

**GOD'S NEW COMMUNITY:
CREATED BY GOD AND FOR GOD
Ephesians 3: 7-21**

Please review this week's catechism question.

Did you meet someone you didn't know at church this past Sunday?

INTRODUCTION

Brainstorm together to create two lists. Have someone time ninety seconds while you make each list. First list: Make a list of all the evidences you can see in the history of humanity and in the present world that seems to deny the existence of an all-loving, all-powerful, personal God. Second list: Make a list of all the evidences you can see in the history of the world and in the present world that points to the existence of an all-loving, all powerful, personal God.

Would an unbiased observer, considering the history of the human race and the condition of the world today conclude that there is a good, loving and all-powerful God ruling over this world? While there is much joy, much beauty and pleasure, yet hanging over everything is the dark cloud of evil, suffering and death. Just in our own century millions of people have suffered and died at the hands of human savagery. Simply listing names and places reminds us of millions of people who have suffered horrible deaths at the hands of evil people: Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, Rwanda, Bosnia, Roe vs. Wade, Jeffrey Dahmer, Sudan, Iraq, to name but a few. Then, to the list of evil done by humans, we can add a growing list of "natural" evils, AIDS, SARS, cancer, starvation, floods, hurricanes, etc. Many millions of people, observing the random and seemingly universal experience of evil and suffering in the world have concluded that there is no God running this universe. Many billions of others view this epidemic of evil and suffering and describe reality as the conflict between equally powerful forces of good and evil with evil often gaining the upper hand over the good.

It is the claim of Paul in his letter to the Ephesians that God, through Jesus Christ, is overcoming Satan and all the forces of evil in the world. This little letter is Paul's declaration that despite appearances, God has

destroyed, is destroying and will destroy Satan and all the evil in the world that he inspires. Evil and suffering will not have the last word and in fact are right now being conquered by Christ. God is displaying his awesome love and power in the world through the work of the resurrected and glorified Jesus Christ. That is the message of this letter Paul wrote. In chapter 3: 7-13 we are going to see two ways that God glorifies himself through Jesus. We will see two ways that God reveals or displays his power and love that is conquering evil and restoring his creation to its original condition.

STUDY

1. In vv. 7-9 how does Paul describe himself in terms of who he is and what he does?

He is a servant of this gospel. He is less than the least of all God's people. His job is to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ and to make plain to everyone what is the administration of this mystery.

2. Why would he say that he is less than the least of all God's people? (See Acts 9:1-6, 22:4-5, 26:9-11, 1 Corinthians 15:9, & 1 Timothy 1:13)

Paul hated Christ and hated Christians so much that he approved of the stoning of the Stephen the first Christian martyr and actually persecuted Christians by arresting them and having them thrown in prison for no crime other than believing in Jesus. Additionally, he spoke all manner of untrue and blasphemous things about Jesus. He is amazed that God would save him through the death of Jesus, a man who was so violently opposed to Christ.

3. How did he become a servant of the gospel?

Paul says that the only explanation of why he is a servant of the gospel, a proclaimer of the unsearchable riches of Christ is because of God's free, sovereign, unconditional, unmerited favor working powerfully in him to change his heart so that what he once hated, Jesus and his people, he now loves.

4. Read Acts 22:3, 25-28, 23:6, 26:4-5, 1 Corinthians 4:9-13, Galatians 1:14, Philippians 3: 4b-6 and compare them with 2 Corinthians 11:24-29. Using your imagination a little bit, describe the conditions of Paul's life prior to his becoming a Christian and after becoming a Christian.

Paul was as Jewish as you could possibly be. He was born of orthodox Jewish parents. His father was also wealthy and a well-connected Roman citizen in the city of Tarsus, located in present day Turkey. He was raised according to the Jewish law. He went to the most prestigious Jewish schools. He was a Pharisee, the strictest sect within Judaism. He was known as one of the preeminent young Pharisee scholars. As a Pharisee, he was absolutely convinced that the Jewish people were God's chosen people. The only people who were acceptable to God were Jewish people who practiced their Judaism or those Gentiles who become Jewish and practiced Judaism. He knew that those who claimed that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah, the eternal Son of God, were guilty of the worst sort of blasphemy. To claim that a mere man was God, to assert that the Messiah was crucified and that the only people who were acceptable to God were those, whether Jew or Gentile, who had faith in Christ was more than he could handle. He was furious with Christians and made it his personal responsibility to stamp out such wicked and ungodly teaching.

The conditions of Paul's life after his conversion are the opposite of what they were prior to his conversion. He is poor, sometimes naked. Rather than being in the favor of the powerful he is often arrested, beaten and thrown into prison. In the world of men he is despised rather than respected.

5. How does Paul view his present condition? How does he feel about being a servant of the gospel and an apostle in these conditions? (Compare this with 1 Timothy 1: 15-17)

He is full of joy and amazement and worships God for his great mercy and love that he has poured out upon him in Jesus Christ. In spite of the fact that his life is now full of hardship he views his life in Christ, as an apostle, as a gift of God's grace. He is so overcome that he is loved by God, that Christ shed his own blood for his sins that he views his entire life, with all of its suffering as a gift from God.

6. How do you think Paul would respond to the question, "What evidence do we have that there is an all-loving and all-powerful God at work in the world?"

One of the things that he would point to is his own life. How do you explain Paul abandoning a life of wealth, power, prestige and self-righteous certainty to become an itinerant preacher with no home, no pay, often subjected to torture and imprisonment? He explains it by saying that God, contrary to all expectation and contrary to what he deserved, powerfully worked in his life so that he loves Jesus and loves to tell others about him, more than he loves anyone or anything else. His hatred for Christ and Christians has been transformed into passionate love for Jesus and Christians. He has forsaken everything in order to know Jesus. The reason he has forsaken all to know Jesus is because God changed his heart. His changed life would be a chief evidence that there is a God of love and power ruling this world.

7. Does your transformed life bear witness to the fact that there is a God of love and power running this world?

God exhibits his awesome power and love by transforming sinners.

8. Verse 10 literally begins with "in order that" or "with the result that". What does Paul expect is going to happen as a result of his making known the unsearchable riches of Christ/making plain the administration of the mystery of Christ?

The result of the gospel being proclaimed is that the manifold wisdom of God is made known to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly realms through the church. Preaching of the gospel creates the church and the church then displays the manifold wisdom of God to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms.

9. Who or what are the "rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms"? Compare with Ephesians 1:19b-21, 2:2-3, 6:10-13.

Paul is referring to hostile satanic or demonic beings who dwell in the heavenly/spiritual dimension and who have influence over and in this world. Notice especially in 2:2 that Satan is described as "the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient." Satan is actively

and aggressively seeking to despoil God's good creation. He is ferociously seeking to tempt humans and to promote all manner of evil in every way that he possibly can. He has many schemes and strategies that he uses to this end. However, the church, which is created by God through the preaching of the gospel, displays the manifold wisdom of God to these evil, hostile powers that are working to promote disobedience and sin in the world.

10. What does it mean to say that through the church the manifold wisdom of God is being revealed to these forces of evil? The key to answering this question is to answer two other questions: First, what is the problem that God has wisely solved by creating the church? (CLUE: look back at 2: 1-3 and 11-16)

By nature human beings are spiritually dead, i.e. they have no interest in God and no ability to become interested in God. They delight to do evil. They are followers of Satan. They are objects of God's wrath. They are separate from Christ and God. Humans are full of hostility and antagonism towards one another (The Jewish/Gentile hostility is the supreme example of human divisions.). They are hostile towards God and God is hostile towards them.

11. The second question is this: how does the church show God's wisdom in overcoming these problems?

The church of Jesus is the seed, the evidence, the beginning of the restoration that God is going to consummate when Christ returns. Every local church, made up as it is of sinners who hated God and people, expresses the great wisdom of God. He, by killing his own Son, has satisfied his justice and made it possible for him to accept into his family men and women who have committed the most heinous crimes against him. By the death of his own son he has destroyed everything that separates humans from one another. The cross is the great leveler of human society. The cross of Christ puts every human being on the same footing. All are sinners and all are in need of a Savior. No other human distinction matters. The cross eliminates all ground for human pride and prejudice. By his cross he makes it possible for human beings to forgive one another and to love one another without expecting anything in return. It is in the church alone that humans who are complete strangers and who have no reason to love each other and

many reasons to distrust each other and even hate each other, are brought together by the cross of Jesus Christ. The existence of the church proclaims to the hostile rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms that God has made a way to overcome their evil designs. By the cross of Jesus, which creates the church and is the center of the church's life, God has planted his new community on enemy territory to live contrary to the ways of the world. The church is God planting a rebel cell in enemy territory pointing ahead to the day when the entire creation will be renewed and all of his enemies will be completely destroyed and the whole earth will belong to Christ and his people. The church exists as the one community on earth that is gathered together by the cross of Christ and around the cross of Christ. Our existence points to the power of God in the death of Jesus reconciling the world to himself and to one another. The cross is the instrument of restoration and our existence shows the wisdom of God in the cross.

12. According to verse 11 how long has God been planning to reveal his wisdom through the church? Why is this important?

God has always planned on overcoming the forces of evil in this way. From all eternity he has been thinking about River Hills Community Church and Bethel Baptist Church and Christ Presbyterian Church and Bubbling Springs Church in Mongolia and every local church that is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Jesus as the cornerstone. Every local church manifests the wisdom of God in making a way for sinners to live in loving fellowship with one another and with God through the cross. Every local church is vitally connected to God and living in his presence through the work of Jesus and God has been working from all eternity to bring every local church that exists into existence for this purpose.

13. In v. 13 we find out that Paul, while writing this letter is in prison, suffering as a Christian and as a result of preaching the gospel. He asks the Ephesians to not let his imprisonment discourage them. Notice the "therefore". The reason the Ephesians should not be discouraged is because of what he just said in vv. 7-12. Why would Paul's imprisonment discourage the Ephesians? How does Paul's transformed life and the existence of the church displaying God's wisdom to the rulers and authorities give them reasons to not be discouraged?

He is one of God's primary spokesmen for the gospel and he is in prison. He is suffering because of his proclamation of this message that is forming the church. It would appear that in Paul's own life Satan and the forces of evil are winning. The power and love of God seem to again be defeated in the life of Paul. How can God be successfully restoring the world, defeating evil when Paul is suffering so much? How can there be a God of love and power running the universe when a man like Paul who has given up every worldly comfort in order to serve God is in prison and has suffered so much abuse at the hands of evil people? Paul's answer is that his suffering, rather than casting doubt upon the love and power of God, confirms it. His suffering is for the sake of the church. His suffering is the means by which the gospel comes to the church and thus creates the church. His suffering is the glory, the evidence of the greatness of the church. As he says in Col. 1, his suffering completes the suffering of Jesus and results in the formation of the church. As he says in 2 Timothy, "I endure all things for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory."

Paul's letters are full of this language. Suffering is not simply an unpleasant side effect of preaching the gospel of Christ in a world dominated by evil. Rather, suffering is the means God has appointed to confirm and promote the gospel. What displays the all satisfying power of the gospel of Christ more: when people with full bellies who live in beautiful homes with healthy and happy children praise God and extol his greatness, or when people beat up for preaching the gospel and thrown in a filthy prison with no trial sing hymns through the night? (See Acts 16:16-25) What reveals the amazing love of God more: when a church is formed and flourishes in an open culture like ours or when it is formed and flourishes in spite of the brutal repression of the government as in China? Nowhere does the Bible tell us to go looking for suffering. However, the presence of suffering in the church is no evidence that the church is not the neon sign of God's love and power in the world. Rather the suffering of the church and of those who work for the church is the means God has appointed to create it and display his great love and power to the world. The suffering of the church and of the church's emissaries are the glory of the church. They are the chief instruments God uses to build the church and manifest his greatness to and through the church. The wisdom of God is shown in the church by his transforming the experience of suffering. Suffering no longer calls

into question God's love but makes his love more apparent as the suffering of God's people both creates the church and causes the church to worship God for his love in Christ.

14. If the existence of the church reveals God's wisdom to Satan and demons, now much more ought it to display his wisdom to us. Can you see the wisdom of God in the existence of River Hills Community Church?

God exhibits his awesome power and love by revealing his wisdom in and through the church.