

July 9, 2023

The Necessity of the Church, Ephesians 3:1-13

By Aaron Shamp

Introduction

- Paul is describing the big picture of the Christian worldview.

The Hardness of Life

- Paul breaks off to mention that he's writing from prison. In vs. 13, he asks them to not be discouraged because of his sufferings. He begins with "Therefore" indicating all he had written previously.
- The Bible does not shy away from the truth that life is hard. And it's not just hard for the bad guys. It's filled with tragedies and set backs for good people too.
 - "The Bible unflinchingly shows you that. Paul is no different than any other author in the Bible, because as soon as he thinks about the fact that, "These people are really struggling over the bad things that have happened to me," because they're struggling with suffering, he does not just say, "Well, suck it up." He doesn't ignore it. He engages them."¹
- Why does the Bible address the reality of suffering? Because suffering shakes our faith.
 - Consider John the Baptist. In Matthew 11, he is struggling with doubt and asks Jesus, "Are you really the One who is to come or should we look for another?"
- Paul's friends are feeling the same way. In fact, they are suffering because he is suffering.
 - "Actually, in verse 13 it says, 'I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged ...' It's a word that means disheartened. The heart gets taken out of you. You get bitter. You get numb. Paul is saying, 'I don't want you to do that.'²

The Wonder of Grace

- One of the most frequent words in this passage is *mystery*. Our conception of the word mystery is almost the opposite of what Paul meant.
 - “The Greek word, especially as Paul uses it, means exactly the opposite. It means, not something hidden that you have to discover. It means something revealed by God because you would never discover it, because it’s so counterintuitive, because you would never come to the conclusion of it by a process of reasoning.
 - In other words, a mystery is an astonishing, counterintuitive revelation, something revealed to you that’s astounding, that goes completely against anything you would’ve guessed.”³
- He uses this term in connection with the gospel. And it is frequently accompanied by the word *grace*.
 - The gospel of grace is the great mystery. It must be contrasted with the law of God.
 - “The gospel is not that if you live a good life, obey the Ten Commandments, live by the Golden Rule, then God will bless you, hear your prayers, and take you to heaven.”
 - “What is the gospel? The gospel is that the Son of God came to earth and triumphed through weakness and suffering. He won through losing. He gained everything by giving it all away. He overcame your and my sin and guilt by taking it on himself. As a result, when you become a Christian, when you’re in Christ, you are as Luther said, *simul justus et peccator...*”
 - “You’re *simul justus et peccator*, simultaneously a terrible sinner and yet absolutely loved, justified, accepted in God’s sight. That’s a mystery.”
 - It’s a mystery because it’s counterintuitive. It goes against what you would ordinarily think.
- If you try to live by the law, over time it will crush you. But if you choose to live by grace, it might be mysterious at the beginning, but over time it will become more and more wonderful.

The Brilliance of the Church

- Paul says that he's been commissioned by God to describe his purpose for the world.
 - Consider what's wrong with the world: breakdown. Everything breaks down. Everything is decaying.
 - But God's purpose in Christ is that he's bringing everything back together and making everything whole. He's restoring everything. How do we see this most clearly?
- "He is saying it is the community, not any one individual, as great as any individual could be ... It is through the Christian community, it is through healed relationships, it is through the Christian community that the world can most readily see the incredible future God is preparing for everyone."
 - "The church thus appears to be God's pilot scheme for the reconciled universe of the future ..." — F. F. Bruce.
 - "He goes on and says the church, therefore, is to be a new society, not just a fellowship, a new society in which this world can see exhibited what family life, what business and economic practices, what race relations, what all of life will be under the healing kingship of Jesus Christ. God is out to heal all the effects of sin, psychological, social, and physical, and the place where people can most clearly see it will be in the church."
- However, many people believe you can be a good Christian without the church.
 - Paul is saying that the church is indispensable to God's plan to show the world the gospel.
 - He's not unrealistic. He knows what a mess all churches are to some degree.
- Consider who you are today. Why are you the person you are today?
 - Not just individual decisions but family, friends, community, and culture shaped you. Then the gospel changed your life. That's great but you aren't going to go off and be transformed by individual decisions now.
 - You need a new family, a new culture, a new community.

End Notes

¹ Timothy J. Keller, The Timothy Keller Sermon Archive (New York City: Redeemer Presbyterian Church, 2013).

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.