

Opening Words

God doesn't want us to come to him with head down but with head up, not dragging our feet but stepping forward with firmness, not groveling in the dirt, but bowing in adoration.

143 Eph The Eternal Purpose of God

We are at the end of this amazing section of Scripture we know as Ephesians 3:1-13. I shared with you that Paul began this section intending to pray, but he didn't get to his prayer until verse 14! That's a 13-verse interruption. Aren't you glad? Think of all the treasures we would have missed if Paul had just gone into his prayer – Paul the prisoner of Christ for the Gentiles, Paul the steward of the mystery, Paul the preacher and Paul the light bringer.

Today we are going to look at verses 11-13 but to get the sense of Paul's words here we really need to back up to verse 8. Let's listen to Paul's words.

To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ,⁹ and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things;¹⁰ 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*.¹¹ *This was* in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord,¹² in whom we have boldness and confident access through faith in Him.¹³ Therefore I ask you not to lose heart at my tribulations on your behalf, for they are your glory.

All that God did, Paul said, all that he did through Christ and through the giving of gifts was so that Paul could preach and bring to light what God is doing and how he is doing it and so that God's manifold wisdom might be made known to the powers. Paul says all this is in accordance with the eternal purpose which he carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord.

God had an eternal purpose, Paul said, and I have found that truth to be one of the most inspiring truths in my life. To know that I am part of a plan that was formed in the mind of God before time began and that he is now carrying out in history, including my own lifetime, is, well, quite motivating, to say the least.

I think everyone wants to feel like or think that they are part of something much bigger than themselves. Life gets so dreary, so easily and quickly – even if you have the freedom and money to do a bunch of fun things. Even those fun things get old after a while and we can go from one pleasure to another to another and discover that life is not about pleasure but it is about accomplishing a great purpose. People cast about, looking for some cause they can give themselves to, something bigger than themselves, something that will outlast them, something that will make a difference, and something that will continue in the generations to come.

Look no further than this verse. Paul said he was involved in something that he described as an eternal purpose. Can't get any bigger than that! And by implication, if Paul was involved in that, so are we.

Earlier in his book, Paul hinted at this eternal purpose. In verse 4 he said God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world. In verse 5 he said that God predestined us to adoption into his family and in verse 11 he said he predestined us in Christ to receive an inheritance. These verses show us that we worship a God and we follow a Lord who had a plan before time began and not even the rebellion of angels and men has stopped God from carrying it out. I find comfort in that and I find a sense of purpose and destiny.

In Ephesians 1:11 Paul said that God works out all things after His purpose and according to the counsel of His will and here in Ephesians 3:11 he finishes off his great section describing his preaching and enlightening ministry by saying that all that Christ was doing through him was in accordance with this eternal purpose. Again, I can't think of anything more fulfilling.

I know many times in my life I feel like I have made wrong choices and wasted time. I think I have engaged in futile efforts and dead-end projects. Have you ever felt that way? What would it be like to get to the end of your life, though, and realize that your life did have meaning? That God redeemed all of those bad choices and futile days and that when you were serving him he used it all to advance his purposes? It would make you feel good, wouldn't it?

I believe that is how we should think and act and feel. We should believe, as followers of Christ, if we are following him that our lives do count and that he uses our efforts to advance the greatest cause in the world, the greatest cause known to mankind, and that is to proclaim the unfathomable riches of Christ to the world.

After all, that is what Paul said in 2:10 when he said God created us in Him to perform good works and that he prepared them beforehand. Most likely, this is another reference to his plan that he formed before time began – his eternal plan.

There is another way to translate this verse – all these things happened, Paul said, in accordance with the purpose of the ages. This translation emphasizes that God has had a single purpose throughout all epochs and ages of history. And this emphasis puts our lives and our work in line with all those who have gone before us. It puts us in line with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It puts us in line with Moses, Joshua, and Samuel. It puts us in line with David, Solomon, and Hezekiah. It puts us in line with the prophets, with Ezra, and with Nehemiah. All the saints of all the ages were carrying out the single purpose of God for the ages.

It looked different at different times. There were different emphases and different tasks at hand. Nehemiah had to build a wall. Solomon built a temple. David consolidated a scattered bunch of tribes into a united confederation. Moses led the people out of Egypt. Abraham believed the promises. All had their role in life to play and it all contributed to the advance of God's great purpose for the whole world. And you and I now have our lives to live and we can do our part.

Sometimes, I know, it seems that our efforts are so feeble, so small. We wonder if they make a difference. We wonder if anyone cares. Sometimes we may wonder if God even notices. But he does and he cares and he uses us in ways greater than we can imagine; to advance the purpose of the ages.

This is why Jesus told the disciples, just a few hours before he would be arrested, put on trial, and executed, “remain in me and I will remain in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it remains in the vine so you cannot bear fruit unless you remain in me.” This wasn’t some mystical teaching. This was Jesus telling his men that if they wanted their lives to count, they should not abandon him even when things get bad, as they did. They must remain in him. And after the dark days of the crucifixion, Jesus rose and regathered these men and sent them on a mission that changed the course of history. They had their role to play in advancing the purpose of the ages and you and I have a chance to advance this purpose too with the gifts and the time and the resources he has given us.

And so, let’s lift our heads. Let’s put a courageous smile on our faces and serve God every day in every place in big ways and in small ways. Let’s follow what Paul said in verse 12 – look at this verse: “In Christ we have boldness and confident access through faith in Him.” We can come boldly to God. In Christ, we can come with confidence to God!

This has been life changing for me. I remember years ago when I read 2 Corinthians 3:4-5, “Such confidence we have through Christ toward God. ⁵ Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as *coming* from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God.” I still remember reading that and how it was like a light that came on in my mind and heart.

You see, I have tended not to be a confident person, believe it or not. I have tended to fear failure and to depend too much on receiving the approval of others. These imperfections in my character hindered me greatly but when I read these verses I realized I could have confidence toward God through Jesus Christ.

God doesn’t want me to come to him with head down but with head up, not dragging my feet but stepping forward with firmness, not groveling in the dirt, but bowing in adoration. When we approach him the wrong way I have just described, we minimize what Christ has done for us. We come to God as if Christ did not die for us, rise for us, and take his throne for us. We come to God as if we have not died with Christ, been raised with Christ, and been enthroned with Christ. We come to God as if his grace does not exist.

But when we come to God with boldness and confident access, even if we are stumbling and having trouble, and if we come with humility and pointing to our Savior, pointing to the one who is Lord of all, God is delighted with us because that maximizes the work of Christ in our lives. That honors God who gave up Christ so that we might come to him to obtain more grace and mercy for our lives.

And so, brothers and sisters, come to God boldly and come to God confidently. This is what Paul learned to do and he wrote this for our benefit.

These realities also helped Paul with one other experience. They gave him strength to endure his suffering. Paul closes this section by saying, “Therefore I ask you not to lose heart at my tribulations on your behalf, for they are your glory.”

Oh, the tribulations that Paul went through, and here he was still experiencing them, now in a Roman prison and all because he wanted to take a life-giving, reconciling message to the world. That must have made God’s people sad to see him suffer as he did. But Paul said, “Don’t lose heart! Everything I am going through is for your benefit and for your eventual glory!”

And though he doesn’t say it here, Paul was probably thinking this, “if it all results in your glorification, it will result in my glorification as well.” Paul was looking to the end, to the great day when God’s eternal purpose would come to completion, when the mystery of God would be finished, and all of God’s people would receive the inheritance and unite in joy in the presence of God.

I’m looking forward to that, and I hope you are too!