

Our Willingness to Suffer for the Gospel Ephesians 3

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IS AGM**

This is what Mike wrote from his recent newsletter. He and his family are going back to their “home” in the Red Sea even though things are still pretty bad at “home”. He writes,

“So why go back now We have many reasons - it is our home, we feel it is liveable, we still feel the situation will stay bad for a long time until it gets better, we have many eager friends to meet with, and we desperately need to generate some business ... above all we feel a burning desire and a great peace from our Father. We were challenged by Piper (He is also a Piper fan.) “God knows there are times to flee and times to stand when the crisis comes, may we be guided more by the ways of God and less by the worldly assumptions of security and comfort.”

Mike and I studied at SMBC together, and I still remember the days when we got up early before breakfast to do our Greek translation together. Their mission has a big impact on me and I always want to know what exactly motivates them to do this. They know their choice involves nothing but suffering.

Thinking about suffering, I believe there are two different types of suffering:

- 1) passive suffering - sick, cancer, lost job, sometimes relationship broken down, being robbed, depression, etc
- 2) choosing to suffer - you take the initiative, you don't have to but you decide to put yourself in a position to suffer.

Reading from Eph. 3, Paul helps me to understand why Mike's family and perhaps all of our IS partners are willing to take the initiative to suffer for the sake of the gospel. In ch.3, Paul shares with the Ephesian Christians why he is willing to suffer for the gospel.

In v.1, he says, “For this reason I, Paul, the **prisoner** of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles --” again at end of the first part of ch. 3, he says again, “I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of **my sufferings** for you, which are your glory.”

Unless we have a higher purpose in our lives, or have realized a divine calling, why do we want to suffer voluntarily?

Today's passage has a big impact on my life recently as I've been contemplating the topic of suffering. Especially in these past few months, when I thought about and prayed for our partners in the Golf region or the Red Sea region, I keep asking myself: Why on earth are they willing to be there? What's their purpose in life? What enables them to be willing to suffer?

What I'm going to share today is not my idea. I am not an original thinker. I got these ideas from a talk by John Piper at last year's Lausanne Conference. I was inspired by his talk and I'd like to share them with you today. The NSW RCT members listened to his talk together at our planning meeting earlier this year, so I apologize that if you are here today, you'll have to listen to this again.

There are three points I'd like to share from Eph. 3.

1, God has His divine purpose to make His glorious wisdom known to the whole universe, including all the demonic powers.

8-10, "to preach to the Gentiles **the unsearchable 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. His intent was that now, through the church, **the manifold wisdom of God** should be made know to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms.

God achieves his purposes by revealing two things:

the unsearchable riches of Christ (8)

the mystery, which for ages past (9)

so that the glorious wisdom of God is made known to the rulers and authorities . From ch. 6:12 we know that these are demonic forces.

Sometimes I feel that the churches in the west are too domesticated. We don't think we are in the frontline. We enjoy our comfortable lifestyle. We think we should only preach the gospel to those who we are like, those whom we consider "good" people. But we forgot we are right in the midst of an ongoing spiritual warfare. We forget that God's intention isn't just to let those like us know Him but also violent people, those who hate God, e.g. Osama bin Laden (he is dead now.) God wants even these people to know Him so His glory will be fully seen.

So, what is this wisdom that God wants to make known?

"the unsearchable riches of Christ" is explained in 2:7, "in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus."

God's loving kindness is the covenantal love for the Jews in the OT. Now through Jesus, this love is also available for those who believe, this is the mystery, as explained in v.6: *"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."*

This is God's wisdom that under the grace of God, through Jesus, all, both Jews and Gentiles, are being made one in Christ.

How does God make his mystery known, even to the demons? Through the gospel (v.6), which is Jesus' death and resurrection.

It's kind of a paradox. 1 Corinthians 1:21-24, you must be all familiar with, *"For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."*

Of course, the demons will never know God even though they've seen His wisdom. They consider it foolish, but at the end of the day, they too will come before God to be judged because God is the Lord above all things.

2) God, according to his ultimate sovereignty and his infinite wisdom, chooses some of His servants to suffer, so to achieve his divine purpose.

No one is willing to suffer for no reason. We don't want to be put in prison for no reason. We don't want to give away all our money, career, or take risks, unless we have a higher purpose, and receive a higher calling.

But Paul is willing to suffer, he takes the initiative, he puts himself in arrest, as he knows God's purpose, and he knows the unsearchable riches of Christ. It's so real to him that he is willing to give up everything, including his freedom, so that the wisdom of the cross is manifested to all, even to the demons.

This reminds me of the story of Steve Saint - Nathan Saint's son, who was baptised by the very ones who murdered his father and the other 4 (including Jim Elliot). Steve was taught and disciplined by those whom were once demon possessed but now were his spiritual fathers. Isn't this a perfect testimony that these two points Paul teaches in Ephesians are absolutely true?

As I think of our own IS partners, aren't they also the perfect witnesses for God, for God's purpose? They are willing to suffer in order to demonstrate God's mystery to all, even the demons.

[pause]

Having said all this, if you think we can accomplish this according to our own flesh and blood, you are wrong! That's why Paul prays for the Ephesians in the rest of ch. 3.

3) We need God's power to achieve God's purpose.

This is exactly what Paul prays for the Ephesians.

God's purpose is to manifest His glorious wisdom to the whole universe, even to the demons, and he chooses some of His servants to suffer for this purpose. Now, with this higher calling, how are we going to respond and enable ourselves to do this task?

In Paul's prayer, there are two petitions and one guarantee.

Two petitions:

1) *Through the Spirit, God may strengthen us with power in our inner being so that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith. (16-17a)*

Many Christians come to Jesus, believe, become part of the church, and become a better person. But their inner being has not yet been renewed. Their life hasn't been radically transformed by the gospel. Their lives are pretty much like the rest of the world.

Paul is talking about the transformation of our Christian life, talking about the renewal of our inner being and becoming mature in Christ. Even though we suffer, our physical body can be weakened, but our inner strength is renewed each day. "Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. " (2 Corinthians 4:16) The HS strengthens us and transforms us from within so we can live more and more like

Jesus. As we allow Christ to live in our hearts and in our daily life we're enabled to live a radically gospel-transformed life.

2) *Because of Christ's dwelling in our hearts, we can grasp Christ's love, how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ. (17b-19)*

Paul is not asking that we will love God here (of course this is a good prayer request), but Paul is asking that once we have the power of God in our hearts, we will fully grasp His love, and fully appreciate His grace. Our physical body won't allow us to love God wholeheartedly, unless first we can fully grasp the width, the length, the height and the depth of God's love.

Many religions teach people to love their gods by making better offerings, working harder. But our God shows us His love first. We have Christ as our high priest. We have the Spirit as our Counselor. We have His Word, which is living and active. God shows us His loving kindness everyday to us.

I am teaching Biblical Theology at my own church, and I said to them, this is not just somewhat is theory I want them to master in order to read their Bible better. I want them to see the Kingdom of God is such a reality that we are all living in - from the beginning to the end, I want us to see how wide, long and high and deep God's love is and to know that we are God's people whom He love dearly. It's not a theory. This is reality.

When we grasp the fullness of God's love, then we will be willing to suffer for the sake of His name.

God gives purpose. God chooses. God strengthens. And God guarantees.

That is the benediction at the end of Paul's prayer, "Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or image, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen."