

“DON'T LOSE HEART”

Ephesians 3:1-13

This is a copy of the sermon preached by Dr. Paul Mims, Pastor, Cornerstone Baptist Church, November 13, 2011

During the Great Depression, a man named Mr. Yates owned a huge piece of land in Texas where he raised sheep. Financial problems had brought him to the brink of bankruptcy. Then an oil company, believing there might be oil on his land, asked for permission to drill.

With nothing to lose, Mr. Yates agreed. Soon, at a shallow depth, the workmen struck the largest oil deposit found at that time on the North American continent. Overnight, Mr. Yates became a billionaire. The amazing thing, though, is that the untapped riches were there all along. He just didn't know it!

Are you a spiritual "Mr. Yates" who is unaware of the riches you already own in Christ? When Paul wrote his letter to the Ephesians, he revealed hidden treasure by preaching "the unsearchable riches of Christ". His goal was to make all Christians see how wealthy they actually are.

In this time when so many are experiencing financial reverses, it is easy to become discouraged. With thousands protesting their incomes or lack of jobs in our major American cities, there is a revolution beginning and we do not know where it is going. The November 14th issue of Time magazine contains an ad from AARP that states that one in four adults, fifty and older, live below the poverty line. The evening news last week showed a family of four whose income was \$80,000 a year and now having to live on \$22,000, which is poverty level.

Life reversals come to us all. Sometimes it is financial or it can be health or family struggles. It can also be career changes or even spiritual crises that affect our wellbeing. Paul is writing to the church in a time when he is experiencing a major life reversal that includes false accusations, imprisonment, ministry change, and judgment leading to a death sentence. His bright message to the church is "I ask you therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are for your glory." (v.13)

Let's look at why he says this and how he could have such a victorious attitude.

SOMETHING GREATER IN US SUPERCEDES THE PRESENT SITUATION (vv.1-6) "Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace given to me for you..."

The background of the present situation is this: Paul had spent about two years in Ephesus establishing the church on his third missionary journey. When he arrived back in Jerusalem, he went to see James, who was the pastor of the church there, and other Christian leaders. They told him that word was circulating around the city that he was teaching the Jews to turn away from Moses and the law and telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to Jewish customs. Later, some of Paul's enemies saw him in the Temple and seized him shouting, "Men of Israel, help us! This is the man who teaches all men everywhere against our people and our law and this place. And besides, he has brought Greeks into the temple area and defiled this holy place. (They had previously seen Trophimus, the Ephesian, in the city with Paul and assumed that Paul had brought him into the temple area.) The whole city was aroused, and people came running from all directions. Seizing Paul, they dragged him from the Temple, and immediately the gates were shut. While they were trying to kill him, news reached the commander of the Roman troops that the whole city of Jerusalem was in an uproar. He at once took some officers and soldiers and ran down to the crowd. When the rioters saw the commander and his soldiers, they stopped beating Paul." (Acts 21:28-32). Paul was later imprisoned, tried, and appealed to Rome and was sent there for another trial. This process has taken several years. But through it all he has focused on his mission calling and has kept it burning in his heart. It is all because of grace that he has kept his relationship with God strong.

The truth that I want us all to see is that regardless of our present situation we can keep our relationship to God first and foremost in our lives. Paul had every opportunity for his spirit to turn sour and blame God for all that was happening to him.

Let's each of us look at our present situation. What has it done to your spiritual relationship to God? Has it drawn you closer or has it pushed you farther away? Has it caused you to trust him more or has it caused you to lose faith in him? Has it caused you to grow in spiritual strength or has it made you a spiritual weakling?

"When I hear my friends say they hope their children don't have to experience the hardships they went through--I don't agree. Those hardships made us what we are. You can be disadvantaged in many ways, and one way may be not having had to struggle." William M. Batten, Fortune.

"Discouragement is dissatisfaction with the past, distaste for the present, and distrust of the future. It is ingratitude for the blessings of yesterday, indifference to the opportunities of today, and insecurity regarding strength for tomorrow. It is unawareness of the

presence of beauty, unconcern for the needs of our fellowman, and unbelief in the promises of old. It is impatience with time, immaturity of thought, and impoliteness to God.” William Ward.

It is when we have something greater in us than our present situation that we are able to be content with life and continue to live it to the fullest. It is often in living it to the fullest that we are able to change or grow out of a situation that would cripple a lesser person. He was consumed by his mission to reveal to the Gentiles that they were included in the mystery of messianic redemption.

Another reason Paul could have such an attitude was that he viewed himself through a set of spiritual lenses.

WE CAN NOW SEE OUR PAST SINS AND FAILURES THROUGH THE TELESCOPE OF GRACE. (vv. 7-9) “I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God’s grace given me through the working of his power. Although I am less than the least of all God’s people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things.”

Probably, none of us has ever done anything so wrong or have a failure considered so great as that which Paul lived with. What was it? When he met Christ on the road to Damascus, he was persecuting the church. He had authority to arrest, beat, imprison and possibly even to kill believers in Christ to stop this new message of hope from spreading over the world. As a young and ambitious rabbi he was doing this to climb the ladder in the religious hierarchy of the day. And then he met Jesus and everything changed. But he never got over his opposition to the gospel as a young man. But he did learn to see who and what he was through the eyes of grace.

Follow Paul’s progression of thought about himself. Earlier in his ministry he said of himself, “I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God was with me.” (I Corinthians 15:9-10) In writing to the Ephesians he says, “I am the least of God’s people.” (v.3:8) One of the last letters he wrote was to Timothy which says, “I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst.” (I Timothy 1:12-15) Do you see his growth in grace? He progresses upward from the least of the Apostles to the least of God’s people to the worst of sinners. “Wait a minute, Pastor, you say, that he is progressing upward?” Yes, although the language is downward, the spiritual growth is upward. The closer we get to the holiness of God, the clearer we see ourselves and the more glorious is his grace.

Satan will try to use our past sins and failures to cripple us and to tell us that we are not worthy to serve the Lord. But when we see our past through the eyes of grace it changes everything.

It is said that Martin Luther once envisioned Satan standing at the foot of his bed. He held in his hand a piece of paper with a long list of Luther’s sins and was reading them off one by one to him. He acknowledged each one but when Satan had finished reading the list, Luther said, “But there is one thing not written there. The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses from all sin!”

So, do not lose heart when your past is brought to mind. You have been given grace in Christ. You have been cleansed from the act of sin and no longer are you held accountable to God for it.

The final reason we should not lose heart he gives us in this passage is

WE CAN TRUST GOD’S PURPOSES FOR OUR LIVES AND FOR THE KINGDOM (vv.10-13). “His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. I ask you therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are for your glory.”

The church does not exist for itself. Although we find our place of service here and receive our religious education here and draw our strength and inspiration from here, the church exists for God’s glory. When the angels see what is being done in the church their worship of God is enhanced and they rejoice and glorify him. God’s purpose in revealing the mysteries of our spiritual lives is in no way hindered by prevailing circumstances. In fact, when we draw upon his strength the outcome is even greater than it would have been otherwise.

God’s purpose for you will be completed if you allow his grace to work powerfully in you. If you trust his word and grow spiritually strong in the weak times of life the glory which you will bring to God will be celebrated in the heavenly realms. God’s purpose governs the ages and only his people can see it.

Did you notice verse 12? "In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence." We can approach our Lord with unrestricted access through Christ. We can tell him all of our troubles. We can present to him all of our needs. We can ask him to help us to live up to the full measure of his grace. We can know that his purpose for our lives will be accomplished even though we have what we humanly call "life reversals."

"Colin Chapman, in *The Case for Christianity*, quotes Ugandan bishop Festo Kivengere's account of the 1973 execution by firing squad of three men from his diocese: February 10 began as a sad day for us in Kabale. People were commanded to come to the stadium and witness the execution. Death permeated the atmosphere. A silent crowd of about three thousand was there to watch. I had permission from the authorities to speak to the men before they died, and two of my fellow ministers were with me. They brought the men in a truck and unloaded them. They were handcuffed and their feet were chained. The firing squad stood at attention.

As we walked into the center of the stadium, I was wondering what to say. How do you give the gospel to doomed men who are probably seething with rage? We approached them from behind, and as they turned to look at us, what a sight! Their faces were all alight with an unmistakable glow and radiance.

Before we could say anything, one of them burst out: "Bishop, thank you for coming! I wanted to tell you. The day I was arrested, in my prison cell, I asked the Lord Jesus to come into my heart. He came in and forgave me all my sins! Heaven is now open, and there is nothing between me and my God! Please tell my wife and children that I am going to be with Jesus. Ask them to accept him into their lives as I did."

The other two men told similar stories, excitedly raising their hands, which rattled their handcuffs. I felt that what I needed to do was to talk to the soldiers, not to the condemned. So I translated what the men had said into a language the soldiers understood. The military men were standing there with guns cocked and bewilderment on their faces. They were so dumbfounded that they forgot to put the hoods over the men's faces!

The three faced the firing squad standing close together. They looked toward the people and began to wave, handcuffs and all. The people waved back. Then shots were fired, and the three were with Jesus. We stood in front of them, our own hearts throbbing with joy, mingled with tears. It was a day never to be forgotten. Though dead, the men spoke loudly to all of Kigezi District and beyond, so that there was an upsurge of life in Christ, which challenges death and defeats it. The next Sunday, I was preaching to a huge crowd in the home town of one of the executed men. Again, the feel of death was over the congregation. But when I gave them the testimony of their man, and how he died, there erupted a great song of praise to Jesus! Many turned to the Lord there. "

Praise Be to His Name!