this amazing countercultural UNITY in the last three chapters – before he tells them what to DO – HE FIRST tells these believers what God has done. Until they know what they have they will never be able to BE the Church that God envisions: first the indicative, then the imperative; first God's VERDICT, THEN our response.

It's not like religion where you do the stuff, do the imperatives, do the commands and if you do enough THEN you get the verdict that you're ok. This is grace – God declares the unworthy to BE perfect because of Jesus Christ and then He begins to actually perfect us.

It's GOSPEL FUEL leading to GOSPEL FRUIT. That's why Paul ends this first section of the Letter the way he does – "This is what God has done to shower the world with grace...now I only pray that you would see it, comprehend it, have an experiential knowledge or sense of it, have your eyes open to see that HAVING THIS GRACE makes a person infinitely wealthy... "the unfathomable riches of Christ".

When you feel the love of God and KNOW that Jesus Christ would rather endure Hell than to lose you – it fills you. You have bold access to the God who loves you as if you were perfect.

It also means that because the Spirit is moving OUT that to be a church that moves with the Spirit is to look OUT. We WILL BE concerned about a world and the nations who need the grace of God in order to worship the God of grace. The Spirit compels us OUT. A church filled with grace is a church on a mission.

Last, we'll be excited about the Church – we won't lose heart as Paul says. Paul says the craziest stuff here about the place of the church in the overall plan of God Listen to verse 10: "so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places."

There's a question about these heavenly places – is it kings and people with all the power or is it angels (1 Peter 1.12)? But in some big, big way, the CHURCH is God's secret weapon for showing His salvation and wisdom to the world. The world needs to see a Church that lives by grace with amazing mercy and truth and all the fruit of the Spirit relating to one another differently than the dog-eat-dog way of the world. The way we love one another is our greatest apologetic or defense of the faith.

The administration of God's grace which we receive by repenting and believing, repenting and believing – grace received is the only way for this diverse group to actually love and forgive and be on a unified mission. It's as the Spirit opens our eyes to see, comprehend, feel and BELIEVE God's love - that empowers us to love one another.

The Church IS God's alternative community and to be on the Spirit's big adventure is to see the church as God's mystery revealed and to be engaged in her life, involved with the people sitting all around you. And THAT will require grace received by faith.

Let's pray.