

God Gives Power

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[0 : 00] Well, the Christian life is wonderful. The best thing in the world is being a Christian by far. But to be honest, the Christian life can also be quite discouraging. Christian life and ministry can be discouraging.

I haven't been a Christian my whole life, but in the years I have been a Christian, I've seen people walk away from Christian faith. I know of people who've left churches because they've been burnt out or they've been burnt by someone.

And if you look at the statistics, church numbers in Australia are getting smaller as years go on. A lot of people say they believe in God, but the commitment doesn't seem to be there.

And I see it regularly at Deakin University, trying to engage uni students with the gospel and just the complete lack of interest from students in anything to do with God or Jesus or the Bible.

They just kind of flake out, disconnect, not interested, not engaged. And that's hard, but it's even harder sometimes when Christians act that way. Because come on, we're on the same team.

[1 : 07] So Christian life and ministry can often be discouraging. And I imagine that the church in Ephesus, this letter from God's messenger Paul that he's written to, I reckon they might be tempted to be discouraged too.

Paul's written this letter to them and there's been two great chapters so far, rich in theology, rich in reminding them of the good news of salvation, the good news of who Jesus is and what he's done. It's really rich and meaty and it's really in depth. And now we're in chapter 3 and in verse 1, he describes his situation. He says in chapter 3 verse 1, This is the reason that I, Paul, am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles.

So Paul says he's in prison. Up to this point he hasn't spoken about his situation, but now he does. Paul's probably in Rome, in prison, probably under Nero. It's AD 60.

Paul's been in and out of prison pretty much all his Christian life. So it shouldn't be surprising that, again, Paul is in prison, but he's in prison, he's in Rome. And he says he's a prisoner for Christ Jesus or of Christ Jesus, in other words.

[2 : 22] And he's saying he's a prisoner, but it's not out of the control of the God he serves. No, he's in prison because of the God he serves. He's there because of the will of King Jesus, not the will of Rome or the Emperor.

He's there because of Jesus. And he says, for the sake of you Gentiles. That is, Paul is an evangelist to the Gentiles, the non-Jews. He's in prison because of his faithfulness and loyalty to the mission Jesus has given him.

You can look it up in Acts chapter 9 if you like. Jesus confronts him, the risen Jesus confronts Paul and tells him that he will be Jesus' personal messenger to the non-Jewish peoples of the world.

He's Jesus' messenger to the Gentiles. And he gets told that again later in Acts chapter 23. In verse 11, Jesus says to him, You've testified about me in Jerusalem and you will also testify about me in Rome.

So this is Paul writing in prison. And I imagine that that's discouraging. He's God's messenger and now he's locked up.

[3 : 31] And in the ancient world, they didn't have brackets in their writing. But in this passage, verses 2 to 12 really are in brackets.

Paul starts off by saying, I'm a prisoner of Christ Jesus. And he's about to go on to what he's going to say in verse 14. But he kind of gets interrupted. He goes on a bit of a tangent to talk about himself and his ministry.

We'll see in a minute. But I think upon hearing that, that Paul's in prison, people might be tempted to think things aren't going well. They might be tempted to be discouraged.

And so what Paul does in this little bracketed section, this little kind of tangent that he goes on to, is to give kind of three reasons for encouragement. If you follow along on the outline, you'll see those reasons there.

The first one is because of Paul's secret. The first encouragement is Paul's secret in verses 2 to 6. He says, Surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you, and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation as I wrote above in a few words, a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ.

[4 : 42] Notice the repetition of the word mystery throughout those verses. Whenever you see the word mystery, just think of the word secret. It simply means something hidden that's now been revealed.

It doesn't mean what we mean when we say the word mystery, and something's a mystery. Sometimes even Christians say, oh, God moves in mysterious ways. In other words, we don't know why X, Y, or Z happened.

It's something unknowable. That's what we mean when we say the word, but that's not what Paul means. He more means it like the word secret. A secret is something you don't know, but then it gets revealed to you.

It's not unknowable completely. It just needs to be told to you. That's what he means by the word mystery. Something hidden that's revealed. And it's like that incident we heard read from Daniel chapter 2.

The king of Babylon has a nightmare, and he wants to know what it means. So he plays kind of a little game with his sorcerers and magicians and his counsellors.

[5 : 38] Calls them up, tells them to come in, and he says, listen, I've had a nightmare, but I want you to tell me what the dream was and then tell me what it means. Which is kind of like, what kind of test is that? And then he says, and here's the kicker.

If you don't tell me, I'm going to have you ripped in half. And, you know, if you do tell me and it's right, you'll get a reward. Right? So it's this dangerous game that he's playing with them.

And, of course, they don't know. They can't figure it out. They don't know what it is. But then God reveals it to Daniel, the Israelite, and he tells the king.

Daniel knows not because he's figured it out, but because God revealed it to him. So it's called a mystery. And that's what Paul means when he uses the word mystery. It's something once hidden, now revealed.

Look at verse 5. In former generations, this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it's now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.

[6 : 36] You see that? It was hidden for a very, very, very long time. Centuries, even millennia, it was hidden. But now it's out in the open. The secret's out.

It's in broad daylight now. And the mystery he even tells you is in verse 6. The mystery is this. The Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

That is, through the gospel, through the death and resurrection of the Jewish Messiah, Jesus, non-Jews who believe in Jesus are included in the people of God.

And he's already said that in the second half of chapter 2. If you were here last week, you would have heard the sermon on it. Remember back in chapter 2, the second half, he says in verse 11, Remember at one time, you Gentiles, right?

You non-Jews. Verse 12, remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope without God in the world.

[7 : 44] He says, you Gentiles, you weren't circumcised. You couldn't go into the inner courts of the temple. You didn't have God's word. You weren't included in the people of God. You didn't have Jewish heritage or ancestry.

You were without hope, without God, without salvation. But then he reminds them, verse 13, Now in Christ Jesus, you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

He says, you who were far away have been brought near, that he's reconciled to God through the death of Jesus, is reconciled with Jewish believers in Jesus, so that in Christ there is one new humanity.

There's not one gospel for Jews and one gospel for non-Jews, and there's not one Messiah for the Jews and one Messiah for non-Jews, and there's not one kingdom of God for Jews and a different kingdom of God for non-Jews.

No, no, there is in Christ Jesus, Jews and non-Jews are one people, God's people, God's family. He says, through the gospel. Paul says, that's the mystery that's been revealed through the gospel. [8 : 55] So his first encouragement is that God's mystery has been revealed. That's the kind of secret. It's been revealed to Paul. And that's at the heart of his ministry. So that's the second encouragement, his ministry, verses 7 to 9.

It says in verse 7, You see, God didn't just make Paul a Christian, back in Acts chapter 9, and go and read it.

It's a phenomenal story of a life transformed by Jesus. God didn't just make him a Christian, but God also made him a servant of the gospel. And it's a gift by the working of his power. Paul says it's got nothing to do with him, nothing because he deserves it. Look at verse 8. Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ.

See, Paul doesn't take any credit for it. He knows there's nothing special about him. He calls himself there the very least of all the apostles. But actually, the word's quite funny. It's actually quite an awkward word.

[10 : 01] It's actually the word leastest. If you were kind of having a competition with someone to out-humble yourself, and someone says, Well, I'm lesser than you are. And someone says, I'm lesser than you. Well, yeah, well, I'm the leastest.

It's kind of like, that's not really a word. It's just kind of an awkward thing. But that's the word Paul uses. He says, I'm not just least, I'm lesser than the least. I'm the leastest of all the apostles. Why? Well, Paul is real. He knows his own history. He knows his background before becoming a Christian. Previously, he spent his life persecuting the church, arresting and killing Christians. The other reason that he knows he's the leastest of all the apostles is because he never travelled with Jesus during his three-year earthly ministry. Paul, unlike the other apostles, he never sat at the feet of Jesus, travelling around Galilee.

He wasn't there when Jesus took the small clumps of bread and fish and fed thousands with it. Paul wasn't there. He wasn't there when the disciples were sharing the Passover meal on the night Jesus was betrayed and arrested and crucified.

[11 : 08] And he wasn't there when the women came back from the tomb saying, it's empty, it's empty. Jesus is alive. He's alive. He wasn't there. But Peter and John and the others, they had that privilege, but not Paul.

So he's not claiming any kind of spiritual superiority here or giving himself any credit that somehow he kind of earned it or deserved it. No, it's a gift. That's what he says in verse 8.

The gift of God's grace. And he says, not just it's the gospel that's been given to him as a gift, but the job he's been given in verse 8. The grace that was given to me to bring or literally to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ.

So his role is to make the mystery of Christ, the mystery of Christ and the mystery of Gentiles, non-Jewish believers in Jesus, being included in the people of God, his job as a gift is to make that known.

And he says in verse 9, to make everyone see. He wants everybody to know this. His secret is for everyone, not just a particular people, but everyone. Why? He says to make everyone see the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things.

[12 : 22] Why? So that, verse 10, through the church, the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord. What's his point? Paul's been given the gift, not only of the gospel, of the mystery of Christ, and the mystery of Gentiles being included in God's people, but he's also been given as a gift the job of making that message known.

Why? He says, so that through the church, through Gentile and Jewish believers in Jesus being united in Christ, the wisdom of God might be displayed to the spiritual rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms.

I don't know if you remember when MasterChef was on TV. People don't watch a lot of TV now that MasterChef's over. It's interesting. When MasterChef was on, during the course of the show, there'd be like a challenge in the kitchen and you'd see up on the balcony all the other contestants kind of looking in and peering in on what they were doing and whether they were doing it right or not. And they were kind of peering in from up above watching the little contest in the kitchen take place. And that's the imagery Paul's getting us to see here. That's what's happening between the rulers in the heavenly realms and the church on earth.

[13 : 42] The rulers in the heavenly places, that language, he's talking about spiritual heavenly agents, probably both good and bad, angels and demons, because that's language that he uses a little bit later on in chapter 6.

He talks about the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. The thing he says, he doesn't get carried away with explaining exactly who they are or what they are. He focuses on the church and he says, the point of the church is to display God's wisdom to these spiritual rulers in the heavenly realms.

They're the kind of audience in the balcony looking in at the church. And he says, this is in accordance with God's eternal plan and purposes. He's already spoken about that in Ephesians chapter 1, verses 9 and 10.

He said, the eternal plan and purposes of God is to bring all things in heaven and on earth under the rule of the Lord Jesus Christ. The question is, how do we know that?

How do we know that's God's plan? It's fine for Paul to say it, but how does he know that? Where's kind of the evidence of where God is headed with humanity and with history? How does he know?

[14 : 49] Where's that, you know, how does he know what God was doing when he promised Abraham way back in the beginning in Genesis 12 that God would bless the world through Abraham? Where's the kind of evidence of that?

Well, you can see it more clearly. We'll come back to Ephesians, but we can see it more clearly over in Revelation chapter 7. You feel free to turn over the page if you want to, or you can just listen.

It's page 999, Revelation 7. And in Revelation, the Apostle John gets a glimpse behind the curtain of history at God's ultimate purpose for the world.

And it's there in Revelation 7, verses kind of 4 to 8. John hears the number of those who were sealed, 144,000 out of every tribe of the people of Israel.

And don't get too hung up about the numbers. It's just a symbol for the complete kind of whole number of Jewish believers in heaven. And then over in verse 9, after this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count from every nation, all tribes and peoples and languages standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white with palm branches in their hands.

[15 : 59] They cried out in a loud voice, saying, Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne and to the Lamb. And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures.

And they fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, saying, Amen, blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God forever and ever.

Amen. Do you understand what this is saying? This is the picture of where God is headed with history, with humanity and all creation. This is the new heavens, the new earth, the recreated order. All things in heaven and on earth bowing down to him on the throne and to the Lamb. That's Jesus face down worshipping him forever. There's a great multitude that no one could count and there's no ethnic hostility or division or tension.

There is one new humanity. People from all cultures and nationalities and ethnic groups around the throne of the Lamb worshipping him. This is where God's headed.

[17 : 05] This is where God has been headed from the beginning. All peoples, a complete number of Jews, the Jewish believers in Jesus and people from all nations, that is, non-Jews, Gentiles, all of them gathered around the throne of God worshipping the Lamb.

That's where God is headed. So back in Ephesians 3, Paul says, through the church the wisdom of God is displayed to the heavenly realms in accordance with his eternal purposes that he carried out in Christ Jesus.

You see, Paul knows. He knows where God is headed with human history. He knows through the gospel that Jew and Gentile in Christ will be around the throne of the Lamb worshipping forever. That's where God is going with history and humanity. In fact, that's where God must go because in Ephesians 1, he says that God has raised Jesus and exalted him far above every title and power and rule and authority and dominion for all ages.

God must be going to this end if he has raised and glorified his servant, Jesus. So it's the end of chapter 1 of Ephesians and Paul says he's the messenger to the Gentiles.

[18:26] Why? So that through the church God's wisdom, his eternal purposes and plan might be made known. This Revelation 7 end to which God is headed, this end in Revelation 7 is visible now, he says.

It's seen, it's visible, here's the evidence. It's through the church, Jew and Gentile in Christ. That's the glimpse, that's the sneak preview of where God is headed.

It's proof, it's the evidence, you can see it. So this is huge and the thing is we don't think this way. Christians tend to think, we kind of have in our culture and our kind of church culture we kind of separate kind of Jesus and his people, we kind of separate having a higher view of Jesus with a higher view of the church.

We tend to separate commitment to Jesus with commitment to the church. There's been books by this, I saw a book the other day written called They Love Jesus But Hate the Church and it's kind of this attitude of separating Jesus and his church.

We kind of complain that my church is like this or that or I wish it were like this or that or my church isn't Mars Hill or whatever. We kind of grumble and complain but actually something very, very, very significant is already being said and displayed to the heavenly realms just by the gathering of God's people.

[19:56] People from all kinds of backgrounds are in this room, people from Jewish backgrounds, non-Jewish backgrounds, united in Christ through faith in the gospel so even right now the wisdom and power and eternal purposes of God are on display.

God is kind of showing off if you like his purposes to the heavenly realms through the church and don't think of church as building or institution think of it as the people gathered in Christ displaying God's wisdom and he says in verse like that's it's evidence in verse 12 that we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him, faith in Jesus.

We have boldness and confidence to approach God because of the death of Jesus on our behalf. Through trusting him we're able to approach God so even when we pray like I prayed at the start and we'll pray later but when we pray there's one access to God, there's one basis for access to God for all of us.

It's not based on our effort or our ethnicity or our background it's based on the work of Jesus, Jesus' death on our behalf and our faith in him. So Paul says what we've seen so far in this section is Paul's saying don't lose heart.

He's in prison but don't lose heart. Why? Well firstly he said the mystery has been revealed, secrets out. Second thing is that his ministry is to make this message known to non-Jews and in doing that the church displays the wisdom of God and God's purposes and let's look at the third encouragement there in verses 14 to 21 and it's his prayer so we've gone from his secret now revealed and the encouragement of Paul's ministry and we're going to see the encouragement of Paul's prayer.

[22:02] So verses 14 to 15 he says for this reason I bow my knees before the Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. He's reminding them that he's praying but he's going to say not simply that he prays but he also tells us specifically what he prays for.

Verses 16 to 19 he says I pray that according to the riches of his glory he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his spirit and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith as you're being rooted and grounded in love.

So the first part of his prayer is there'll be two parts of this prayer but the first part is a prayer for strength. He says with power that Christ will dwell in their hearts and he says that you'll be rooted and grounded in love in verse 17 those words rooted and grounded kind of convey the image of a tree with its roots deep down in the ground that's really fertile and growing and it's solid and strong and ground is another way of saying like a really well built strong house it's got a solid foundation that's the kind of image that he's talking about that they would be like a well built house and a well planted tree his prayer is for their strength and growth as Christians he prays for Christ to dwell in

them to transform them he says deeply rooted and grounded in love love for one another that's evidence of Christ dwelling in them so the first part of his prayer is for strength with power that God would strengthen them as Christians and then in verses 18 and 19 he prays I pray that you may have the power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge so you may be filled with all the fullness of God that sounds a little bit like a riddle because he says I want you to know or grasp or comprehend what is the and he goes on to say the breadth and length and height and depth so it's this massive sort of immeasurable know the unknowable basically or measure the immeasurable it's kind of like taking a little kind of school ruler saying there you go measure the universe well you kind of can't because the universe is so big and the ruler is so small like you know you kind of can't but he's saying I pray that you will know the immeasurable dimensions of Christ's love and he says that you will be filled with all the fullness of God or better to say filled to the fullness of God in other words he's looking forward to the last day when they will be perfect and complete to the fullness of God and it's that sense of kind of wholeness completeness he says I pray that you be the complete picture the whole package the complete deal perfect and perfected on the last day so he prays for them he doesn't just say I pray for you and goes on to say other things he says I'll pray and he tells them exactly what he's praying for this is his prayer for them that they be strengthened and they be complete in Christ but of course the question is can God do this Paul's in prison sounds like the church is a little bit shaky who does this depend on who does the success of this depend on does it depend on Paul well he's in prison that's not going to be too good so who does it depend on what confidence can Paul have that this will happen well the last two verses tell us who it depends on verses 20 and 21 now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine to him be glory in the church and in

[26 : 01] Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever in other words this all depends on the infinite immeasurable capability of God it's kind of like going to lunch with Bill Gates Bill says it's my shout can he do it yeah of course he can he's Bill Gates he can invite us all out to lunch ten times over and it wouldn't affect his bank balance at all if Bill Gates calls me up and says I want to take you to lunch I can trust that he can pay it he's that kind of guy the illustration is not exactly right because Bill Gates resources are finite and God's are infinite but it's the idea of if Bill Gates calls me up and says I want to take you out to lunch my shout if I think can he pay of course he can pay he's Bill Gates he's got more money than all of us put together can God do this can God answer Paul's prayers for their encouragement and growth can God fulfill his purposes in the world when it doesn't look like that that's what's happening well Paul says yes absolutely that's in fact why he burst into praise because God is infinitely capable to do more than we ask or imagine he says

God's not bound by resources or time or energy he can do more than we could ever ask or imagine and so he says to him to this God be glory in the church and Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever so look there's lots of reasons to be discouraged in Christian life and in ministry especially Christian ministry if you ever tried sharing the gospel with someone at work or someone at school or uni or a family member and they just kind of walk away or bag it out or you invite them to church and they don't show up or you invite them to a bible study or something and they don't come that actually gets discouraging doesn't it trying to recruit leaders is you know hard work and often people don't do what they say they will and it's discouraging fundraising for gospel ministry is discouraging because people often make pledges that they'll financially support a ministry or a particular missionary but they don't know talk is cheap money doesn't always come in there are some people who kind of want to jump on the church planting bandwagon because it's a cool new thing but statistics actually show that more than half most church plants die or split or dissolve within two to three years and most don't survive life so people think oh it's going to be great and cool and fun but it's actually probably not likely that that church plant will continue and that's actually discouraging now Paul the apostle is in prison doesn't look good for the gospel or his ministry the the church in Ephesus is probably in hostile territory too you can read about in Acts chapter 19 there's kind of mob violence when Paul goes preaching the gospel there so it's probably a dangerous place for Christians it's dangerous for Paul but he says kind of big idea is don't don't lose heart don't be discouraged don't lose heart why he's told us three things that the secret's out it's going out to all people and it can't be stopped he's told us that God's plans and purposes will be achieved that end to which God is headed towards will be achieved you can see it now through the church and

because ultimately it depends on God's ability and God's power not us it depends on God and he will do it God is able to do it and that encouragement should give us confidence to pray Paul's stuck in prison but but he prays and in fact he writes to the church telling them what he's praying for so confidence in God's power gives us courage to pray so let me ask you this question are you confident in

God's power one way to tell whether you are or not is by whether you pray do you pray for the church do you pray for the spread of the gospel do you pray for specific Christians and their growth like Paul prays here and I'll confess I don't do this I'm rebuked by this passage in my lack of trust in God which is a sin and needs to be repented of I am convinced of God's power because I know God raised Jesus from the dead so I need to pray specifically what Paul prays here there's one another reason to learn and pray the prayers of the Bible because often our own agendas in our prayer life isn't God's agenda and so this prayer in verses 14 to 21 is a really good one to to maybe learn or write out or memorize and pray specifically so the question is are you confident in God's power if so do you pray because to him be the glory in the church and in

Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever amen let me pray father in heaven thank you that you are the God who speaks you're the God who rules the God who reigns we thank you that you sent your son Jesus into our world to die on the cross in our place and take the punishment for our sins so that by trusting in him we're included in your people made part of your family with people from all backgrounds father thank you for the great picture of where you are headed with humanity and history that in the end every knee will bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the father we pray that day would come soon we pray that we would not be discouraged when we don't see immediate gospel fruit either in our lives or in the ministries we're involved in involved in or in our church father you are the

[32 : 20] God who is able to do more than we can ask or imagine and so we pray that we would trust your power to bring people to your son and grow people to the to the very fullness of God on the last day and we pray that we would see now through the church in the world your purposes and plans being fulfilled and accomplished we pray that the kingdom and the reign of the Lord Jesus would spread through the nations that people would turn back to you and trust him as savior and Lord and father thank you that you are indeed the God who doesn't rely on us or our wisdom or our strength or our power but it's all your power and to you be the glory in the church in Christ Jesus to all generations amen to me we hear you spoke to God understand and in the room that will be happy to these are who are for the souls who are talking about this and today have life his and he's himself and Stan

I promised he his husband all You you and children and he hasn't had second out movies all meny