

Feb 9/25 Leader's Guide

Ephesians 3:1-13 Living out of an Alternative Reality

1. Read Acts 21:17 – 22:29 for background on why Paul is in prison. How do these verses help us to understand Paul? His mission amongst the gentiles?

This is simply a starter question to get you thinking about the details that stand behind Paul's call to be apostle to the gentiles and the situation he finds himself in as he writes.

Some things to ensure come to the surface...

- 1) *The suffering he has faced – you can likely bring in the reality that after this riot he is imprisoned in Caesarea where the Roman Governor hopes he will pay a bribe – he refuses – 2 years pass – he asks for his case to be heard in Rome – a year journey – two ship wrecks – a winter in Malta – when he arrives emperor Nero is too busy to see him – 2 more years pass – Acts which covers this story ends abruptly there – most assume because he died in that prison.*
- 2) *The instigation for the riot is the crowd's response to the aspect of the good news that is about including gentiles in the people of God*

Read Ephesians 3:1-13

2. In his suffering Paul looks to Jesus – I am a prisoner of Christ Jesus. What would be the fruit of putting our focus on Jesus in the midst of our suffering?

So often in our suffering we focus on the things that hem us in, that hold us back. I am a prisoner of these circumstances, this person, this job, this marriage, these political circumstances. To focus in our suffering on Jesus – I am a prisoner of Jesus Christ is to say – nothing – not this person, this job, this marriage, these political circumstances will ever be able to frustrate King Jesus' will for my life, my world.

It crushes a Christian myth, a Christianized Karma, bad people suffer, good people don't. In this mindset when suffering hits we ask – what did I do to deserve this? We take a moral inventory trying to find the thing that has brought about our suffering so we can stop it and make the suffering end. But if in our suffering we look at Jesus – we see him there on the cross suffering not because he is outside of God's will but because he is right at the heart of it.

3. How does he see his suffering being for the benefit of the Ephesians?

I (Tim) saw in this the suffering that was faced by those who fought against apartheid, those who fought for civil rights. They did so by non-violent means, they did so by way of the cross, laying down their lives for others in self-giving love. In response they were threatened, beaten, persecuted and arrested. But all it served to do was to further expose to the world the evil that

they were resisting. In a sense it could be said that their suffering was part of the victory. This is how Paul sees his suffering. He is suffering for the benefit of this community, for their glory.

4. Paul uses a word for suffering that means crushing pressure, the pressure that comes from clashing kingdoms. When the kingdom of Jesus meets the kingdom of this world there will be a clash. This is the kind of suffering that followers of Jesus can expect. Where do you see this type of suffering in your life? Our world?

This is simply a reflection question to get us into the heart of the suffering that followers of Jesus can expect. This is the suffering of being on the leading edge of this clashing of kingdoms.

5. (4,8,12) Paul in these verse displays both deep confidence and humility. From the surrounding verses where does his confidence and humility come from?

His confidence is not in his intellect or wisdom but in Jesus. The higher his view of Jesus the deeper his confidence. The higher his view of Jesus, the deeper his humility.

5. Paul's confidence ultimately lies in the mystery. The biblical word mystery – and the English word mystery mean almost the opposite. In English we think of mystery as something we have to discover because it's hidden. In the Biblical sense a mystery is something revealed because we would never discover it on our own. So, for Paul this mystery has been revealed and clearly can be seen by all. What is the mystery he wants his readers to see? (See Ephesians 1:9-10). What impact would having such confidence in this mystery have upon us as we navigate life?

The mystery he wants them to see is that God is reconciling all things in Jesus. That Jesus is coming again to make everything new. That all of creation would pulsate with his goodness, his love, his justice, his peace...

This will be the future of our world, for this future rests in the hands of the one through whom all things were made. Jesus. When faced with the evil in our world we can stand against it, we can work towards something new, secure in the hope that Jesus is coming again to flood the earth with new creation.

6. (10) What does Paul say is the purpose of the church in our world? What does this look like practically?

To display the manifold wisdom of God. Manifold was a word used by classical Greek writers to speak of a beautiful embroidered cloth, or a garden full of a variety of colourful flowers. It was a word not so much referencing the size of God's wisdom but rather the beauty of it.

When the church lives in light of the mystery – God reconciling all things in Jesus – replacing hate with love – conflict with peace – bitterness with forgiveness – when the church becomes more and more a community where divisions are healed – when the church lives in anticipation of Jesus' future reign – becoming a foretaste of God's future - the wisdom of God is displayed.

The rulers and authorities in the heavenly places will see it.

What does that mean? N.T. Wright puts it well when he says - both the earthly authorities and their shadowy heavenly counterparts – the demonic realities that stand behind the brokenness of our world - always tend to create societies and social structures in their own flat, boring image, monochrome, uniform and one-dimensional. Worse: they tend to marginalize or kill people or groups who don't fit their narrow band of acceptability.

The church is to be – by the very fact of its existence, both an announcement to the world that there is a different way to be human – and a warning to the demonic forces that stand behind the evil in our world that their time is up – that Jesus' victory is sure – that new creation is indeed coming.

7. (8-9) What does Paul see as his role in making that a reality for the church? What does that say to us about how we can live into God's purpose for the church?

Here is an unedited portion of the sermon that reflects on this question:

Now most of us would look at the church and say – really – do we really do that (display God's manifold wisdom to the rules and authorities in the heavenly places)? – Paul is under no illusion – he is constantly writing to churches offering course correction – how does he do so? – he tells us here – vs. 8 – he preaches the unsearchable riches of Christ – living into the calling requires that we look at Jesus – and continue to look at Jesus – and look to Jesus even more - for you will never get to the bottom of his grace – never get to the end of his love – you will never find the boundary of his power – look to Jesus – look to Jesus – look to Jesus – for the more and more we see Jesus – the more and more we are drawn into this alternative reading of reality – and by his Spirit are enabled to live out of it.