

“History and Heartache”  
Deut. 24:17-22;  
John 16:19-24, Ephesians 3

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Do any of you ever scrapbook or have scrapbooks? They are pretty interesting, especially if you haven't looked at one in a long time. All of a sudden you see things and remember things that you haven't thought about for a while. I got to thinking about remembering things; having a scrapbook and how it can be helpful in remembering things. Generally, the kinds of things that we put in scrapbooks are pretty much the things of our lives that we want to remember, although scrapbooks can also be valuable to help us remember events that weren't so happy. We have a scrapbook of our tragedy here. I think it's important to have that memory, to think back on it.

Generally, we put the happy thoughts and good times in scrapbooks. It's interesting to me that we do that because often what sticks with us are not the happy thoughts, the good memories. In fact, sometimes I think the memories we really don't want to stick with us are the ones that do. We often want to say that they aren't there. Psychology would say that is our problem. We don't want to think on those bad memories. We don't want to let those be part of our lives and though we push them aside, they pop up on their own.

How does this fit with what Paul is saying here in Ephesians? On first blush, you might be thinking, “Where is this coming from?” But if you notice what Paul is doing as he begins to talk to the Ephesians, one of the things he is doing is noting some things about himself. He says, “I'm the least of the apostles.” I don't have to go back through the history of who Paul was because Kathleen did a great job of that in the children's sermon this morning. But out of that history, he recognizes who he was and is and how it means he is the least. And yet, he doesn't forget it. It's part of who he was. He reminds us in other places that he did things like persecute Christians. He recognizes that by encountering Christ his life has been changed.

As he looks back through his history, he is able to accept that “that was then” and now God has moved him to a new place. In fact, God allows him to use that memory to be a new person, even to motivate him, to keep him humble and recognize that he is the least likely to be an apostle and yet here he is. So, he brings his own history with him, his own set of struggles, his own way of being and recognizes that when it encounters God, it encounters another kind of history, a saving history, the history of God, the promise that now we are all heirs to the promise. Paul encourages us to think back on the history of God: that promise, that covenant, the way that God has continued to enter into the lives of his people. That's why we read that Deuteronomy piece. He keeps going back to “Remember you were slaves and I saved you.” Remember how God comes into the lives of God's people and saves them, frees them. It is where God encounters Paul and that history becomes real in his life. He doesn't forget his history but it becomes transformed.

He realizes that not all of that history is easy for everyone to accept, nor is his present circumstance. You see, there are two things going on here. One is that he is bringing up his own history and the other is he is bringing up his own heartaches. He is bringing

up the suffering he is doing now. In fact, he might be writing from prison. He mentions being imprisoned. Often times when we think of a man of God we don't think of somebody who is getting thrown in prison. That may cause some consternation for the folks who have been listening to him.

Our struggles bear down on us in ways that make it hard for us to hear and recognize God's presence. I think that's what Paul is getting at here when he's bringing up that idea of suffering, his own sufferings, and the sufferings of those around him. Even as we suffer through the heat here together, there are moments of suffering in our lives, aren't there? There may be somebody's life that's had no suffering in it. I would like to meet them. But most of us have experienced, in some way or another, the disappointments, the struggles of life, the expectations that haven't been met, the relationships that have struggled. Sometimes it is easy to be up here and think that because I get to be a preacher that nothing has ever been hard. We all have experienced difficult times in our relationships and in our lives, and that's what Paul is inviting us to recognize. Not to shy away from the fact that we've had failures, not to shy away from our disappointments, not to shy away from what's been wrong or that there is wrong in the world, but to acknowledge that. That's why he is in prison. No, it's in the midst of that, he wants to remind us that God is present.

Sometimes we want God to be present in a way that changes the world for us so that everything works the way that we think it should and there is never a problem or a tragedy or a struggle. That's not what Paul is saying. Paul is inviting us into the struggle of life. He says that in doing so we have power that can give us an internal strength that is beyond our understanding. He is inviting the Ephesians to remember how they encountered Christ and what that means. It all starts for him with how the walls have been broken down. There is no wall between the Gentiles and the promise. God's grace is for everyone. It starts there for him. God's surprising gift of love is something that everyone can encounter. It is for all. See, Paul realized that when he encountered Christ on the road and was transformed and changed and given a new calling.

Paul was given the opportunity to see what the true meaning of life was all about. It was about God's love for him and for all those he might encounter. So often we ask that question: what is the meaning of life? What's its purpose? Paul's going to say it's to encounter the love of God and to share that love. It's why he can go into this hymn at the end of this chapter about the nature of all this. It's a wonderful passage and I don't know why I haven't simply memorized it over the years. It's well worth memorizing. What happens when we memorize something? We know it by heart, right? When we know something by heart, what happens? It becomes part of us. It's like it dwells in us. What Paul is inviting us to do is this very thing, to know Christ's love by heart and to let it dwell in us.

I always have to do a little aside. I want to make sure we know that what I'm talking about here is biblical love. This *agape* that he's talking about is the same thing that grace is about: God choosing to care for us, to value us. I could spend a lot of time thinking about that because each of those things is incredible, to think that God chooses. This isn't something forced upon God. God chooses to love each of us, to care for each of us.

We can spend a lot of time thinking about what caring and valuing means. It's what I think that every human being needs: to know that we are loved fully. God wraps God's arms around us if we let him. It's when someone cares for us, loves us, that we are strengthened. It's that very Spirit of God giving us strength in our inner being as we allow God to love us, to trust that love to be saved by faith. To trust that love. And, as we do that, learn it by heart, we let Christ dwell in us. And when, as we begin to open up further and allow that love to live in us, it's like knowing the verse by heart, it just comes out when we need it. It comes out of us. It becomes a way of life.

It's in contrast, however, with the world. The world's way tells us that we should be all about ourselves, that we should be in competition with everyone else, that it's about being better than others. Think about it this way. Paul is inviting us to live in the love of God in a way that doesn't suggest that we want to be better than everyone else but we want to be the best we can be for Christ, for God. We want that love to begin to shape our lives. What does that mean? It means that we choose to care and value others, particularly God and then anything God cares about. Which is what? Just about everything and everybody. How do we care? Paul is going to encourage us to think about that in particular ways in the rest of Ephesians but now is the point at which he is recognizing how this has shaped his life, overturned his history, how it intersects his heartaches and gives him an inner strength that he hopes everybody can have. He wants everyone to know the breadth, and height and length and depth of God's love in Christ that surpasses all knowledge.

Sometimes I think we say "Oh love. It's just a common sentiment—no big deal." But there is a vastness to it that we need to jump into, that we get to jump into. The breadth. The height. The length. And then there is a depth, four dimensions. That's a little out of our experience unless we go into the time and space continuum. Anyway, it's incredible. He's inviting us to know that it surpasses knowledge, it surpasses everything. That's why all of sudden Paul can't help himself, but has to go into this ode to what God has done. Look at what he says here, this is just incredible. What he says is as we allow that love to surround us, as we allow ourselves to jump in, as we allow that breadth and height and depth to enter into our lives and begin to overflow in us, what happens? We're full of the fullness of God. I don't know about you but that gives me goose bumps. It's crazy. I don't think any of us are there yet, but it's an invitation to be on the journey to where we are going. It's not about the world changing, it's about us changing. And, it's changing in incredible ways: an inner strength and a way of seeing because we see with care, not with a wall between us and the other.

And so, Paul says this is what the Good News is all about. This is incredible. He ends with saying, "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 Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen."