

Part of Something Bigger (Ephesians 3:1-13)

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I think it was in the early 1990's, Bill Murray starred in a film called *Groundhog Day*. February 2, in most parts of the United States is the day on which, according to legend, the groundhog first emerges from hibernation. If it's a sunny day and the groundhog sees its shadow, six more weeks of wintry weather are predicted.

In the film Bill Murray plays a weatherman who's assigned to cover the annual Groundhog Day event. He hates this assignment and wants to get it over with as soon as possible. But he wakes up the next day and finds that he's in a time loop.

Every day is now Groundhog Day for him. That sense of *deja vu*, as though the exact same thing has happened before. The basic idea of the movie is, "He's having the worst day of his life, over and over..."

Do you ever have the feeling that it's Groundhog Day, the same day of your life over and over? Years ago someone said, "The hardest thing about life is that it's so daily." Life can easily become a drudgery, when our hearts are really longing for more. We want to be part of something bigger than ourselves, and do more than get up every day to repeat the same things over and over.

Some of you might say, "I'd quite like for my life to be a drudgery." Things may be so bad in your life right now that you actually miss when your biggest problem was boredom.

If you are struggling with either problem - drudgery or trials that are worse than drudgery - then today's passage may be a help to you.

The passage is really a digression or a detour in Paul's letter. The apostle Paul is writing to a church and describing how God's great power is at work among them.

He begins to pray for them, and as he begins he gets sidetracked. It's important to see what sidetracks him, so that we understand why he writes what **he's** about to write. We'll then see how relevant this passage is to our own lives as well.

So what sidetracks Paul? Paul writes, "*For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—*" and then he breaks off and switches topics. You have to ask, what made him lose his train of thought and take this big detour?

You get a hint to the answer if you look at how he concludes his digression in verse 13: "*I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.*" This is **important** to note if we're going to understand this passage and why Paul wrote it.

The problem that prompted Paul to write this passage is that he is in jail and suffering. He's a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and he's suffering. Paul realises that this could be very discouraging to his readers.

In the book of Acts we are told that Paul was seized by an angry mob, beaten, and bound in chains. People plotted to kill him. Some swore an oath that they would not eat or drink until they had killed Paul.

Within a few years of writing this, Paul would be martyred in Rome. This raises big questions and big doubts. The very reason Paul gets distracted is because he is in the middle of major trials, and these trials are likely to affect the churches that know and love Paul. They're likely to get discouraged by them too.

So what do you do when you're in the middle of trials that discourage you? What do you do when you are caught in the middle of trials that are not only yours, but that are dragging the people around you down?

This is relevant because many of us have to deal with stuff that overwhelms us, or maybe we're just dealing with the discouragement of daily living which can cause us to lose hope.

Paul gives us an insight into two truths that give him confidence and hope even in the middle of these trials:

That he is part of something bigger

Read verses 2 to 7 again with me:

Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly.

In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.

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 the Lord's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless 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.

As Paul wrote this letter, he was probably under house arrest in Rome. If the average person had met Paul, they probably would have seen him as nothing more than a common prisoner awaiting trial. But as you read this passage, you get a sense that Paul understands that he is part of something much bigger.

He writes about being a steward of God's grace. Paul sees himself as having a God-given role in making the good news known to others, specifically to the Gentiles who hadn't heard it yet.

This gospel never ceased to amaze Paul. He's already told us that what the gospel **is** in chapter two.

First: God has taken spiritually dead people and has made us alive by grace through faith. *"But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in our sin—it is by grace you have been saved"* (Ephesians 2:4-5).

Second: God has already begun to unite all things together again in Christ, and he's begun in the church. He's done this by breaking through all the barriers that divide us to make us into a new humanity in Christ.

He alludes to this again in this chapter, verses 5 and 6: God has revealed something now that nobody in previous generations understood.

Yes, they understood that Gentiles would be included in God's plan. But nobody ever thought that Gentiles would one day be on completely equal footing before God. We are, Paul says in verse 6, *"heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus."*

In other words, Paul realised that he was part of something much bigger: part of the plan of God who created all things.

And notice the change that it made:

He calls himself a *"prisoner of Jesus Christ"* in verse 1. Not a prisoner of Caesar, but a prisoner of Jesus. He could see that God, not Nero, was in control, and had put him right where he wanted him.

He writes *"on behalf of you Gentiles."* Paul had been arrested because of his association with Gentiles. He could see that his suffering had a purpose. He was giving his life to a purpose that transcends his imprisonment.

He spoke of becoming a *"a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace"* (verse 7). Most of the time, I think we tend to talk about what we do for God. But Paul didn't. He saw ministry **not as** his gift to God, but God's gift to him.

And then notice his humility in verse 8. He calls himself *"the least of all the Lord's people."* Paul knew that he was in need of God's grace as much as any person who has ever followed Jesus.

Because Paul grasped the good news and his part in it, he had confidence and hope even in the middle of trials. He knew he was part of something bigger, and it gave him hope even under house arrest.

Understanding the gospel gives us confidence and hope in lives trials.

We all need to live for something bigger than ourselves. *"There is woven inside each of us a desire for something more - a craving to be part of something bigger, greater,*

and more profound than our relatively meaningless day-to-day existence." That longing to be part of something more in your life - that's God given.

What is it? Well, it's the gospel. Understanding the gospel allowed Paul to see his life completely differently. The same thing can happen to you and me. Instead of seeing ourselves as a teacher working for the school, we can see ourselves as a teacher working for Jesus Christ.

When we suffer, we can see that even through our suffering there may be purpose.

When we serve God, we can see ministry as a gift from God rather than an obligation or something we're doing for God. And it will give us a humility, because we'll marvel that God has chosen us- even though we are the least of all of God's people.

Understanding the gospel gives us confidence and hope in all lives trials.

If you ever go to the south coast, stare out over the English Channel and imagine what happened there in the spring of 1940. Hitler **had** the Allied Forces in a corner and was getting ready to invade Great Britain. His troops were closing in on the Allies in what was going to be an easy kill.

Nearly a quarter of a million young British soldiers and over 100,000 allied troops faced capture or death, and the Royal Navy could only save a small fraction of that number.

But a bizarre fleet of ships appeared on the horizon of the English Channel. Trawlers, tugs, fishing boats, lifeboats, yachts, pleasure craft, an island ferry named Gracie Fields, and even the America's Cup challenger *Endeavor*, all manned by civilian sailors, went to the rescue.

This strange armada eventually rescued 338,682 men and returned them home to the shores of Britain, as pilots of the Royal Air Force jockeyed with the German Luftwaffe in the skies above the channel. It was one of the most remarkable naval operations in history.

And for those few days they were more than trawlers and fishing boats, and they could put up with all kinds of trials because they had a purpose. And you and I can have the same thing happen in our life. It's the gospel that gives us purpose that we're part of something much bigger even in our trials.

There's a second truth that kept Paul going.

That the church is part of something bigger

Not only did Paul see his life as part of something bigger, but he looked around and saw that as the mystery of the gospel was being revealed, God was accomplishing something that blows the minds.

He writes:

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 that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Ephesians 3:10-11)

The word manifold in the Greek means many- coloured.

It's going to blow our minds. , Paul wrote, the very existence of the church has a much higher purpose than we realise. It's an amazing thing that spiritually dead people are raised to new life, and that former enemies become family with each other within the church. It's such a big deal that it is the way that God has chosen to reveal his wisdom in its rich variety.

The human genome shows that God is wise. Scientists are unraveling all the ways that information is stored in our DNA that makes us who we are. It's amazing. The universe shows God's wisdom. It reveals God's wisdom to humans.

But look at how God has chosen to reveal his wisdom: through the church. As somebody has said, the history of the Christian church has become a school for angels. Evil power thought it had Jesus killed once and for all. All of his followers were scattered. But he rose from the dead.

But then he left.

You can't expect much from a small group of followers who had never amounted to much. But then Peter - yes, that Peter - got up to preach, and thousands joined the church. But those who opposed him threw everything they could at the church, but the church continued to spread throughout the Roman Empire, so that this obscure, marginal movement became the dominant religious force in the western world for centuries.

The very existence of the church is a sign to opposing powers that their authority has been broken, and that their final defeat is imminent. God shows through the church that his purposes are being fulfilled and they're moving toward their climax.

As someone wrote, the church is "God's pilot scheme for the reconciled universe of the future." God has chosen to display his wisdom -in all its dimensions through, of all things, the church. Doesn't that blow my mind.

But all this has huge implications for how we see church. A lot of people have a faith that's all about us and Jesus and has nothing to do with the church. But that is not what you read here in Ephesians. The church, according to Paul, is central to history. It's central to the gospel.

"The church is good news - of a new society as well as of a new life," . The church is a showcase to the entire universe of God's wisdom - in all of its variety. This should make all the difference in how we see the church.

And because Paul saw his life as something bigger, and the church as something much bigger, he wrote:

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 your glory.

Because of all of this, we have access to God that's unhindered by other powers. We can have assurance that even during suffering there is a bigger purpose. Understanding the gospel gives us confidence and hope in life's trials.

I don't know all that you're going through this morning, but I know that if you are a follower of Jesus Christ, that you are part of something much bigger, and this can give you confidence and hope even in the middle of your difficulties.

And if you're not yet a follower of Christ, then the good news is that the gospel is about taking people just like you and me and making us part of something much bigger, something that can give a prisoner, a cancer sufferer, a divorcee, a doubter, a struggler, a sinner - confidence and hope, even in the middle of life's difficulties.

We are all part of something much bigger and are called to risk life in the depth of grace. So be encouraged! Amen