

“A Most Blessed Failure”

by Greg Smith-Young (Elora-Bethany Pastoral Charge)
Fifth in a series on Ephesians

Ephesians 3.1-21

February 9, 2014

Therefore I, Paul, am a prisoner of the Messiah Jesus for you Gentiles. . . .

I assume, by the way, that you have heard about the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you? You know how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote briefly? When you read this, you can understand my insight into the Messiah's mystery. This was not made known to people in previous generations, but it has now been revealed by the Spirit to his holy apostles and prophets. The mystery is that through the gospel, the Gentiles share in Israel's inheritance. They are members of the same body. They take part in the same promise in the Messiah Jesus.

I was made a servant of this gospel, as the gift of God's grace which was given to me by the energy of his power. This grace was given to me, though I am the least of God's people. My task is to tell the Gentiles the good news of the Messiah's wealth, which is beyond counting. My job is also to bring to light for everyone the mysterious plan, hidden for ages in God who created all things.

This is the plan: through the church, God's wisdom in all its variety is now made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was God's eternal purpose that he accomplished in the Messiah Jesus our Lord. In Jesus we have boldness and confident access to God, through our trust in him. So please do not be discouraged because of my sufferings for you. That's your glory!

So, I kneel before the Father, who names every family in heaven and on earth. I pray that, from the riches of his glory, he will give you strength with power, through his Spirit in your inner being. I pray the Messiah will live in your hearts through faith. I pray you, who are rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to understand with all God's people the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the Messiah's love that is deeper than we can know. May God fill you with all his fullness.

Now to him who can do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, because of his power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in the Messiah Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Ephesians 3.1-21

Translation by N. T. Wright, adapted by GSY

I've got some questions to start us off (and I'm looking for your thoughts).

What does success look like to you? Think of a friend, your child, your grandchild. What would make them successful? What would make you successful?

How about this: What makes a church like ours successful?

We've created and inherited ideas of success and measures of success. Some make it. Some do not. Those who make it – people, businesses, organizations, churches – we want to be like them.

And those who are not successful. . . . What about someone who doesn't meet these signs of success? What about a church that does not meet these marks of success? What about you, when you don't make it? What about us, together as this church?

II

In our Bible reading, Paul is in prison.¹ Which, if I'm not mistaken, is not on our "success" list.

Prison back then, like now, was an awful place to be. People find out you are in prison, they think poorly of you. Being a prisoner strips you of your honour and clothes you with shame. Pleasant people don't go to prison. Good people don't go to prison. Winners don't go to prison. You did something. You got caught. No more freedom.² In Paul's world, prison wasn't a punishment. Prison was where they sent you to wait for your trial, or your punishment.

Paul has come with good news, but now he is in prison for causing a riot. Paul has been proclaiming the victory of Jesus the Messiah, but now he is in prison, not exactly a sign of triumph. He has been telling of Almighty God, but now he is under the heel of the Empire and its gods. How can your good news message of victory have any credibility when you are in prison? And what good can you do, in prison?

¹ It is hard from this letter to figure out the exact situation. It could be that Paul was not in prison at all, but was using "imprisonment" as a metaphor. However, I find that unlikely, given his multiple references to imprisonment and suffering, and the independent sources that confirm Paul's multiple incarcerations. I think it most likely that Paul was in Rome, awaiting trial. In other words, this letter comes at the end of the events narrated in *The Acts of the Apostles*. Another theory is that he was imprisoned in Ephesus itself, and sent this letter to Christians in the region around the city.

² Timothy G. Gombis, *The Drama of Ephesians: Participating in the Triumph of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010), 109.

Paul is writing to encourage fellow Jesus-followers.³ In today's portion, he sets out to tell them about his prayers for them, and his praises to God. He gets around to this. But first, he runs off on a tangent. Because he is in prison.

III

He wants them to see something: He is right where he needs to be!

Weak. Powerless. Shameful. To all signs, Godforsaken. Yet, God is working through him. God is using him to tell the story of Jesus. And people keep on believing! Through Paul's weak words, and his disastrous circumstances, the changes-everything news of the risen Messiah continues to seize hold of people. Prison has not shut him up. The power of God's enemies has not shut him down.⁴

God is using Paul in prison to continue to create the church-community of Jesus.⁵

God is creating a church-community of Jews and Gentiles. Jews, who have carried the promises of God for generations. Gentiles, us outsiders who are being brought inside in the Messiah Jesus.

Together, we share in God's promises to Abraham and his family; in Jesus we are all part of the family.⁶ Together, we are parts of the body, of which Jesus is the head. Together, we are heirs of God's riches.⁷ Imagine finding out the folks down the road have just inherited a lot of money. Imagine finding out that you are now part of that family, with a full share in their wealth.⁸ We share in the treasures of God. We are finally alive, as God meant us to live. We finally have hope, as we are held in God's future. We can go from room to room in creation, God's royal palace, delighting in the splendor of God's wondrous

³ There is much scholarly debate about whether Paul wrote this, or a student of his after his death. I find the arguments against Paul's authorship unpersuasive, though it is quite likely that Paul dictated the letter to someone else (Tychicus in 6.21?) as was his normal custom. Whether he dictated it word for word, or offered the key ideas which the writer then crafted into the letter is impossible to determine. For discussions of the authorship and setting of Ephesians, see Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld, Ephesians (Waterloo, ON: Herald, 2002), 24-28, 341-44; Michael J. Gorman, Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul & His Letters (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 501f; N. T. Wright, Paul and the Faithfulness of God. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2013), 56-60.

⁴ Gombis, 110-114; Wright 37.

⁵ Gombis, 115.

⁶ Wright, 34.

⁷ In verse 6, Paul uses 3 words that begin with the prefix *syn-*, which means with or together: *synklēronoma* (together-inheritors), *syssoma* (together body-members), *symmetocha* (together promise-sharers).

⁸ I've borrowed this illustration from Wright, 33.

world.⁹

We who were outsiders have been brought in, and those who were insiders have been brought closer. Together we are in the company of God. Not a god who is arbitrary or bitter, who throws power around and spits us out. God, who in Jesus welcomes us, beloved children together, into the Holy Presence.

Paul is in prison, and all this is happening. Turns out this was God's plan from the beginning. Paul calls this the "mystery." Something only hinted at, a whisper, is now bursting out and shining forth. God's worldwide family is being gathered together, all because of Jesus.

And those powers, who think they can stop this . . . who imagine a prison cell can stifle it . . . who trust in fear, intimidation, violence and death to put an end to it . . . who think they are in control . . . They lock Paul up, certain they've won. But then this church-community insists on popping up. An insurrection of peace in the enemy territory of hatred, of reconciliation in the midst of division, of life in the face of death, of true freedom from behind a locked prison door.

Don't be surprised! This is God, who with Abraham and Sarah made a family from a childless couple. This is God, who hitches hope to a rabble of slaves. This is God, who breathes life into dry bones. This is God, who binds the lion's mouth and cools the furnace flames. This is God, who turns water into wine. This is God, who becomes a condemned criminal, executed on a cross. This is God, who rolls away the gravestone with resurrection. This is God, the Holy Spirit who pours out on men and women, young and old.

So what does success look like, when we're talking about God?

IV

Sometimes what seems the worst thing is, in fact, the best thing . . . because it is how God is working.

Sometimes what seems the worst thing is, in fact, the best thing . . . because it is how God is working. And God always works for good. God is always bringing things together, gathering up what has collapsed, fixing what is broken, healing what is wounded, forgiving

⁹ Ibid, 36f.

us who are guilty, reconciling us who are divided. Always!

And sometimes, often perhaps, God is doing this making-things-right, through the very events, circumstances, and happenings which seem most wrong. Through our failures. If God were only to work with whatever on earth is pure and perfect, God would have nothing to work with. Praise God, who does wonders with what is messed up and what is broken down. With the likes of us, and the failures we find ourselves in.

J. R. R. Tolkien wrote *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*. He loved words, and he made up a word for this: *eucaastrophe*. He took a Greek word, *catastrophe*, which means . . . catastrophe, disaster. And he stuck a Greek prefix in front, e-u, *eu*. That means “good.” A good catastrophe. A beneficial disaster. A blessed failure. *Eucaastrophe*.¹⁰

Paul, in prison, celebrates the holy mess he is in. It’s a *euchatastrophe*. For sometimes what seems the worst thing is, in fact, the best thing . . . because it is how God is working.

Praise God!

¹⁰ <http://tolkiengateway.net/wiki/Eucaastrophe>