

Purpose, Power, Possibilities (Ephesians 3:1-21)

Surprise parties are a “love ‘em or hate ‘em” kind of thing. No matter which way you feel about them, the one thing that’s clear about them, is that they don’t just happen. A lot of planning and timing goes into making it happen—it isn’t just a happy coincidence.

Something like that meets us in our text today when it comes to Paul’s thought about the church. This section of Ephesians highlights once again that the church—the people gathered around Jesus as Savior and Lord of life—isn’t just a happy coincidence, or a consequence of social evolution. Instead, the church is God’s intentional creation, and it’s not designed as a personal “happy” place where people passively absorb good vibes, though one might reasonably expect to be happy as part of their church experience. The point is that the church is not a human invention devised to deliver emotional reprieve, but God’s idea built around a specific purpose.

It’s the idea towards which God has been working throughout human history. It’s the revelation of a mystery woven into all of God’s interaction with humanity. In biblical vocabulary, the word mystery means a revealed secret—something that’s been there all along and disclosed at a specific moment in time. According to Paul, the mystery is Christ, specifically Jesus as the Christ, the messiah of Israel and by that also the Savior of the world. Furthermore, Jesus is the Lord of creation and the creator of a new humanity—people who are joined to God in Christ by his Spirit. Jesus is the promise to Abraham fulfilled, that his descendants, physical and spiritual, would be blessed, and in that blessing they would bless the world.

The church is not simply a passive entity enjoying blessing, but an active organism engaged in bringing about God’s purpose in the world. Verse 10 captures God’s purpose for the church: to make known—that is to reveal—the manifold wisdom of God. 1 Cor. 1:24 tells us that Christ is the wisdom of God to us, the church, and now, in Christ, we reveal the wisdom of God. But to whom? According to the text it is the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms. This type of phraseology is an underlying theme in Ephesians—it occurs again in Chapter 6, but appears prior to our text in verse 2 of chapter 2 where the reference is to the ruler of the kingdom of the air, and the influence this has over the world. There’s a spiritual nuance to these terms to be sure, but Richard Rohr suggests that this is more Paul’s pre-modern way of saying the world: its systems and institutions apart from God that concentrate and convey evil as sin runs its course. What this means, then, is that the church’s purpose is to reveal God’s wisdom in the world in which we live side by side with those still captive to the world’s way of life apart from God. We live in the same place, but under a different ruler.

The way we live in this place is to demonstrate the manifold wisdom of God. You’ll recall that wisdom means “skill in living,” the word manifold is literally “many colored,” meaning all the shades of life, or whatever circumstances present. In any and every situation, our purpose is to show how living by God’s design and power is the best option for navigating reality. We face the same issues common to life: we have mortgages or rent to pay, taxes, jobs, health issues. We’re subjected to politics, we’re working remotely, we have children at home doing virtual school, we’re dealing with cabin fever, we make choices on how to spend money. We’re spouses, parents, friends, co-workers, students, citizens, individuals, and we engage in all of these relationships and obligations as people applying the wisdom we receive from God that shapes what we do, what we say, how we say things, our attitudes towards those who disagree with us, and our demeanor. We approach all of this differently as people who live on a different foundation as Jesus explained in the Sermon on the Mount. There is to be a discernible contrast in our lives that showcases the character of God expressed through blessing. This is the point, friends. We’re here to demonstrate heaven at the very gates of hell. There’s already enough hell in the world, our purpose is to give the world heaven—be refreshment, be encouragement, keep heaven’s door wide open so that all who desire it may come in! This captures attention and points people to God through Christ. Living in contrast like this will cause people you know to ask what you know that makes the difference.

This magnificent purpose prompts the kind of prayer that sustains our momentum. As you reflect on Paul’s prayer in vs. 14-19, compare it to the patterns of prayer that have settled

into contemporary practice. Much of contemporary prayer revolves around the words: help, heal, or why. A bit of that crops up in Paul, but most of what Paul prays—and what he recommends as a model for us revolves around what God desires for us so that we are able to be used by God to bring about what God desires in the world through Christ.

There are five petitions in this prayer that is given to inform the content of our prayers beginning with prayer for the power of the Spirit. This refers to ability we gain through the presence of the Spirit at work in us—it's less about displaying the presence of the Spirit, as a possession of sorts, and more about enabling our work towards God's purposes in the world. It's a bit like the difference between body-building and weight lifting. Have you ever noticed that Olympic weightlifters don't look a thing like Mr. Universe? They usually look more like Sumo wrestlers. Their workouts consist of training to lift as much weight as possible. They're not concerned with appearance, but strength. On the other hand, body-builders aren't interested in strength, in how much they can lift. They're interested in adding lift to their muscles. This prayer for the Spirit's power is not in service to how we appear, but what we can accomplish in service to God's purpose. In other words, empower and direct us to where God needs us to be.

The second petition involves knowing the presence of Christ. It means being at home in Christ—seeing Christ around us, and Christ being at home in us. It's the difference between a house staged for open house, and the home in which you live. The staged house doesn't reveal anything about those who live there—it's a generic setting. But the home in which you live reveals something about who you are, what you value, what you enjoy, what makes you, you. We're not meant to be generic examples of humanity, but the image of people captured by the love and warmth of Christ freely expressing our allegiance and commitment to Christ as Lord. This petition is for authentic and genuine faith in which Christ is welcome and part of all aspects of life.

The third petition is that we comprehend the inclusive love of Christ; that we see the limitless expanse of Christ's love that reaches to every dimension in every direction. That nothing and no-one is beyond the reach of Christ's love.

Following up on this is the fourth petition that longs to know, here meaning to experience the love of Christ. And this involves aspects of fellowship with believers—a challenge given the present situation, but not insurmountable. It is vital because we largely experience the love of Christ through those who belong to Him. Vital because we find support when we're in need. Vital because we're valued simply for who we are—a loved one in Christ. Vital because we're committed to each other's well-being—we help carry each other's burdens as we likewise celebrate one another's joy. It's community—a unity of loving siblings who share a common commitment to Christ. This hasn't always been everyone's experience in the church, and we grieve over this for it is designed as such. As far as it depends on us, let us determine to express Christ's love towards one another.

The last petition is that we be filled with the fullness of God—the full measure of God's life alive in us, providing what we need to thrive in any circumstance. Think of this as equalized pressure, like a submarine that has to have a certain level of pressure within itself to withstand the enormous external pressure it experiences in ocean depths. Without this internal pressure it would be crushed at depth. In the same way, because we're living in a world that is not yet fully redeemed, there is enormous external or cultural pressure that weighs against us in this space. But when we are filled with the fullness of God, our internal pressure—the force of God's life pulsing within allows us to withstand that pressure, no matter the depths to which we must go to accomplish the purpose God is pursuing.

Friends, this is comprehensive praying that concerns our purpose, who we are, our vision, our support and resilience. We pray not for window-dressing, but for the fact that we are engaged in real-time, real world deployment that competes for the hearts and minds of those still experiencing the futility of life apart from God.

Having been established in purpose and fortified by prayer, we stand ready to witness outcomes—not our pre-determined expectations, but outcomes that exceed our imagination on the basis of God's power at work in and through us. When we think of God's power, our

minds tend to wander towards dramatic concentrations of might, like the parting of the Red Sea, or Jesus walking on water or raising someone from death. But against the scale of human history, events like this are few and far between. Instead, consider incremental change effected over time that ultimately results in unimaginable outcomes.

Recall the story of Joseph in Genesis—awful in many respects: betrayed by his brothers, sold into slavery in Egypt, falsely accused of impropriety, languishing in prison over several years. And yet, through chance encounters in critical moments, Joseph found himself elevated to Pharaoh's right-hand man positioned to accomplish God's purpose in preserving the Hebrew people through whom descended Jesus of Nazareth, Israel's messiah, Savior of the world and Lord of creation. An unimaginable outcome made possible by Joseph's faith in a faithful God.

The thing is, we don't always know where we are in our "Joseph" story, but God knows, and our faith, our confidence in the faithfulness of God will carry us through until the fullness of God's plan unfolds before us and our response will be: only God—hallelujah! In Christ we have purpose, power, and possibilities that stagger our imagination. Be faithful, be glad! AMEN