

Creekside Community Church

Paul's Letter to the Ephesians – Identify Theft: Who Do You Think You Are?

June 19, 2011

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Good Suffering

Eph. 3:1-13

This morning I want to talk about good suffering - which sounds like an oxymoron. How could any suffering be good? But the Bible says that suffering accomplishes things in us and through us which can be accomplished by no other means. That's why James tells us to *"Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have it's perfect result so that you may be perfect and complete and lacking in nothing."* James asks, "Want to be perfect, complete, and lacking in nothing? Then get ready for some trials." We're looking at Paul's letter to the Ephesians in a series of messages I've called Identity Theft. Because we can't live the way Christ calls us to live until we see who we really are - our true identity as born again, children of God. What I hope you'll see this morning is that understanding your true identity is essential in handling suffering gracefully. Because it's not until I understand the grace of God and how He sees me that I can fully embrace the suffering that inevitably comes to all of us.

In the first two chapters of Ephesians Paul explains all that God has done for the Ephesians and for us through Christ and our new identity. Beginning in chapter 3 of Ephesians, he starts to pray for the Ephesians but then he abruptly launches into an explanation of his own situation for the next 13 verses. His prayer begins with vs. 14. Paul is writing to the Ephesians from prison and he's concerned that they're becoming discouraged because he's been held by the Romans for almost four years. That's why he writes in vs 13. *"Therefore I ask you not to lose heart at my tribulations on your behalf for they are your glory."* Now there is a ton of information packed into vs. 1-12 and it's easy to get lost unless we keep Paul's ultimate goal in mind. He's not discouraged by his imprisonment and he doesn't want the Ephesians to be discouraged either and he explains why in this passage. So this is a great passage about how a Christian views suffering through his identity in Christ; through the lens of sovereignty, through the lens of stewardship and through the lens of service. Because Paul knows who he is in Christ, he is able to see the reason he's suffering and why that suffering is ultimately good.

Let's begin with suffering and sovereignty. Paul is under house arrest and has to provide his own housing while waiting to appear before the Emperor - probably an apartment in one of the thousands of tenement buildings in Rome. His friends are able to visit him, but he's always chained to a Roman soldier. That's why he writes in vs 1. *"For this reason, I Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you, Gentiles."* Paul says he's in jail for the sake of "you Gentiles", and here's why. More than three years before Paul wrote this letter, he visited Jerusalem. When he went to the temple, he was recognized, a riot developed, and Paul had to be rescued by Roman soldiers. Now the reason the Jews were so upset at Paul was not because Paul believed that Jesus was the Messiah. There were many Christian Jews living in Jerusalem at this

time. In fact, when Paul take the opportunity to share with the mob in the temple how Christ saved him, there is little reaction at all. But when he tells them that Christ sent him to preach the gospel to the Gentiles, the place blows up. The Jews - as we saw last week - believed that the Gentiles were unclean pagans and were never to be associated with and they are livid at the thought that Paul would tell the Gentiles that they also can be part of God's people. The Romans take Paul into protective custody and arrange for the Jewish leaders to present their case against him before the Roman governor, Felix in Caesarea Phillipi, the Roman seat of power in Israel. However at Paul's trial, it becomes obvious to Felix that Paul isn't a criminal and that this dispute is simply about religious differences. So Felix tells the Jewish authorities that he will decide Paul's case later and sends them away, keeping Paul locked up and hoping that Paul or his friends will pay for his release. After 2 years, Felix is replaced by a new governor named Festus. As soon as Festus arrives, the Jewish leaders again bring charges against Paul, requesting that Festus send Paul back to Jerusalem for trial, but planning to assassinate Paul before he gets there. Festus asks Paul if he is willing to go to Jerusalem to stand trial, and Paul replies that he has committed no crime against the Jews or against Caesar, and that as a Roman citizen, he has the right to be tried before Caesar. Festus has no choice but to send Paul to Rome where he now has sat imprisoned for several years, waiting to appear before Nero. Paul is being held without formal charges because he obeyed God and took the gospel to the Gentiles. He is prevented from caring for new churches he's planted and from planting any new churches. He's stuck in jail, wasting his most productive years while waiting to appear before one of the worst rulers of Roman history. Yet Paul doesn't identify himself as Nero's prisoner. He says that he is Jesus' prisoner. He is where he is because that is God's will for his life. And rather than question God's will or God's goodness or God's wisdom, Paul accepts jail as the best possible place to be if that's what God wants. He's not in jail because he is bad but because God is good and God is sovereign.

The first lens we need to view our suffering through is God's sovereign control over His creation. When Paul calls himself the prisoner of Christ Jesus, he's simply applying to his own life what he wrote in chapter 1:11, that we were predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will. Not some things but all things. Everything has a purpose. Everything has a reason. There are no chance occurrences, no coincidences, no accidents. God controls everything that happens or does not happen to us. Several weeks ago, we looked at Romans 8:28-30, "*And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.*" Paul doesn't say that everything that happens to us is good. He says that no matter how bad something looks to us, we can know that God is going to somehow work it out for our good. But how do we know that's true? Paul tells us. *For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.*" Paul says we can be sure that God is controlling our present situation because He has been in control of all of history. Those whom He predestined before the foundation of the world, He called to Himself - I didn't just decide to become a Christian, God called me, enabling me to come to Him - and those whom He called, He justified - crediting them with Christ's righteousness when they put their faith in Jesus - and

those whom He justified, He glorified - when we'll share Christ's glory in eternity future. God loses no one from eternity past to eternity future. I'm not hanging on to Him, He's hanging on to me. The fact that God chose me millions of years ago to ensure my future millions of years from now tells me I am very loved and I am very secure. And that God never takes His hand off the wheel throughout history. That's why Paul accepts his suffering in prison. Because He sees that suffering through the lens of God's sovereign control and goodness.

A couple of weeks ago, I went to the doctor and he ordered a few tests - nothing serious, so far. But being a closet hypochondriac, I imagined the worst. What if I have....fill in the blank. In the past, fears like that would have me for lunch and dinner and breakfast the following morning. But because of our study in Ephesians, I remembered, "God is good and God is all-powerful. And anything that happens is meant for my good and for the good of others. So if I do have fill in the blank, then it's because God is good and because God loves me and because He knows I need this to get me where He wants me to go; to become like Jesus. And I was at peace. Psalm 46:10 contains one of the simplest and yet most profound commands in the Bible; "Be still and know that I am God." Psalm 46 is about natural disasters; earthquakes and tsunamis as well as world wars. Yet God says, "Be still and know that I am God." "I am in control and I am good." I don't know how you get through suffering without believing in a sovereign God. "Lord, why is this happening to me?" "Be still and know that I am God." "But Lord, I'm losing everything!" "Be still and know that I am God." "But this hurts so much!" "Be still and know that I am God." If you're treading some deep water right now, God isn't surprised. He knew it was coming, allowed it come, and intends only good. Be still and know that He is God.

The second lens Paul viewed his suffering through was through the lens of stewardship. A steward is someone who has been entrusted with the care of what belongs to somebody else. And Paul says he's in prison because he's a steward. That's why he says that his imprisonment is for the sake of the Gentiles. *if indeed you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace which was given to me for you;* It's been years since Paul started the church in Ephesus and so there are people in the church who don't know Paul personally. So Paul reminds them of the stewardship God gave him for them; of bringing them the message of God's grace. God made Paul the apostle to the Gentiles, a job he was uniquely prepared for. Unlike the other apostles who were native Hebrews, born and raised in Israel, Paul grew up in the city of Tarsus in the Roman Province of Cilicia. Not only was he familiar with Gentile customs, literature and language, he was a Roman citizen. And God called Paul specifically to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. Look at what exactly God entrusted Paul with for them. *that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief.* Revelation is God revealing to us what we can't know otherwise. Paul didn't make up the stuff in the NT, God revealed it to him, possibly during the three years he spent in Arabia following his conversion. A mystery is something that was previously unknown but now has been revealed. Paul has already written about the mystery in chapter 1 - which is what he means when he says as he wrote before - or earlier in the letter. This mystery which wasn't revealed in the Old Testament but in the New is that Jesus is the Christ, His role in redemption and that God's plan of redemption includes the Gentiles) *By referring to this, what Paul wrote previously when you read - you can understand*

my insight into the mystery of Christ, which in other generations (those generations before Christ) was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit; The writers of the New Testament. The coming of the Messiah is predicted over and over in the OT but no one would have anticipated the full extent of what God would accomplish through the Messiah. The way God would redeem the world was unanticipated. The Jews expected the Messiah to arrive as a conquering hero, not as a humble servant who would lay down His life. No one anticipated that the Mosaic Law would be set aside and that people would be saved by grace and not by keeping God's commands. No one anticipated that God would include both Jews and Gentiles into one body with equal access to God or that Christ would actually dwell in His followers. These are all - at most - hinted at in the OT but are not revealed until the New. *to be specific, (here's the part of the mystery most pertinent to Paul's stewardship) that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel, 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.* God entrusted Paul with the stewardship of this mystery, not because Paul deserved this responsibility but as a gift of His grace given to Paul as Christ worked within him; the same way every Christian has been gifted by the Spirit of Christ living within us for a specific role in Christ's body. We're saved by grace, and we serve by grace. God gives us the ability and the desire to serve His purpose in the special way He created us and Paul's gift was to take the gospel to the Gentiles. *To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ,* Notice that being a steward didn't feed Paul's ego because he knows it's all grace - just like his salvation. Here Paul calls himself the very least of all saints. In 1 Timothy 1:12, he calls himself the foremost of sinners. Paul understood grace. God doesn't save us because we deserve to be saved nor does He entrust us with a ministry because we're qualified for that ministry. It's all by grace - because He's good, not because we're good. It used to bother me that God worked powerfully through some of the strangest people; people with obvious weaknesses. Why does God bless him? He's not particularly smart, he's kind of goofy at times, there are others who seem far more qualified, or articulate or loving yet God really uses him. What gives? What I've finally realized is that salvation is by grace and our place of service is by grace. God neither saves us nor puts us into service because of who we are but because of who He is - so that everybody can see how loving and good He is - not how wonderful we are. Paul got that. That's why Paul - the great apostle to the Gentiles and writer of much of the NT can still say that he, the very least of all saints, was given grace to preach Christ to the Gentiles *and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things;* notice again that the full nature of God's plan of salvation and redemption was unknown to previous generations but has now been revealed to Paul so that he might preach it to the Gentiles. *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.* The mystery of God's plan of salvation extends even beyond the church to the entire spiritual realm - remember that's what the heavenly places means, the realm of the spirit, the dimension in which angels, good and evil, and God now dwell. God entrusts Paul with the preaching of the gospel to the Gentiles so that as they believe and become part of the church, God can show the evil angels - that's who "the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places" refer to - His incredible wisdom. Once Satan seduced humanity to join his rebellion

against God, the kingdom of darkness thought they had thwarted God's purpose for humans once and for all. How could God save sinful people without compromising His justice? What the rulers and authorities in heavenly places never imagined was that God would become a man and bear the punishment for their sin Himself, reconciling them to Himself and restoring humanity and eventually the entire creation to what it was meant to be before Satan's attack. So the church is exhibit A of the grace and wisdom of God to the angelic realm. *This was in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, (this was always God's eternal plan, made long before humans even fell into sin) in whom we have boldness and confident access through faith in Him.* Paul repeats what he said back in chapter 2: that we who were far away have been brought near to God by Christ, in whom we have boldness - the word means freedom of speech, that we can be free and open and frank in our conversations with God because we are always welcome in His presence because we are clothed in Christ's righteousness - and confident access through faith in Him. That's Paul's understanding of his job description - the stewardship God has entrusted to him. And for Paul, it was the most important job in the world.

The worst job I ever had was working for a crop dusting company. It was the summer between my freshman and sophomore year in college, and when I applied for the job, the old guy in the stained overalls who took my application said the job only had one requirement; that you couldn't find work anywhere else. That was encouraging. I showed up at the airfield at 5:00 in the morning and my first job was to load pesticides into the plane. The Environmental Protection Agency didn't exist at this time and if there were any regulations for handling toxic chemicals, my boss hadn't read them. I just dumped pesticides into the plane and then drove out to the field to flag the plane so the pilot could keep track of where he'd sprayed and where he hadn't. I would stand in front of the section to be sprayed, the crop duster would come in low right at me and dump, then as he circled to come back for another pass, I would walk down to the next section to be sprayed. Well, after several weeks of breathing and bathing in pesticide, I got sick during work, and was taken to the emergency room. My mom refused to let me return to the job - yea Mom! - and so I quit. Yet I regularly endure far harder things as a pastor. Why? Because how significant you believe your job is will determine what you're willing to put up with because of it. Again how I see myself will determine how I view suffering. Paul says the reason he's suffering is because of the job God has called him to do. Taking the gospel to the Gentiles put Paul in hot water with the Jews and got him thrown into a Roman prison. But to Paul, jail is a small price to pay in light of the significance of God's purpose for His life. That's Paul's point in chapter 3. Being a steward of the word of God for the Gentiles - being chosen by God to take the message of Christ and the grace of God to those who will never hear is so important that if it means jail or torture or death, so be it. Paul wouldn't want it any other way.

The second lens to view suffering through is the lens of stewardship and the job God has given every Christian to do. He's given every Christian a spiritual gift or ministry by His Holy Spirit. He has a job for us to do. And if we suffer as a result of the responsibilities and gifts God entrusts,, it's because we need to suffer to finish the job He's given to us. Why would Paul need jail to do the job God assigned him? That's where he found the time to write most of the letters of the

New Testament. Paul was a busy man - always on the move. To stop him long enough that he could write down all the things God had revealed to him, God threw him in jail. Suffering enables us to do the job God has given to us. Suffering makes us more dependent on Jesus and less dependent on ourselves so that we experience more of His power for ministry. Suffering equips us to comfort other people who go through hard times. If you're hurting, you want to be surrounded by people who know what it's like to hurt, right? And every trial, every failure, every setback, expands the circle of the people I'm able to minister God's grace to. Suffering shows others the difference Christ has made in our lives. Christians are like tea bags. Our true flavor only comes out when we get into hot water. Frankly, no matter what God has called you to do, it will be impossible for you to do it without going through some suffering. Suffering equips you for ministry.

Last week I shared my struggle with finding my identity in Christ rather than in people's recognition. I've always craved recognition and people's approval and so it's really bothered me whenever I'm misunderstood or wrongly blamed or misrepresented or lied about. For a long time I wondered how can God use that for good? Well, He can and He does. Jesus was misunderstood, slandered, falsely accused, lied about and misrepresented. And if I'm following Christ, the same thing will happen to me. And it has - a lot, both within the body of Christ and outside in the community. All people do not think well of me or of Creekside. We're misrepresented and lied about. But what I've come to see is that when you don't defend yourself, when you find your security in Christ and His opinion of you, when you come across secure rather than insecure, confident rather than scrambling to explain yourself, that influences people. Paul often talks about sharing in Christ's sufferings - the suffering that comes as a natural outcome of doing God's will and completing the work He's entrusted to us. However, if you don't completing the job God has given you, then you probably won't understand why you're suffering.

Paul looked at his imprisonment through the lens of God's sovereignty - as the prisoner of Christ Jesus. And Paul looked at his imprisonment through the lens of the stewardship God entrusted to him. Here's the third lens through which Paul viewed suffering: the lens of service. While stewardship reminds me that I'm a servant of God, service reminds me I'm a servant of people. I suffer for Christ. I also suffer for Christ's people. Paul summarizes this section with verse 13. *"Therefore - because God is sovereign and because of the glorious stewardship of His grace that He has entrusted to me for you - I ask you not to lose heart at my tribulations on your behalf for they are your glory."* Paul tells the Ephesians, "I'm in prison for your sake. I'm suffering on your behalf." This was Paul's view of suffering. He suffered on behalf of others - just like Jesus. In 2 Tim.10, also written from prison, he writes, *"For this reason I endure all things for the sake of those who are chosen that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus and with it eternal glory."* How does Paul's suffering lead to their glory? All of Paul's problems are a result of his commitment to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. And he says, "I'm willing to endure anything that's necessary for you to be saved and gain the eternal glory of Christ." Your eternal welfare is far more important than my temporal comfort. Remind you of anyone else? Didn't Jesus say, "Greater love has no man than this, than to lay down one's life for his brothers?" Christ reproduced His own self-sacrificing love in

Paul. Plus Paul's tribulations show the Ephesians how important they are to God; that what Paul is willing to endure for them is their glory - evidence of the great value they are to God.

Understanding that we're called to suffer for the benefit of others has changed my view of ministry. For example, evangelism has always been difficult for me. I was leading a project at Newport Beach one summer for college students from all of the US who got jobs in the community and then spent their time doing outreach, primarily on the beach. One day the students got the idea of playing slow-motion football on the beach to gather a crowd and then to share what Christ had done with the people who had gathered. I hated the idea. All I could think of was how we'd look like fools. But I didn't want to discourage the students so I didn't say anything. Yet the closer the time got to kickoff, the more nervous and uncomfortable I got. And I wasn't even going to be involved. I was just a spectator. But when the time came, I managed to be at another section of the beach and involved in something which I'm sure, seemed very important at the time. Nobody ever said anything about my absence but I knew in my heart that I had completely chickened out. That happened many years ago and I thought that the older I got as a Christian, the easier evangelism would become, but it hasn't. But I don't think it's supposed to be, for a couple of reasons. First, we become like Jesus by learning to put the welfare of others ahead of ourselves, dying to our own desires on other's behalf. Being willing to talk to people about Jesus - especially when we're afraid of what they'll think or do, when we're afraid of embarrassing ourselves or Christ, but speaking up anyway, has tremendous value in the eyes of God. And when people see what we're willing to endure for their sakes, it makes our message far more convincing. It's only when we suffer, when we return love for hate, patience instead of anger, gentleness instead of harshness, that people begin to see Jesus in us. And so seeing my suffering through the lens of serving others and the impact my suffering has on them changes the way I see suffering.

But if I'm not secure in my identity in Christ - I will always resent suffering because I'll never be sure if suffering is meant for my good or for my punishment. As long as I think I have to perform for God, as long as I'm trying to earn God's blessing by doing good, then I'll always approach God on the basis of punishment and reward. If I'm good, I expect God to bless me and so when I suffer I resent it as unfair. If I'm bad, I expect God to punish me and so I view suffering as more evidence that I'm a loser. Either way, as long as I live in the land of DO, I will resent suffering. But when I find my identity not in what I do but in what Christ has done, when I rest in God's grace - His love for the unlovable, His power for the powerless, and His kindness towards the undeserving, when I believe God when He tells me that because of Christ, I am holy, blameless and pure - then I can accept suffering as good and necessary to take me where my loving Father wants me to go. That's why the gospel is good news.

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