

## **Suffering, Sovereignty, and the Stewardship of Grace (Ephesians 3:1-2, 13)**

*Preached by Pastor Phil Layton at GCBC on July 17, 2011*

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Last week we concluded our study of the church as God's house, and completed the imagery at the end of Ephesians 2 by looking at the house of God in Paul's other letter to the same Ephesian church – 1 Timothy (written to their pastor, what the house of God is to be all about, how it is to be conducted). The key verse in 1 Tim. 4:13 says '*give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching [or exhortation] and to doctrine [or teaching].*' This is what we as the house of God are to give our attention to, and as we prepare our hearts for that, and as I've been giving attention to exhortation and application, I want to give you some practical application and help how to give attention to these priorities on the Lord's Day in the Lord's house.

### **"How the Word is to be Read and Heard"** (bulletin insert)

- Excerpt from *The Works of Thomas Boston*, Vol. 2

Luke 8:18. – "Take heed therefore how you hear."

The doctrine of the text is,

*Doctrine:* As the hearers of the word would profit by it, they should take heed how they hear it ...

I. Some things are to go before hearing; namely, preparation and prayer. ... We should prepare ourselves for [worship] ...

1. Getting the heart impressed with a... sense of the majesty and holiness of that God into whose presence we are going, and whose word we are to hear, Ps. 89:6. Though the voice is on earth, the speaker is in heaven, and we should consider it so as to come to hear what God says to us, Acts. 10:33. And the more this be on our spirits, we may expect the more good by the word, Isa. 66:2.

[Acts 10:33 (NKJV) "*we are all present before God, to hear all the things commanded you by God.*" Isaiah 66:2 (NKJV) "*the one ... who trembles at My word.*"]

2. Banishing out of the heart worldly cares ... Matt. 13:7 ... [Jesus explained the cares of this world choke the Word, so it's unfruitful]

4. Purging the heart of carnal and corrupt lusts and affections, 1 Pet, 2:1, 2. This is to put off one's shoes when coming on the holy ground, laying by the earthly frame, and putting on a heavenly one.

5. ... Stirring up in the heart spiritual desires, 1 Pet. 2:2. As new-born babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby, longing for communion with God, seeing his glory in the sanctuary, the supply of soul-wants

*Secondly*, Prayer. We should be much in prayer before we go to ordinances, family prayer and secret prayer, and therefore ought not to spend the Lord's day morning so as not to have time for these. If ye would have good of the word read or preached, pray, and pray earnestly before it. Pray,

1. For assistance to the minister. Hence the apostle says, “Brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may have free course, and be glorified,” 2 Thess. 3:1. Pray that the Lord himself would come out with him, directing him, instructing him, and exciting him, what to speak, and how to speak.

2. For a meal to yourselves, Ps. 119:18, “Open my eyes, that I may see wondrous things out of Your law.” Pray that God would direct the word to your case, and send it home on your hearts with his blessing, that ye may be enlightened, sanctified, strengthened, humbled, or raised up by it, as your case requires. And in order to attain this, pray and wrestle earnestly ...

II. Some things are to go along with hearing ...

Diligent attention to the word, Isa. 55:2, “Hearken diligently unto me;” listening carefully to it, as a matter of the greatest weight, keeping the mind off other things in the time and bending it wholly unto the word. In this there are four things comprehended.

(1.) Outward gravity and composure ... attention ... Luke 4:20.

(2.) A fixing and bending of the ear and mind to what is spoken .... Prov. 2:1-2, “receive my words...incline your ear...apply your heart”

... A love of esteem, highly prizing it, Job 23:12, “I have esteemed the words of his mouth more than my necessary food.” Ps. 119:72, “The law of Your mouth is better unto me than thousands of gold and silver.” ... as our very life and breath. Deut. 32:47.

... We should lay it up as a precious and enriching treasure, Col. 3:16, “Let the word of God dwell in you richly;” ... The best way to lay it up is, to let it have deep impression on your spirits while you hear it, and to lift up your eyes to the Lord, that he may fix it in your heart... Luke 9:44, “Let these sayings sink down into your ears.” ... Deut. 6:7, “... you shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up.” ... Talking of it thus on your way from the church, and in your own houses, will be most beneficial to you ... Prepare for hearing it; pray earnestly for the blessing of God to accompany it; receive it with faith and love; lay it up in your hearts...practice in your lives.’

So before I read from our text in Ephesians 3 I want to take some time for us to pray and prepare our hearts to hear from the living God. We’re not going to do this every week in church, but I would encourage you to do this before church yourself or with your family, but let’s take a moment now: pray for yourself, and for me, for the Word of God to go forth ... then I’ll pray.

Eph 3:1 *For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles ... [Paul completes the thought in v. 13] 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 ...*

“For this reason,” Paul begins in 3:1, and then your Bible may put a dash--what that means is the thought of v. 1 is incomplete. It’s an incomplete sentence he doesn’t complete till 13 verses later. In the Greek, v. 2-13 form one long sentence that could be in parentheses in English, and then Paul finally resumes: “*For this reason.*” The verb for v. 1 in Greek grammar is not given until v. 14 (“*I bow my knees*”). Not great grammar but Paul is caught up by his great God.

This is an inspired interruption, a divine digression, a sanctified side-bar, a truth-filled tangent, or a righteous rabbit trail. To put it in modern terms, “Paul goes off.” All it takes is a phrase, maybe even just a word, and Paul *goes off*...the glories of the gospel send him into orbit for a little, then he returns to what he was saying, in some cases he interrupts his own interruptions. Paul is a preacher :) Paul is speaking with a pastor’s heart and concern and care in v. 13, that they would not lose heart or be discouraged in light of the circumstances he alludes to in v. 1, the suffering he mentions in v. 13. And ultimately this is the heart of God who inspired this text through the pen and personality of Paul for us, too. The key truths:

1. The Suffering of Man
2. The Sovereignty of God
3. The Stewardship of Grace

## THE SUFFERING OF MAN

**Key observation of Paul’s suffering: His focus is on others, not self**

In v. 1 he says he was a prisoner “*for the sake of you Gentiles ...*”

Notice in v. 13 that Paul is not moping, he’s ministering to them. It would have been easy for Paul to be discouraged in jail, but Paul’s focus was on encouraging others with God and His gospel, and even what he writes here God intends to encourage us all as well.

v. 13 ESV: “...*not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you*”

NIV: “...*not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you*”

Amplified: “*So I ask you not to lose heart [not to faint or become despondent through fear] at what I am suffering in your behalf ...*”

Some of the other translations have the word “tribulations.” This same word is translated in other places “affliction” or “anguish” or “distress” or “trouble.” This particular word often has to do with outward difficulties but it’s also used of inward emotional distress.

What type of sufferings? “... *far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. **Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches...*** (2 Cor 11:23-28)

That’s what Paul’s talking about. Not merely external things (and those things he endured were extreme even to his extremities), but on top of the outward there was an inward daily pressure within of concern for all the churches that was in some way greater suffering than the rest (when Paul takes about his great anguish and pain in his letters it’s this, his tremendous care and concern for others).

The literal original meaning of this word *tribulation/suffering* was pressure, as in pressing/squeezing grapes. When used of people, it carried the ideas of being under pressure as well, feeling crushed, as if there were weights being pressed hard against the soul. Some of you in this room can relate. Some may be feeling it now.

Paul says “don’t lose heart.” Suffering can crush the heart, putting great pressure on one’s heart, great discouragement in one’s soul, even to see the suffering of others you love, and Paul writes this passage so that those he knew and loved wouldn’t be discouraged in this suffering, or as the translation I read earlier says “become despondent/faint.” The word can mean become “good for nothing,” or “to give up,” “think all is lost,” “throw in the towel.” Depression and discouragement from seeing suffering in ones you love is a big temptation, but God’s Word meets us there and gives us help here.

Paul’s focus on others not himself in suffering is a great lesson. As I was preparing things to say for Lynn Miller’s funeral service this afternoon, Lynn was a tremendous example to me in this. Suffering greatly physically month after month, he always encouraged me. What an example!

Paul spent a lot of time praying for others. In this book he spends much of chapter 1 and much of chapter 3 praying for them, and it’s only at the end of the letter and in part of one verse that he really talks about himself and how and what he can use prayer for. Paul was clearly not one consumed with self or commiserating with self and there is a great lesson for us in his pattern in his prison epistles

The context of v. 1 is Paul as a prisoner. Because of his ministry to the Gentiles, some Jews in Jerusalem had him arrested (Acts 21-28). Lloyd-Jones explains thoughts that might tempt Paul’s readers: ‘now he is a prisoner, and suffering as a prisoner. Does this fit with Christianity? Does God allow His own people to suffer in this way? Paul knew that they might well be thinking and arguing in that manner, as Christian people have always tended to do ... it would avail him nothing to show them the spiritual riches of the Christian life [as he is going to in Eph. 3] if they were made to doubt the gospel itself by reason of the fact that he was at that moment suffering in Rome.

Nothing has so frequently perplexed God’s people as the question of suffering. Why does God allow His own people to endure trials and tribulations? Why should a distinguished servant like Paul of all others ever be allowed to be a prisoner? ... [Turn to 1 Timothy. Even the pastor of this church in Ephesus struggled at this point at the shame and suffering of his spiritual father. Lloyd-Jones suggests] this seems to have been Timothy’s perpetual problem. He was perplexed by the fact that the Apostle Paul is being allowed to suffer, and that he is going to be put to death. Timothy cannot understand it, and it always depresses him.’<sup>1</sup>

2 Tim. 2:9 (ESV) “...*the gospel for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound!*”

Another version says “the word of God is not imprisoned” or “the word of God is not chained!” Paul might be, but God’s Word is not and cannot be shackled. The gospel sets captives free! Paul wasn’t free, but the gospel is free! Sovereign grace is freely bestowed by God, unchained, unrestrained, unbound, abounding free grace!

2 Tim 1:8 (NAS) *Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord or of me **His prisoner, but join with me in suffering ...***

... <sup>12</sup> ***For this reason I also suffer these things, but I am not ashamed; for I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day*** [Paul was chained to a Roman, but Christ is His real guard!]

... <sup>16</sup> *The Lord grant mercy to the house of Onesiphorus, for he often refreshed me and **was not ashamed of my chains ...***

**4:10** *Demas, having loved this present world, has **deserted me** and gone to Thessalonica; Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. <sup>11</sup> Only Luke is with me ... <sup>16</sup> At my first defense **no one supported me, but all deserted me; may it not be counted against them. <sup>17</sup> But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me ...***

The Lord was with him if no one else was but the guard, God was there. He may have been bound to a soldier from Rome, but above all Paul saw himself as bound to the sovereign Ruler over all things

## **Which leads to point #2: THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD**

### **Key observation: Paul looked beyond people to God's Providence**

Notice how Paul refers to himself in Eph 3:1: *Paul, the prisoner of*

- ... *The Jews?* No. They may have had Paul arrested on the human level, but Paul's life had been arrested on the Damascus road by the Jewish Messiah who was the real Master of His fate, who redirected Paul's life to this path.
- *I, Paul, prisoner of...the Romans?* No. As Jesus said to the Roman ruler after He was arrested, the only power they had was power given to them from God. Yes, Paul was chained to a Roman soldier when he wrote these words, but he was not their captive, he was as Martin Luther, who loved Paul, once said when under arrest in Worms, Germany, standing before the Roman emperor of his day, Luther said: "I am captive to the will of God." Paul was captive to God's will.
- *Paul, prisoner of Caesar?* No. Paul was prisoner to his sovereign Savior! "*I, Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ...*"

Paul saw himself as prisoner of Jesus, Emperor of the Universe! Paul knew like the prophet Isaiah said, all the mighty nations of the earth put together are like a drop in a bucket or a speck of dust on the scales, they are less than nothing to our sovereign God (Isa 40). Nero has nothing on Jesus. Jesus said "Satan has nothing on me." Satan has to get permission for what he does with God's servants (we see that in OT and NT; Job 1, Luke 22). God is sovereign.

Look back at Eph 1:1, and notice language of God's sovereign will again and again:

<sup>1</sup> *Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus **by the will of God ...***

... <sup>4</sup> ***just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world***

... <sup>5</sup> ***He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will,*** <sup>6</sup> ***to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us ...***

...<sup>9</sup> *He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him ...*

...<sup>11</sup> *also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will ...* [that's the doctrine of God's providence] ... [v. 21 says Christ's position is] *far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.*<sup>22</sup> *And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things...*

Including imprisonment? Yes. 3:1 *"I Paul, prisoner of Christ..."*

Ray Stedman points out: 'never once does he say that he is a prisoner of Caesar; it is always "a prisoner of Christ Jesus." The reason is obvious when you read his letters. He saw that Caesar was not the one who had the final say about him; Jesus did. The duration of his confinement was not determined by Caesar, but by the Lord Jesus. As Paul came to understand the One whom he served, he knew that Jesus is in control of history. He saw him as John did in the book of Revelation -- as sitting on his throne, holding the reins of government in his hands. He is the One who opens, and no man shuts, who shuts, and no man opens, who orders, and his will is carried out ... This is a tremendous lesson to us, who sometimes become worried and anxious about what the political powers-that-be are doing in the world today. Would that we had the faith of this mighty apostle who understood so clearly that Caesar was not in control; Jesus is.'<sup>2</sup>

Look at Eph. 4:1: *"I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord ..."*

...<sup>8</sup> *Therefore it says, "WHEN HE ASCENDED ON HIGH, HE LED CAPTIVE A HOST OF CAPTIVES, AND HE GAVE GIFTS TO MEN."*

When Christ was victorious in His resurrection, just as an earthly victor would have captives, Christ led His captives. Not only did Paul see himself as a captive to Christ and prisoner of Christ, but all Christians are to see themselves as *slaves of Christ* (Lk 17:11). Look at Eph. 6:6b: *...as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God ...*

<We work ultimately not for man, but as slaves of Christ to God's will>

Paul saw himself as a bond-slave bound to Christ, held captive by Him to do His will. Paul wanted to do God's will from his heart, as one chained/inseparably linked to His merciful Master (the very word "Lord" itself has those connotations). We need to remember we're slaves of our Lord, and shouldn't expect to be treated as superstars. Slaves didn't expect their "best life now" (that wasn't Paul's theology, so when he suffered, his theology didn't have to).

What about "God loves you with a wonderful plan for your life"? Doesn't the Bible say "it's a wonderful life"? Actually, Hollywood is where that comes from (Jimmy Stewart, Donna Reed). Some TV preachers may make it sound like all things will be great when you follow Jesus and give money to their TV ministry, but that's not the full biblical picture. God does love you, but He never promised His plan for your life would seem wonderful from your perspective

What about the great promises of Jesus? One problem with modern Christians is picking and choosing promises. The word "suffering" that Paul uses in Eph. 3:13 was a promise from Jesus, John 16:33: *"In this world you will have tribulation* [suffering, same word in Eph. 3:13, promised]. *But take heart; I have overcome the world!"*

Be encouraged—tribulation proves that Jesus told the truth! Jesus promised it, and when it happens that's just another proof we can bank on His other promises as well. Jesus didn't promise a life of ease, free of disease/discomfort. If you bought that, that was false advertising. The true Jesus promises suffering ... and grace for it.

Don't lose heart, Paul says in Eph. 3:13, perhaps intentionally invoking the very language of Jesus: don't lose heart, but *take heart in Christ who overcomes the world*. His overcoming grace enables you to be an overcomer in suffering or tribulation. We can be more than conquerors through Him who loves us! Paul didn't view himself as a *victim* but as *victorious* in Christ by grace.

How does suffering, affliction, tribulation fit with the promises of God? It proves the promises of God and is a platform for His grace

1 Thessalonians 3:3–4 (NKJV) <sup>3</sup> *that no one should be shaken by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we are appointed to this.* <sup>4</sup> *For, in fact, we told you before when we were with you that we would suffer tribulation, just as it happened, and you know.*

With right theology, our faith is confirmed by, not confused by trials. But “why?” we ask. God didn't tell Job why or Paul why (2 of the godliest men ever). But He tells us His grace is sufficient.

Could God have kept even the entire Roman army from arresting Paul? Yes! In the OT, an entire Assyrian army that was around God's people was stopped, the angel of the Lord killed 185,000 of them. When a Roman battalion came to arrest Jesus, He said the Father could send 12 legions of angels if it was His will.

Once imprisoned, could God have rescued Paul out miraculously? Yes, he did it for Peter one time, sending an angel who put the guard to sleep and let Peter out. Paul himself experienced God's miraculous intervention when he and Silas were in stocks in Acts 16 in a prison in Philippi, in the middle of their midnight praise service, the Lord literally rocked the house and literally brought the house down, it was a literal jail break. But this time, God didn't

For 5 years Paul had been a prisoner. When he writes this letter he had some freedom to receive visitors under a house arrest and was chained to a Roman soldier but able to write, as he does this letter. As he writes, “There is no smell of a prison in Ephesians. As you open the book it is just like going into some vast, open expanse and breathing the fresh air of heaven ... Paul's spirit is with Christ in the heavenlies [Eph. 2:6 says, “seated with Christ” not this guard]”<sup>3</sup>

Paul's thoughts were on things above, not just on things below. He could be in an earthly prison but be thinking of a heavenly palace. A simple poem says: “Two men looked out prison bars, one saw mud, the other saw stars.” Paul had a heavenly perspective in jail. He wrote to the Colossians also from prison: “*Keep seeking the things above, where Christ is...set your affections on things above*”

As Paul moves his arm to write these verses his chain clanks but it reminds him he's bound to Christ, a prisoner to a gracious Master.

MacArthur: 'Perspective is all-important. How we view and react to circumstances is more important than the circumstances themselves. If all we can see is our immediate situation, then our circumstances control us. We feel good when our circumstances are good but miserable when they are not. Had Paul been able to see only his circumstances, he would quickly have given up his ministry. Had he thought that his life was ultimately in the hands of his persecutors, his jailers, his guards, or the Roman government, he would long since have given up in despair.

But Paul's perspective was a divine perspective, and he lived with total trust in [a sovereign] God's purposes. It was not that he himself knew his future or fully *understood* the divine purposes behind his afflictions, but that he knew his future, his afflictions, and every other aspect of his life were totally in His Lord's hands. Despite his apostleship and his many revelations from the Lord, Paul lived and worked by faith, not by sight ... not because of what he could see but because of the Lord's own Word ...'<sup>4</sup>

Corrie Ten Boom wrote that she considered wherever she was as God's purpose and place for her to take the gospel to—even the Nazi concentration camps. That was Paul's perspective, too.<sup>5</sup>

Paul doesn't say "this isn't fair! I served God for years, and I end up in prison?!" Paul's focus was the gospel, grace, not grumbling. What's fair? According to Eph 2:3 we're deserving of God's wrath – that's what is fair, if by *fair* we mean *what we deserve*. Paul had received grace rather than what's fair (hell). Paul was amazed, not that he, Paul this great ambassador for Christ had to be in chains ... Paul was amazed that he, a sinner deserving wrath and hell, he had the honor of being an ambassador in chains of the gospel of grace!

Look at Eph 3:8: *To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ!*

## THE STEWARDSHIP OF GRACE

Ephesians 3:1 *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** ...*

We'll unpack more of what the stewardship is, the gospel (v. 3-6) next time, but v. 2 by itself has a massive truth from Prisoner Paul.

Observation #3: he understood grace is a stewardship for others

- v. 1b "... **for the sake of you Gentiles**"
- v. 2b "... **stewardship of God's grace given to me for you**"

STEWARDSHIP – "dispensation of God's grace" (KJV/NKJV), not a word many use today, but we use the word "dispense," and that's part of the idea. We're given grace to dispense or share it. Some modern translations have "administration of grace" (NIV). It is the word for a steward of something valuable, an administrator of a household, a manager of important property for an important person.

In God's house, God entrusts His infinitely valuable grace to stewards who are responsible to administer it to others, like the custodian of a great estate or inheritance for heirs of God's grace. A steward managed something that was not his own, for another. A steward was responsible to disburse or dispense something to others – in this case, this inestimably valuable grace of God. This was how Paul said all believers should view themselves, as being entrusted with this treasure that we're responsible to share and to give out in the way that the Master has commissioned His stewards

1 Corinthians 4:1 *Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God* [that's also what Paul goes on to discuss in Eph. 3:3ff]. <sup>2</sup>*In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy [or faithful].*

We are stewards of the resources God has given us, not to build bigger and better barns merely, but to use our time, talents, and treasure to invest also in things that really matter. In this context, the stewardship is the grace of the gospel in v. 7-8. God gives His grace *to us* not just for us, but so it will flow *through us* to others.

Paul said in Romans 15:15: “*grace...was given me from God, to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, ministering...the gospel*”

Look at Eph 6:19: *pray on my behalf, that utterance may be given to me in the opening of my mouth, to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel,* <sup>20</sup> *for which I am an ambassador in chains; that in proclaiming it, I may speak boldly, as I ought to...*

In Philemon 1:13 Paul speaks of the “bonds of the gospel” (KJV). Paul was truly gospel-centered so he could truly rejoice in chains if the gospel went out.

Philippians 1:12 *Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel,* <sup>13</sup> *so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ* [NKJV “my chains are in Christ”] *has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else,* <sup>14</sup> *and that most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear.*

Paul saw the soldier chained to him as a captive audience for the gospel. Paul wasn't their prisoner, he was the prisoner of Christ, and the soldier became Paul's prisoner for however long his shift was guarding Paul, he would hear the gospel. And some repented, and began telling others in the Praetorian guard and beyond! PTL!

Paul saw his prison as a platform for the gospel of grace and a way to encourage other Christians with grace, as they think, “Boy, if Paul is willing to endure this for what he believes, he must really believe it! And if God can use Paul in chains to start a revival with Roman guards, that elite Praetorian soldier squad of Caesar, God's gospel truly is unstoppable, as Paul told us. It really is true, so let's give our lives for this gospel, too, with courage like Pastor Paul!”

Paul goes on to say he rejoices wherever Christ is truly proclaimed, even by other Christians who hurt Paul when he was down. It was all about Christ and the gospel for Paul.

From the world's vantage point, Paul being in jail for 5 years, awaiting execution, makes him and his religion look foolish (some great prophet/preacher, huh?).

But of course they thought the same about Jesus, arrested, tried, executed in a humiliating and horrific way. Jesus, man of sorrows, familiar with suffering, despised and rejected of men (some great prophet, huh? He can't even save himself!). But there is the only way to be saved by trusting that Christ in what He did on that cross for sinners who repent. It is on that very platform that the gospel of grace is founded, this mystery or paradox that astounded the world and confounded the worldly wise when they saw how God's grace abounded to Christ's followers suffering, even to their martyrdom.

Seeing how God sustained Paul and others in prison gives courage. A book *Martyrs Mirror* records many in history like Paul in Eph 3, and it encourages me to read closer to our time real-life stories like in the year 1550, Hans Van Overdam, who like Paul was in prison for his faith, awaiting execution, wrote these words much like Paul

'My most dearly beloved, grieve not on my account (Eph. 3:13), but praise the Lord that He is so good a Father to me, that I can suffer bonds and imprisonment for the testimony of Christ, for which I also hope to go into the fire. The Lord give me strength ... Written while in prison for the testimony of Christ. I lay in a dark dungeon for a month; I am now in a deep, round hole, where there is a little more light, and here I have written this letter. I hope to offer up my sacrifice this week, if it is the Lord's will, together with those whom the Lord has foreordained thereto ...'<sup>6</sup>

A letter by Adriaen Pan, written in prison, in the year 1559:

'... we entreat you, that no one will faint at our tribulations to which we are now subjected; for we hope that you will be rejoiced to hear it since we know for certain, that it is for the truth [and he cites in parentheses Eph. 3:13 "*faint not at my tribulations for you*"] ... my wife was somewhat distressed before they laid hands on us; but when she saw that it had to be, fear left her ... and she began to sing ... My dear brethren, we do not say this to boast but for joy, and to thank God for the great power and strength which He grants us; and for the joy of all lovers for the truth, who may hear this ... My wife and I salute you much...'<sup>7</sup>

We forget sometimes in our casual comfortable Christianity in this country how many Christians have been persecuted, imprisoned, and martyred – not just in the early centuries of the church. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century in other countries, some estimate there were more martyrs for Christ than in all the other centuries combined. Do you know Sudan has had Christians crucified on crosses in our lifetime?

We're all worked up about our liberal government, but we need to wake up to what's really going on and stand up for the gospel, not just crank up our voices about political issues. People are dying for the gospel all around the world, and people around us are dying without the gospel all around the world and all around us. We need to wake up (see *Voice of Martyrs*, [persecution.org](http://persecution.org), *Foxe's Book*). We need to light up a passion for the gospel, evangelism, missions. We can have secondary pursuits/concerns but keep the gospel first.

It's the gospel that is most important, and whatever persecution is coming for our country (more like normal in church history), let's remember the gospel shines when it's dark, and let's share it now. And whatever suffering comes, may God help us like Paul to see it as a platform from a sovereign God for us stewards of the gospel.

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<sup>1</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Unsearchable Riches of Christ*, p. 15-16.

<sup>2</sup> Ray Stedman, "The Great Mystery," preached December 17, 1972,

<http://www.pbc.org/files/messages/5270/3015.html>

<sup>3</sup> Ruth Paxson, *The Wealth of the Christian*.

<sup>4</sup> John MacArthur, *Ephesians* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1996), 87-88.

<sup>5</sup> Max Anders, vol. 8, *Galatians-Colossians*, Holman New Testament Commentary; Holman Reference (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 128.

<sup>6</sup> *MARTYRS MIRROR OF THE DEFENSELESS CHRISTIANS*, p. 486, 491.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 619.