

“The Successful Christian Life”

Ephesians 3:1-13

10 in our series on Paul’s letter to the Ephesians

December 2, 2012

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Prayer

God, you have come to us in Jesus the Christ, Emmanuel. And Lord Jesus, we thank you that you said that wherever two or three are gathered in your name, you are there in that place with them. And we want you to be here. Lord God, I would like it if you would preach the sermon this morning, because, Father, it’s on Ephesians 3, and there’s some strange, wild stuff in there. Lord, you are strange and wild, and I know you want to make us strange and wild—make us holy. So, Father, I pray that you would help us. I pray that you would open our hearts and help us to believe the wonders of your grace, and that you would guard the words that come out of my mouth so that if any of them aren’t of you, nobody in this place would remember them, that they would just drop into oblivion. But, Lord God, whatever is of you, would you pierce our hearts? Would you change us, would you make us like yourself? Would you help us now, Lord God, to preach? In Jesus’ name, amen.

Introduction

Movie clip from *Indiana Jones: Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

[An Arab swordsman in black, wielding a huge sword approaches Indiana Jones. The man tosses the sword from hand to hand, spinning it around, grinning at Jones. With little effort, Jones reaches for his gun and shoots the man.]

Sermon

I’ve always loved that clip and have even used it to describe the Christian life. Just like Indiana Jones, we’re each in a battle with “principalities and powers of evil.” We get so stressed, and the situation appears so hopeless, yet Christ has given us weapons, and He wants us to wield the weapons. In Ephesians 1:19, Paul prays that we would know “the immeasurable greatness of power in us who believe.”

Since we’re preaching through Ephesians, I really hope that you are taking time to read Ephesians. I also hope you’re taking time to read Acts 19-20. In Acts 19-20, Luke recounts Paul’s ministry in Ephesus. When Paul arrived in Ephesus, he baptized the Ephesian believers in the Holy Spirit. Then for three months he taught in the synagogue, and for two years he taught in the Hall of Tyrannus, such that (Acts 19:10-12, 19):

All the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, Jew and Greek. And God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, so that even handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were carried away to the sick, and their diseases left them, and the evil spirits came out of them.... A number of those who had practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. Their value was estimated at 50,000 pieces of silver.

A piece of silver (the drachma) was a day's wage. We're talking millions of dollars here. Burned them. This would have had an impact on the economy. In fact, a silversmith in Ephesus named Demetrius led an uprising against Paul, because Paul was wrecking the economy of Ephesus. Ephesus was the site of the temple of Artemis, the Asian mother goddess, and because so many had turned to Jesus, they no longer bought silver shrines to Artemis made by Demetrius.

Well, I'm just pointing out that Paul had armor and weapons of immense power. In Acts 20, he even raised a dead guy named Eutychus. Paul preached so long that Eutychus fell asleep and then fell out of the window dead. In other words, Paul killed him with a long-winded sermon and then raised him from the dead by the power of God. Awesome!

It's easy to argue that outside of Jesus, Paul had the most successful ministry in all of history. Paul lived the victorious, Christian life. He lived the successful, Christian life.

Well, probably sometime around 61 or 62 A.D., about six years after his time in Ephesus, Paul wrote to the Ephesians. This week we pick up the letter at Ephesians 3:1: "For this reason...."—God uniting all things in Christ; tearing down "the dividing wall of hostility"—stuff we've been preaching. "For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner...." Did you catch that?

- Paul, who lives such a victorious, powerful, successful, Christian life...
- Paul, who raised the dead and was miraculously delivered from the Philippian prison just a little before he arrived in Ephesus...
- Paul, who was the first ever to do the "miracle prayer cloth thing," is not staying at the Ramada Inn. He's in prison. He's in prison in Rome for violating the dividing wall in the temple in Jerusalem, the wall separating Jews and Gentiles.

Ephesians 3:1-3:

For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles— assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace [that's a stewardship of handing out his master's stuff for free] that was given to me for you, how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly.

"By revelation" is literally "by apocalypses," which means: "unveiling." Paul had a revelation, and in chapter one, he prayed that the Ephesians would have a revelation too. And, 20 or 30 years after Paul died, John would send a book to Ephesus from the prison island of Patmos, a book titled, "The Revelation of Jesus Christ." It was not titled, "The Calendar of Freaky Weird Stuff in 2013." It's titled, "The Revelation of Jesus." It reveals Jesus. And it reveals principalities and powers...like the Beast from the land and the Beast from the sea and the Great Harlot, all under the dominion of Satan the dragon. It reveals how they are all conquered by a lamb who is also a Word, a *Logos*.

He conquers, and those with Him conquer...all things.

Ephesians 3:4:

When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs....

“The Gentiles.” Who are “the Gentiles”?

For a Jew, “the Gentiles” are “the others”—the people on the other side of the dividing wall. The Gentiles were the “not chosen.” They were the people that God had “not chosen for his own possession.” They were the people God had “not chosen to save and bring into the Promised Land.” For, you see, God had promised to save Israel, even all Israel, even the dry bones (Ezekiel 37:12). Even the dry bones He would raise from Sheol and bring into the land.

And now Paul writes, “This is the mystery hidden for ages.”

- “Chosen People (I’m talking to you, Chosen People!), the Not Chosen People—the Gentiles—are your brothers and sisters and fellow heirs.”
- “Isaac (father of Israel), Ishmael (father of the Arabs) is your brother.”
- “Jacob, Esau is your brother and fellow heir.”
- “Judah, the lost tribes (the Samaritans) are your family.”
- “The people on the other side of the wall are your family. And that family is your inheritance, the kingdom of God your Father.”

And now something truly amazing happens in Ephesians, something I believe has been largely hidden from the institutional church ever since she began serving the principalities of Rome around 600 A.D. Paul begins referring to Gentile believers as “chosen,” and those that don’t believe in Christ as “the Gentiles.” In Ephesians 4:17, writing to Greeks (that is, Gentiles in the flesh), Paul writes, “You must no longer walk as the Gentiles do in the futility of their minds, darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God.”

For Paul, the Gentiles are now the children of wrath, the unbelievers, the un-saved, the people on the other side of the “Evangelical dividing wall of hostility,” the people destined for the valley of dry bones or are already there. Now listen to the verse again:

Ephesians 3:6:

This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs; members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

Not “some Gentiles” but “the Gentiles.”

This mystery is that the un-chosen are chosen in Christ Jesus.
This mystery is that the unbelievers are fellow heirs in Christ Jesus.
And yet we know that apart from faith in Jesus, none can center the kingdom of God.
And many die without confessing faith, so how can this be?

Well, I can't explain all God's judgment, but in the next chapter (Ephesians 4), Paul tells us Jesus descended into the depths of the earth and "led a host of captives free." In Corinthians, he talks about baptizing people on behalf of the dead. Peter writes, "Jesus preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly did not obey." Then in I Peter 4:6: "The gospel was preached even to those who were dead, that though judged in the flesh the way people are, they might live in the spirit the way God does." And Jesus said something even more amazing: "The gates of Sheol—the gates of Hades—the gates of Hell will not prevail against my church."

Jesus expects us to storm the gates of Hell!

And now I want to briefly share something with you that kind of blows my mind, and you may not believe it. And that's okay. You don't need to believe me; just believe the Word of God. But for about 17 years now on various occasions, I've prayed for people oppressed with demons. And in some of those people, the oppression was so severe that the spirit would seize the person and speak through the person. Once the spirit was cast out, the person couldn't remember what had happened.

About 15 years ago, my wife started praying with me, and I discovered that she had an amazing but troubling gift. Sometimes God would allow her to see and hear what was going on in these other dimensions before they'd manifest to me in my space and time. Now, if you can't believe that, maybe you can believe this: My wife is the church cleaning lady. That much can be empirically verified. But this building has needed rather extensive cleaning. So from time to time, Susan will come get me in my office and say, "Peter, come help me. Come pray with me." For she's heard voices on the other side of a locked door or seen the form of a child huddled under the stairs.

Two years ago in September, I preached three sermons entitled, "Jesus in the Land of Ghosts," and I freaked people out. You can watch or read the sermons on our website. Well, to make a very, very long story very short... Through some amazing occurrences, even including video footage, we discovered that some evil spirits had been assigned to this building, and that this building was built on an old Masonic cemetery. After a bunch of prayer and the help of a bunch of people, I believe those evil spirits have been bound and cast out. Yet over the last two years, we've encountered ghosts. I don't know how else to say it...but dead people. Demons will react violently to the name of Jesus. But ghosts will react like confused people because they are confused people. It's imperative that you never seek the dead for information. But what's a guy to do when they're bothering his wife, the church cleaning lady?

So, like I was saying, Susan will come get me, and I won't ask for information. I'll preach the Gospel. I don't hear or see them, but others in our church have. I could tell a multitude of stories, but for now just this: On one occasion after hearing a voice on the other side of a locked door that leads to a large, empty space (a room) under this stage, Susan and I had communion and then prayed over that room. In prayer, Susan saw figures hiding in the dark. So I prayed that Jesus would show Himself to them, and He did. But He was so brilliant that they would cover their eyes and hide. And so I preached, I proclaimed the Good News, that Jesus had died for the sins of the whole world...that He loved them, and they could trust Him. And then Jesus

opened a brilliant door in the wall on the side of that dark room under the stage. Some came to Jesus and walked through the door with Him, and some remained. Then Susan heard Jesus say, "I'm leaving the door open for those that will still come through." And then she heard a voice. It said, "Children of the desolate, you are desolate no more."

Now, I believe that the building has been cleansed, and I believe that the dead have walked into life through a door under this stage. And I believe it is because they hear you singing. I believe that your faith, Church, has announced God's victory to the principalities and powers, and that Christ in you has set the captives free. And I know that some will think I've totally lost it, and some don't know me. I know that's freaky weird. So please don't feel like you have to believe me. However, I earnestly hope that you'd believe the Bible.

Ephesians 3:6-10:

This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs; members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power. To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities [principalities and powers in the King James Version] in the heavenly places.

Wow! Paul told us in Ephesians 1:10 that God's plan is to *anakephalaió*—unite all things in Christ, breaking down the dividing wall of hostility, and now in Ephesians 3:9, announcing His manifold wisdom (His victory) to "the principalities and powers in the heavenly places" through the Church...which is you. And you thought that through you He just wanted to have a bake sale and deliver a pamphlet to the people across the street. Through you, He delivers a message to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places. And Paul is going to go on to say, "We battle not against flesh and blood but against principalities and powers in the heavenly places."

Do you understand?

Flesh and blood is not your enemy. The people on the other side of the dividing wall are not your enemies. Those people are your prize. It's the principalities and powers that convince you that those people are your enemies, so that instead of liberating the captives you'll assault the captives and build walls for the principalities and powers.

So what are the principalities and powers in the heavenly places? Well, it's a fascinating topic that we'll need to spend more time on later. But in case you're interested...

In 1962, the theologian Hendrik Berkhof published perhaps the most systematic and influential book on the topic. It's titled, *Christ and the Powers*. It seems that by "rulers and authorities" Paul meant "rulers and authorities." He meant governments...but not simply human governments, not Barak Obama or Mitt Romney, but the spiritual forces behind governments, and not just political governments, but systems of thought and structures of activity. He meant sociologies, psychologies, and economies. Paul believed that at least most, if not all, of those powers were created by God but are now fallen and corrupted. He believed that they are spiritual, the gods of this age.

Sociologists like Emile Durkheim write about concepts like “collective effervescence” and the idea that a crowd can become more than the sum of its parts, that collective psychology has a reality of its own. And Paul would call that reality a principality or power.

So when Demetrius the silver smith in Ephesus started a riot against Paul, it really wasn't simply a man named Demetrius but a principality associated with the goddess Artemis, a fallen angelic or demonic entity assigned to Ephesus to keep the Ephesians in bondage. Just as there were demonic entities assigned to souls somehow trapped in this building.

Entities related to Masonic oaths.
Entities related to racism and the KKK.
Entities even related to human religion.

When John the apostle sees the Beast from the land in the Revelation, he's talking about a demonic entity attached to human religion in the land of Israel—a principality or power. And when John talks about the Beast from the sea, he's talking about the empirical power of Rome from over the sea. He's talking about principalities that act like beasts, that rule men's hearts through threats and fear. And when John sees the Great Harlot in the Revelation, he's talking about corrupt economies, selfish commerce, a principality that rules men's hearts through seduction. A Harlot buys and sells people in the name of love. And principalities and powers rule men and women's hearts through fear and covetousness. They enslave humanity through fear of punishment and the promise of rewards...even if they do it in the name of love.

If I love out of fear for myself, it's not love. I merely use love to survive...like a beast. And if I love to obtain some reward, it's not love. I merely use love for my own ends like a harlot. So under the dominion of the powers, I compete with people like a beast, and use people like a harlot. And I build dividing walls that encase my own soul in Hell. The principalities and powers are under the dominion of the dragon, who is Satan, who Jesus called “the ruler of this world.” But the ruler is judged and cast out at the cross.

The principalities and powers have not comprehended or cannot comprehend love. “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not understood it—comprehended it or overcome it.” God is light, God is love, and love was revealed on the cross. The principalities and powers keep us in bondage by convincing us that God is not love, and grace is an illusion; that Christ was not crucified for the sins of the world; that love is a lie—a mere idea, a *logos*, a word without substance, when, in fact, love is God. And with His Word, He creates all things and redeems all things. His Word is Jesus.

In Colossians, Paul writes that God “disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame by triumphing over them in it.” That is Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

Hendrik Burkof writes:

It is precisely in the crucifixion that the true nature of the Powers has come to light. Previously they were accepted as the most basic and ultimate realities, as the gods of the world. Never had it been perceived, nor could it have been perceived, that this belief was founded on deception.

The principalities and powers are good ideas that have been twisted into lies. The cross showed that the powers don't work for God but are His adversaries.

You know, it was the Beast from the land (the religious leaders of Israel) who came for the Beast from the sea (the empire of Rome) and inspired the Harlot, that is, the crowd (the democracy) in Jerusalem to chant, "Crucify! Crucify!" And yet there on the cross as He was crucified, Christ conquered them all.

In the Revelation, John describes it this way:

In the midst of the throne, I saw a lamb standing as though it had been slain....
And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them saying, "To him who sits on the throne and to the lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever."

So what is that lamb? That Lamb is the Word of God, the *Logos* of God, the Idea of God. The Idea is revealed in weakness, and yet nothing is as powerful as the Idea of God—the Word of God—the choice of God—the judgment of God.

It reminds me of this scene in a rather silly but insightful movie called *V for Vendetta*. The hero "V" is battling the corrupt principalities and powers of a totalitarian government. At the end of the movie, they try to kill V, and he says this:

[Movie clip from *V for Vendetta*:]

[A man shoots at V, who isn't wounded but keeps walking forward.]

Mr. Creedy: *Die! Die! Why won't you die? Why won't you die?*

V: *Beneath this mask there is more than flesh. Beneath this mask there is an idea, Mr. Creedy. And ideas are bullet-proof.*

"Ideas are bullet proof"

Well, on the cross the body of the Word of love was broken, and the idea of love spilled out. For on the cross Jesus refused to be controlled by the principalities and powers, the world rulers of this present darkness. Even though we nailed Him to the tree, He died for each of us. Not for fear of what might happen to Him if He didn't, not for fear of Hell. In fact, He descended into Hell, and not for a lust for Heaven. He already was Heaven! He didn't love us for some other reward. We *are* His reward, His inheritance, His Bride.

Love is its own reward.

Yet on the cross I'm not even sure He saw that, for He cried, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" In other words, "Love, why have you forsaken me?" On the cross there were no miracles, and that was the greatest miracle. There was no power, and that was the supreme power. On the cross, love didn't work for Jesus. Yet Jesus loved love for no reason.

He is the Reason.

I'm saying that Jesus chose love in absolute freedom. And that's called faith. And God raised Him from the dead, and the walls came tumbling down—the walls of the temple, Old Jerusalem, the gates of Hell. In space and time, they're still tumbling down, and they come tumbling down through us as we proclaim "the manifold wisdom of God to the principalities and powers."

And how do we proclaim the manifold wisdom of God to the principalities and powers? How do we do battle with the world rulers of this present darkness? Well, we'll talk about this much more when we get to chapter six, but the bottom line is that we choose love in weakness, and that's called faith. And that, my friend, is a strange weapon. Faith is far more powerful than any gun, and as weak as a naked man hanging on a cross.

Ephesians 3:10-13:

So that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him. So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory.

Paul is in prison suffering.

Now there's no earthquake breaking open the prison doors.

Now we read about no miracles handkerchiefs.

Now Paul looks like a failure.

It looks like his Christianity isn't "working."

In a book titled, *The Call*, Rick Joyner wrote about a vision he had. At one point he encounters the Apostle Paul, and Paul says:

On earth you cannot measure eternal treasures. When I died, it looked like everything for which I had given my life to building on earth had already perished. The churches I had given my life to raising up were falling into apostasy, and even some of my closest friends were turning against me. During my last days, I felt like I had been a failure.

When I first read that, I was shocked. And then I read 2 Timothy, which scholars think was Paul's last letter before he was martyred in Rome. 2 Timothy 1:15: "All who are in Asia turned away from me." Ephesus was in Asia. Paul didn't know how God would answer his prayers with the revelation of John. 2 Timothy 4:16: "At my first defense, no one came to stand by me. All deserted me...but the Lord stood by me." 2 Timothy 2:9: "I am suffering bound with chains as a criminal, but the Word of God [*Logos* of God, Idea of God] is not bound."

Isn't that amazing?

You know, Paul left Ephesus in Acts 20 right after the riot over the worship of the goddess Artemis. So Paul's demonstrations of power didn't defeat all the powers. Yet when Paul was imprisoned in Rome awaiting execution, when Paul felt like his ministry had been a failure, when there were no great and miraculous signs, when Paul felt like a failure but exercised a little faith in the midst of suffering and so wrote a few letters...well, it was then that unbeknownst to Paul, Paul wrote the Bible!—and changed the world. Through him, Christ defeated the principalities

and powers and captured you! And that's the successful Christian life. And I don't mean changing the world. I mean faith...revealed in suffering, faith in the midst of failure.

Some of you think you're a failure. So you've said stuff like this to me: "Well, Peter, you're a pastor, and God can use you. But I'm not skilled, and I'm handicapped. So I just sing my worship songs and try to love the people on the bus." When you say that, I want to grab you and yell:

That's it! You're exercising faith in the midst of suffering. You're loving the Lord your God and your neighbor on the bus. You may not witness signs and wonders or see a great revival, but I'm telling you that you are proclaiming the manifold wisdom of God to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places. And you have no idea what dead things God may be bringing to life at the sound of your worship and the witness that is your love.

You are defeating the principalities and powers. And if you're wondering—"What is it to be defeated by the principalities and powers?"—well, just slap Jesus stickers on everything and live like everyone else.

- I mean speak in the tongue of men and angels, but just don't love.
- I mean say, "Lord, Lord," and cast out demons and do many mighty works in His name, but don't know Him. Don't know love.
- I mean serve Him and love Him for some other reason, like to save your own butt from the fires of Hell or to get His stuff—what you think is Heaven.
- I mean get really religious just like the Sadducees and Pharisees get religious in order to become a Christian success. Do it to be admired by men, have a nice family, and make a good salary. In other words, make sure your Christianity *works* for you. And then you'll be working for the principalities and powers.

But on the other hand, if you really want to do some damage to the gates of Hell, just exercise a little faith in love in the midst of suffering.

Faith is the successful Christian life.

And check this out: It's really not your faith, and it's actually not your successful life, and you really don't choose love. Love chooses you. He may be choosing you right now as I speak. Faith is God's Idea rising in your heart. It's the life of Christ in you. A more literal translation of verse 12 would be this: "We have boldness and confidence of access not through our faith in Him but through the faith of Him."

Paul already told us that faith is not of ourselves. I think that's why he goes on to say, "What I'm suffering for you is your glory." That Christ suffered for me and for you is our glory. You see, Paul actually believed he was Christ's suffering Body. We are Christ's Body in this fallen world. And when you have faith in the midst of suffering, that's when you trust God's love and so love others, even if, especially if, it hurts.

Well, the principalities and powers, Satan himself...they see Jesus in you. They see the glory of God on you. They see the fire of the kingdom in your eyes.

Jesus in you is God's weapon for you.
Jesus on you is the armor of God on you.

And then the gates of Hell come crumbling down, Old Jerusalem comes tumbling down, and the New Jerusalem descends as a bride.

In *V for Vendetta*, V dies, but his idea that people should all love each other in freedom—the idea, the *logos* rises incarnate in the *ethnos*—the people. The night he dies, they all dress like him and march on the Parliament building to watch the walls come tumbling down.

Paul will tell us to put on Christ, for we're hidden in Christ.

And that's how the walls come tumbling down.

And that's how each of us then become who we truly and uniquely are.

And that's how we enter the Kingdom of God, where every unique person is united in Him and bound together in love.

[Movie clip from *V for Vendetta*.]

[Hundreds of people in masks march through soldiers towards the Old Bailey criminal court building. Then they stand still, remove their masks, and watch the building burn and fireworks begin.]

Man: Who was he?

Evey: He was Edmond Dantes. And he was my father. And my mother. My brother. My friend. He was you. And me. He was all of us.

[Camera zooms in on many faces taking off masks.]

Well, that's an imperfect movie. Yet everything good in that movie is this:

Communion

On the night Jesus was betrayed, the Logos of God, the Word of God that had become flesh, the firstborn of all creation, took break and broke it saying, "This is my body given to you. Take it, eat it, and do this in remembrance of me." And in the same manner after supper He took the cup and said, "This cup is the new covenant—the eternal covenant—in my blood poured out for the forgiveness of sins. Drink of it, all of you, and do it in remembrance of me."

So He calls you to His table and invites you to take His body and His blood...take the meaning, take the Word of God into your heart, let the walls come tumbling down, and be His Church marching upon a broken and painful world.

In Jesus' name, may you believe the gospel and become the gospel. Amen.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, we glorify you. We honor you. We praise you because St. Paul says that the Father gave you dominion over all the principalities and powers. And we think that's a really good idea.

We want you to be King. We want you to be the authority. Lord Jesus, we're saying that we're really glad the government is on your shoulders. Lord Jesus, we confess that we have been principalities and powers ruling over our own lives, and that was a bad idea. Thank you, Lord Jesus, that when we call you Lord, we confess that you are the power, you are the king, and to you belongs all the glory. Then, Lord God, the lie is exposed, because the principalities and powers told us if we do that we'll be slaves, but it turns out that slaves of you are free. So, Lord God, in Jesus' name we thank you and praise you. Amen.

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