

# The Cosmologic Symphony Orchestra

Ephesians 3:8-13 August 9, 2023

**Ephesians 3:8-13 - <sup>8</sup>This grace was given to me—the least of all the saints—to proclaim to the Gentiles the incalculable riches of Christ, <sup>9</sup>and to shed light for all about the administration of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things. <sup>10</sup>This is so that God’s multi-faceted wisdom may now be made known through the church to the rulers and authorities in the heavens. <sup>11</sup>This is according to his eternal purpose accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. <sup>12</sup>In him we have boldness and confident access through faith in him. <sup>13</sup>So, then, I ask you not to be discouraged over my afflictions on your behalf, for they are your glory.**

A symphony orchestra can range from 15 players to over 100. They are made up of different people from various backgrounds, coming together with assorted instruments to put a composer’s work on display. Symphonies typically have multiple movements with progressing themes and “often complex, elaborate...music.”<sup>1</sup>

There are some famously difficult compositions. Alexander Scriabin’s *Mysterium*, though never finished, was meant to last an entire week. Scriabin was a strange guy - he wrote things like, “I am God” in his secret journal, and he believed that if the *Mysterium* was performed in the foothills of the Himalayan mountains, at the end of the seven days the “world would dissolve into pure bliss.”<sup>2</sup>

We’re in a section of Ephesians where Paul is explaining the mystery God reveals through the Church. We can liken it to a symphony. It’s melody is grace. The movements last not for a week, but for an entire era of God’s plan - Paul calls it a dispensation. Together we perform this composition, in harmonious cooperation. As part of the whole, we each have a specific part to play. We each are a specific instrument placed intentionally into this group by the Lord. We are God’s workmanship, His masterpiece work of art, not made just for our own benefit or for the betterment of earth, but (as we’ll see tonight) there is a cosmic, other-worldly purpose for God’s work through the Church.

Paul has been talking a little bit about *his* specific place in God’s plan, which helps us see *our* place in the orchestra and encourages us to join the band - to get on the bandwagon of grace.

**Ephesians 3:8 - <sup>8</sup>This grace was given to me—the least of all the saints—to proclaim to the Gentiles the incalculable riches of Christ,**

The grace given to Paul was his calling to preach to the Gentiles, the revelation he received from Jesus, and the opportunities God gave him. But this grace was *also* the sufferings and obstacles he endured, including his current imprisonment. He called these things a *gift* of grace.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://coloradosymphony.org/symphony-vs-orchestra/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ludwig-van.com/toronto/2020/11/17/feature-seven-difficult-pieces-music-ever/>

Paul identifies himself as the least of all the saints. Your version may say “less than the least.” Linguists explain that the term he uses is a funny Greek word meaning, “smallest,” or, “leaster.”<sup>3</sup>

Many of you know that, in Paul’s letters, there’s an interesting progression. In an earlier letter, 1 Corinthians, Paul refers to himself as “the least of the apostles.” Here, a number of years later, he calls himself the “least of the saints.” And then, in 1 Timothy, he calls himself the “worst of sinners.”

It’s not that he was full of himself in the 50’s and finally thought better in the mid 60’s - there’s a lot of context around why he used those phrases when he did - but, on a devotional level, his humility grew as his walk with the Lord continued. He did think better of *himself* as the years wore on. He had a tender sensitivity to his own weakness and his need for the Lord’s intervention.

Some might say, “Well, Paul’s just saying that. It’s a *false* humility.” But that’s not what Paul is doing. Humility was *not* a virtue in the Greco-Roman empire.<sup>4</sup> It was associated with failure and shame.<sup>5</sup> So, Paul identifying himself this way would’ve grabbed attention.

If Paul was the *least*, what did that mean for *me*, an Ephesian Christian? If God uses the smallest, leastest guy for His purposes, what might He have for *me* to do? This letter wants each Christian to think very seriously about what God has empowered them to do and what their day-to-day callings are and how to walk in the reality of salvation with a heavenly perspective.

Paul said, “One of the primary ways I fulfill my calling is by proclaiming the riches of of Christ.” He doesn’t mean *physical* riches, but heavenly ones. The letter began by saying we’ve been given “every spiritual blessing” in Christ. That whole first chapter was centered around us understanding just how good salvation is.

Now we are sent out to proclaim the riches of Christ. R. Kent Hughes puts it this way: Our preaching should convey the truth that “*Christ always enriches life. [He] never subtracts from it.*”<sup>6</sup> Now, the Lord may *remove* some damaging, malignant thing from our lives, but our lives are always benefited by Him. His riches are “incalculable.” The term means they “cannot be traced out.”<sup>7</sup> You can’t find the outer boundary of them.

### **Ephesians 3:9 - 9 and to shed light for all about the administration of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things.**

Paul’s goal was to shed light. Before he was a Christian, he snuffed out a lot of lights. He savagely hunted believers down. In the book of Acts, people heard Paul was born again and they said, “Wait, isn’t this the guy who caused such devastation in Jerusalem?”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Markus Barth *Ephesians 1-3: Introduction, Translation, And Commentary*

<sup>4</sup> Ben Witherington *The Letters To Philemon, The Colossians, And The Ephesians*

<sup>5</sup> John Dickson *How Christian Humility Upended The World*

<sup>6</sup> R. Kent Hughes *Ephesians: The Mystery Of The Body Of Christ*

<sup>7</sup> *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary Volume 11: Ephesians Through Philemon*

<sup>8</sup> Acts 9:21 NLT

But what a great example of *how powerful* God's salvation is. He could save Paul, who may have been the *worst* person on the planet at the time. The Lord could take this destroyer and make him a deliverer. Hands used for murder could now be used for miracles. A tongue used to blaspheme would now broadcast the Good News of Jesus Christ.

God transforms people. He makes us *new* creations. He brings us new purpose, a new spiritual family, a new way of life, bringing everything together in Christ.

This phrase "to shed light" can be translated "to make plain."<sup>9</sup> And that's a great litmus test for how we're communicating the Gospel to people. Are we making plain Who God is and what He's said and what His plan is? That's the job - to make it plain.

Now, *if* God wants to make Himself plain, a person might ask, "Why not just write a big message in the sky?" In fact, I had someone ask me that recently. "If God is real, why doesn't He just show Himself and write His message in the sky?" It's a fair question.

The first answer is that He actually *has* written His message in the sky. The heavens declare the glory of God. He has written more than 750,000 words about Himself and His plan, preserved those words for thousands of years, had them translated into thousands of languages and sent to every corner of the world.<sup>10</sup>

He *did* bodily appear and walk the earth for more than 30 years. And humanity largely rejected Him. They *refused* to believe, even when they witnessed His power first hand.

On top of that, God has sown eternity into the heart of every human being so that they will grope for God and He's made the promise that if a person seeks Him, they *will* find Him.

But, set that aside for a minute. Why *doesn't* God just write a big billboard in the sky? I was thinking about that question and, it's just a thought experiment, but imagine you were driving down the 99 tomorrow and, as you go, there's a big billboard in black and white that said, "GENE - your great-great-uncle has a fortune for you. Call this number." Would you call that number? I wouldn't!

But what if this great-great-uncle you've never met sent a *friend* to come find you, explain the situation. Say, "You don't know me and you've never met your great-great-uncle, but he knows all about you and wants to give you this inheritance. I know it seems too good to be true, but here's a down payment. And here are the documents. And I'm here to help you get in contact with your great-great-uncle and I'll try to answer any questions you have. And I'll tell you that it's not just you. Your great-great-uncle is also *MY* great-great-uncle and all these things are true. I've received a fortune from him." That would be a lot different than a random billboard, wouldn't it?

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<sup>9</sup> See the *New International Version*

<sup>10</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bible\\_translations](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bible_translations)

We are the friends God has sent to make these things plain. Things that seem impossible - too good to be true, but really are. That God is the Creator and Savior and a Generous Giver.

Our goal is to make plain, to clear the path, *not* to put obstacles between the Lord and those He wants to save.

**Ephesians 3:10 - <sup>10</sup> This is so that God's multi-faceted wisdom may now be made known through the church to the rulers and authorities in the heavens.**

Multi-faceted is a word that can mean 'many-colored.' It was used to describe woven carpets.<sup>11</sup> I'm having us think of it like an orchestra. All these pieces coming together to be woven together in common purpose, to create a whole out of many parts. This was the great mystery Paul revealed to Ephesians: That Jews and Gentiles, men and women, slave and free, rich and poor, we're all being brought together in the Church for God's glorious work of art.

But here we learn the Church is not just meant for *earth*. God has a cosmic, supernatural purpose for us. Through the Church, He plans to *teach angelic beings* things about His wisdom.

Angels are *not* all-knowing. The Bible indicates that they have a lot to learn. In fact, it tells us that they are very interested in understanding what God is doing with us. Peter says that the angels "long to catch a glimpse of these things."<sup>12</sup>

Ephesians say that, in eternity, God plans to put the Church "on display" to demonstrate His kindness. And here it seems we are being used as an object lesson to teach the rulers and authorities in the heavens about God's wisdom.

It's incredible to think that angels are investigating my life. And I realized that so often I am trying to figure out what God is showing me for my life, which is a good thing, but this gives us another thought to tuck away: What is God showing angelic beings *through* me?

Remember that stunning scene in Job 2? There's the Divine Council, assembled before the Lord, the Devil comes in and God says, "Have you considered my servant, Job?" "Uh, I'd rather Satan *doesn't* consider me..." God's plan is so much greater in scope and scale than we realize. He's doing things through your life that ripple all the way into the eternal, heavenly realm.

This also helps us have a proper perspective on spiritual warfare. That's a topic Paul will speak about more in chapter 6. But one of the best ways to walk in victory is to live out our calling in the Church. Through the Church God makes His wisdom known to the rulers and authorities in heaven.

**Ephesians 3:11 - <sup>11</sup> This is according to his eternal purpose accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

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<sup>11</sup> John Stott *The Message Of Ephesians*

<sup>12</sup> 1 Peter 1:12

When you attend a symphony, your attention is on the piece of music. You *may* know the name of one of the soloists, but you have no idea who the second double-bassoon player is. You're there to hear Beethoven's masterpiece. In a sense, it doesn't matter at all who is playing the piece, just that there is someone there who knows the music and is ready to play.

Paul points out here that it's not about him, it's about Jesus. This was one of the problems in the church at Corinth. They elevated individuals and became a fanbase for certain ministers. "I'm of Paul," or "I'm of Apollos," or "I'm of Peter." But *Jesus* is the One Who accomplishes these things. Not us. Not some celebrity Christian. It's Christ.

"Well, if it's all Christ, then who cares if I participate or not?" It's true that God doesn't *need* you, but He *wants* you on the team. We've seen the movies where they assemble the team, right? They get *this* person for this aspect of the job and *that* person for another aspect. God knocks on your door and says, "I want you for this thing I'm doing. Do you want in?" And this isn't just a one-time thing. This is an *eternal* plan, the unfolding of a work that will last forever. One commentator noted, Marxism is going to cease to exist. Islam is going to cease to exist. Free-market capitalism is going to cease to exist. Only the Church is going to survive history and we will rule the universe alongside Christ.<sup>13</sup> The Lord says to us today, "You want in on this? I've got a spot for you."

But it's *His* design. He's the Composer and the Conductor. I remember going to college, trying out for the concert choir. In high school I was one of the few boys who wanted to sing and could sing loud. So, I was a *tenor* in high school choir.

In college, the choir director said, "What part do you sing?" "I sing tenor." "No you don't. You're gonna be a bass." "I can't sing that low." "Well, you'll be a baritone when there's a baritone part and a bass the rest of the time." He'd rather me be a weak bass than a terrible tenor. But, he knew better. And he understood the other components that I didn't and he was forming a group.

**Ephesians 3:12 - <sup>12</sup>In him we have boldness and confident access through faith in him.**

Did you know you have freedom of speech?<sup>14</sup> Not the kind that is being eroded and censored more and more in our spiraling society, but freedom of speech before God Himself. We don't have to cower. We don't have to be afraid to speak to God about anything in our hearts. God wants us to have the kind of relationship with Him that friends have with each other.<sup>15</sup>

This access is available *now*. This is a reminder we constantly need, because we're *not* as bold as we could be. I know that's true because *even Paul himself* is going to ask the Ephesians to pray that he would be as bold as he can be! So, as we exercise our faith and do so imperfectly, we want to

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<sup>13</sup> Hughes

<sup>14</sup> Witherington

<sup>15</sup> Frank Thielman *Ephesians*

remind ourselves of *God's* faithfulness, all He has given us, and what *is* true about our relationship with Him. His power and grace and kindness makes this all possible and He will not relent.

**Ephesians 3:13 - <sup>13</sup>So, then, I ask you not to be discouraged over my afflictions on your behalf, for they are your glory.**

Paul's afflictions were many and severe. Yet, we see he was not afraid of them or discouraged by them. He said, "This is on your behalf. It's for your glory. It's my part to play."

If you go to see a symphony, you don't pity the musicians for the countless thousands of hours dedicated to study and practice. You don't feel bad about their sore fingers or having to carry around a 30 pound tuba all over the place. We understand that's part of the life for this musician. Paul, essentially is saying that, but in a much more heavenly frame of mind. "Those scars from my scourging? Oh those are like the calluses guitar players get on their fingers. Being imprisoned for 5 years? That's part of being first-chair apostle to the Gentiles!"

Paul looked at his life, with all the hardship and pain and opposition, and he says, "This is a privilege. This is God's grace toward me."

In a sense he said, "I don't deserve this!" But not in the way we *usually* hear that phrase. He said, "I don't deserve the favor God is showing me. I'm the smallest. The worst of sinners. I persecuted the Church. I blasphemed the name of Christ." Not only that but he understood that his suffering had a great purpose. He said, "This is going to accomplish great things for you guys." His being strong through suffering would help *them* be strong in suffering. This testimony would help propel the message of the Gospel to those who heard it. "Let me tell you about Paul." As far as Paul was concerned, this was all a wonderful gift of grace.

It reminds us of that great phrase in Genesis 6: "But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord." What did Noah find? A big job to do. A hard set of circumstances to endure. But power to go through those circumstances and ultimate deliverance. God's favor for Noah was a calling - a place in His plan. And he played his part faithfully.

Adolf von Hensley's *Piano Concerto in F Minor* is so challenging that only three recordings of it exist.<sup>16</sup> It requires the players hands to have certain, abnormal formations and elasticity. It's a special piece for special people.

Noah found grace and a special place in God's plan. Paul found grace and a special place in God's plan. In Ephesians 4 we'll read, "Now grace was given to *each one of us* according to the measure of Christ's gift." The question is: What is my place in God's plan? He's invited us into the orchestra of the Church, this multi-faceted, radiant symphony of His power and grace. The composition He sets before us may be challenging, it may demand intense levels of dedication at times, but it is good, masterful, and eternal in scope. Let's find our place and join in the song.

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.ludwig-van.com/toronto/2020/11/17/feature-seven-difficult-pieces-music-ever/>