

“An Encouraging Digression”
Ephesians 3:1-13
February 8, 2015

INTRODUCTION:

It is clear from the repetition of the first words of verse 1, “for this reason,” which are then repeated in verse 14, that the passage between those repeated words is a digression. Paul had begun to say in verse 1 that it was “for this reason” that he prayed for the Gentile Christians in Ephesus to know the love of God through Christ. But something occurs to him that needs saying first, and he ends up not getting around to talk about this until verse 14. So the first 13 verses end up being a digression.

Digressions are interesting. We sometimes find them annoying, wondering if the person digressing will ever get to the point. But digressions can also provide us with a fascinating look into the deeper places of a person’s heart. If Paul were writing purely out of his logic, there would have been no digressions. Everything would have been written the way we are taught in school to compose our paragraphs, with a unified theme and points that develop that theme. But the heart doesn’t always work in such an orderly way. A person speaking from the heart will often digress, following his passions, desires and feelings more than his logic.

What was it that was on Paul’s heart that led to this digression? I think it was related to the fact that he was in prison and he realized the potential his imprisonment had to lead to discouragement among the Ephesians. He refers to this discouragement as a losing of heart. **“I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory”** (v. 13). So this passage is all about where Paul found encouragement, and where his readers can find it as well. Do you ever battle discouragement? We are often prone to it when things don’t work out the way we had expected them to. “Lord, I have honored you in my parenting, but two of my children are not walking with you at all.” “Lord, I have been tithing for twenty years, and we are still struggling so much financially.” “Lord, I have always sought to be the kind of godly woman who would make a good wife and mother, but you have never brought me a husband.” Paul’s version of that could have been, “Lord, you have called me to be an apostle to the Gentiles and plant churches in the Gentile regions of the world. But here I am in prison, and there aren’t too many churches getting planted by me while I’m here.” But Paul was not discouraged. We see in this text what he believed that kept him encouraged. All of these are written that we too might not lose heart.

I. The Sovereignty of God

It brings great comfort to the heart to believe in the sovereignty of God, that all things come to us, even the hard things of life, through the wise and good hand of our heavenly Father. We can see that Paul believed in the sovereignty of God from his description of himself as **“the prisoner of Christ Jesus.”** It is interesting that he gives himself this title, because he was literally the prisoner of Nero, not Jesus. But because he believed in the sovereignty of God, he saw everything as coming from the merciful hand of Jesus. He was not just an apostle of Jesus, but lived his whole life under the sovereign control of Jesus. So if he was employed, he was an employee of Jesus. If he was unemployed, he was an unemployed man of Jesus.

According to Luke’s chronology in the book of Acts, Paul had been in prison for about five years by the time he writes these words. He was two years in prison in Israel, with a case delayed by the political motives of two successive governors. Then he was transferred to Rome at his own request, resulting in a journey that took approximately a year. And he had likely been in Rome for two years by now. Think how many churches could have been planted by Paul during these five years. What could God have been thinking? Neither Paul nor we can know fully the reasons God has. Paul knew some of them. He tells us in Philippians that through his imprisonment many in the highest places in Rome had heard the gospel because of his imprisonment. Perhaps we would not have as many letters from Paul if he had not been in prison, letters that have benefitted literally billions of people through the centuries. Paul didn’t need to know all the reasons for his imprisonment. He trusted in God’s goodness, wisdom and power.

Perhaps you’re battling discouragement now because, like Paul, you are trapped in some difficult situation. Maybe it’s a difficult marriage, a difficult job or a difficult health challenge. It makes no sense to you why God has you in this place. If and when you find yourself in such a place, and we all do at times, it is trust in a sovereign God that delivers us from despair. We don’t have to see the reasons for our difficulties; we only need to see God’s sovereign goodness and wisdom.

II. The Large Story of God

It would have been quite an easy thing for Paul’s world to grow quite small. Confined to his quarters, with limited options as to his daily activities, a typical response would have been for small matters to grow quite large. Matters such as his food, the condition of his quarters, even the cracks in the ceiling or the bugs on the wall, could assume a place of major importance in his mind and heart. Contrast that with involvement in something of great importance that absorbs all your attention. If you have the privilege of being involved in something big, you might easily forget to eat. Small things that might otherwise

irritate you lose their importance. You're involved in something big, and everything else becomes small.

When you are discouraged, small things become big and big things become small. So the way to fight discouragement is to keep in mind the big things. We see Paul doing precisely that in the way he talked about **“the stewardship of God’s grace that was given to me for you”** (v. 2). The word that is translated “stewardship” is difficult to translate here, but its meaning in this context is easily discerned. Paul is referring to his God-given task of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles. He refers to it as **“the mystery made known to him by revelation”** (v. 3). Paul uses the word “mystery” exactly opposite of the common meaning of our English word. To us, a mystery is something hidden that needs to be discovered, and as long as it remains undiscovered it is a mystery. The biblical meaning of mystery is something that was previously hidden, but has now been made known.

Paul tells us precisely what this mystery is in verse 6. **“This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.”** But wasn't this known in the Old Testament? Many passages from the Old Testament reveal that God will bring his blessings to the Gentiles, often referred to as “the nations” in the Old Testament. How is this mystery newly revealed through Paul? John Stott words it like this. “What neither the Old Testament nor Jesus revealed was the radical nature of God’s plan, which was that the theocracy (the Jewish nation under God’s rule) would be terminated, and replaced by a new international community, the church.” Gentiles wouldn't just become Jews who worshiped Jesus, but would become fully part of God’s people without first becoming Jews. And Jews would not remain as part of God’s people just because of their birthright as Jews. They too would have to trust in Jesus to be considered part of God’s people. As Paul worded it back in chapter 2, God is **“creat[ing] in himself one new man in place of the two”** (2:15).

The influence of this new man, the church, will be worldwide and will even spread beyond this world to the heavenly realms. God’s purpose is that **“through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places”** (v. 10). Who are these rulers and authorities? Clearly, they refer to angelic beings. The question is whether Paul is referring only to evil, fallen angels or to all angels, good and bad. I think he is referring to all angels, but with a primary concern for the fallen angels. It is through the gospel project to all the nations, forming one new man, the church, that God’s wisdom is shown to all rational creatures in heaven and earth.

As Paul writes from his prison, his concerns are far bigger than the cracks in the ceiling and the bugs on the wall. His vision reaches the ends of the earth and beyond this earth to the heavenly realms. He is living in God’s large story

and not confined to his small story. This is how Paul kept from losing heart and how his readers, including us, can keep from losing heart. Have you ever noticed how easy it is to begin living in your small story and to forget God's bigger story? Another word for living in your small story is self-centeredness. I find myself doing this all the time, and repentance is often needed.

Let me give some examples of small story living in my own life. While talking to someone about some issue in their lives, my primary focus is on what I am going to say. I'm a pastor who is supposed to know what to say to people with needs, or at least that's the way I often think of things. When I'm thinking of what I'm supposed to say, I'm living in my small story rather than in the bigger story of what God is doing in another's life and how he might want me to play a part in that. Or consider another example. Someone decides that God is calling them to transition from our church to another, and I get discouraged. What's happening in my heart at that moment is that I am thinking about the effect of this on me. One less person attending worship, one less giver to the financial needs of our church, one less person to serve in the church. What is missing is to think in terms of the big story, God's purposes in this person's life and the ways he might choose to use this person in his larger purposes. I could go on to describe defensiveness when criticized, touchiness at perceived slights, resentment toward those who aren't doing what I think they need to be doing, self-pity when things aren't going well and boasting when they do go well. All these and more are sins stemming from living in my small story.

If you want to spot this small-story living in your own heart, just be on the watch for any "But what about me?" complaints. The large story reminds us that it is not about me but about God and his larger purposes. One of the many paradoxes of Christianity is that our story comes to have meaning only as we forget about our story and take up the role God has for us in his big story. That's what Paul was doing here, and it's what kept him from discouragement.

III. The Grace of God

These final two points are both about God's larger story, a story that is first of all about God's grace. The words "grace" or "gift" occur 6 times in these thirteen verses. Paul was keenly aware of the grace of God in his own life. He mentions how he is "**a minister according to the gift of God's grace**" (v. 7). Then he goes on to say, "**To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ**" (v. 8). It is as if God looked for the least likely candidate to be the apostle to the Gentiles and chose Paul, just to show the magnitude of his grace. Apart from grace, Paul would be the least likely person for this role. He was the chief persecutor of the church in the early Jewish persecution recorded by

Luke. Further, he was a zealot for a form of Judaism that was very exclusivist, particularly exclusivist as it related to Gentiles. We would say today that he was a radical Jewish fundamentalist. It would be hard to find a more unlikely candidate to be the apostle to the Gentiles. Paul's selection by God for this role highlights the primary message of the gospel, a message of grace. Paul was certainly undeserving of this role, and the rest of us are as well.

We also see the grace of God in Paul's description of the content of his preaching, preaching that centered on **"the unsearchable riches of Christ"** (v. 8). No matter how much we discover about the riches of Jesus' grace, there is always more to be discovered. The bottom will never be reached. Paul discovered a source of wealth that was big enough for him and everyone else in the world, with an abundance still left over. He couldn't help but proclaim that good news. Even when in prison, he wrote about it and spoke about it to everyone whom God brought his way.

IV. The Church of God

God's larger story was not only about the unsearchable riches of the grace of God, but also about the new entity formed among those who receive that grace, the church. It is through the church that God makes known his manifold wisdom. The church has a central place in God's large story. John Stott summarizes this central role in three ways. First, the church is central to history. Every nation tends to think of itself as central to history, but the Bible teaches that no nation has such a place. Instead, it is the lowly church that is central to all God is doing. Second, the church is central to the gospel. The gospel isn't just good news for individuals but also good news of the creation of a new community called the church. Third, the church is central to Christian living. As we see in the last verse of our text, Paul was willing to pay any price to see the church prosper, because he believed that it was central to the Christian life.

CONCLUSION:

In Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, Bilbo Baggins struggled to leave his comfortable life in the Shire to go on this grand adventure. He liked his small Hobbit world, eating his six meals a day in comfort. He liked the Shire and was reluctant to leave its familiarity and predictability. At first, he adamantly refused to join in on the great quest. He almost missed his chance and had to chase after the group after deciding to join them. As it turned out, he had a very significant role to play, as the ring of power came to him during this adventure. The same decision lies before us all. Will we stay in our small stories, perhaps growing discouraged and resentful, or venture forth into God's larger story of the grace of the gospel?