

Visions that Change Our Lives

Rich Nathan

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"I Believe in the Church" Series

Ephesians 3:1-13

My father-in-law, Joe, is not a Christian. He was raised in a Roman Catholic family and went to Catholic schools for his education. But he doesn't believe what the Catholics taught him and he doesn't believe when I talk with him about Christ. He walked away from his Catholic heritage years ago and hasn't been in church but two or three times here in the last 20 years.

A few times we have gotten into really honest, heart to heart talks about Christ. I have said, "Joe, why don't you believe? You know, there is this mountain of evidence in favor of Christ. We've talked about it. There were dozens of OT prophecies written hundreds of years before Christ ever walked on the earth that predicted the place of Jesus' birth and the timing of his birth and his ancestry and the fact that Christ would be rejected by his own people. We have OT prophecies concerning his death on the cross and his resurrection. You have several eye-witness accounts of his life."

"There is this mountain of archeological evidence, Joe, verifying dozens of details in the NT writers' accounts. I mean so many things that archeologists have discovered back up the veracity of the scriptures. And there is no reasonable alternative to the claim that Christ rose from the dead. Joe, you were here on Easter Sunday. You heard me talk about all of the various possibilities regarding what happened to the body of Christ. There simply is no reasonable alternative for a thinking person to believe about the body other than Christ rose from the dead. People went to their deaths swearing they had seen him alive after he died. With all that we've talked about and with all that you know, how is it that you don't believe."

On several occasions Joe's fall-back position to me was, "Richie, let me tell you about the Second World War." My father-in-law was drafted early in the war, earlier than most soldiers because of his age. He was a little older. He was in the Infantry as a gunner and won a bunch of medals, including a couple of Silver Stars. He fired these big guns that rode on half-tracks and he had the experience of marching across North Africa and into Sicily under General George Patton. He landed in France during the D-Day invasion. He marched across France into Germany. He experienced nearly four years of war – lots of killing, lots of instances of friends being killed. He told me story after story about some pretty horrible things that he experienced on various battlefields.

Joe's ultimate fallback position regarding why he doesn't believe is that he has seen too much suffering, too much death, and too much carnage. He just can't believe. That's what he says, he cannot believe.

What we personally see does have a profound effect on the way that we think and live. Talk with a police officer or a prison guard or a prosecutor or an ER physician in a big city emergency room. Talk with folks who are down there in the trenches about your romantic philosophy concerning the goodness of humanity – how you believe that people are basically good and how folks just want to be kind to each other if they were only given a chance. Just try to sell some really liberal romantic philosophy about people's goodness to a probation officer or to a divorce attorney and they will shake their heads and say, "Where have you been living your whole life? At a country club? In a university classroom? Have you spent the last 20 years at summer camp? Get out into the real world. See what people really do to each other. Get a vision of reality."

Seeing has an affect on us. Really seeing. Remember about a decade ago when Rodney King's beating was video taped. We saw police officers gathered around this one man who was lying crumpled on the ground. They just kept beating him and kicking him. The effect of seeing that was huge on the whole city of LA. Before that lots of people would say, "Well, police officers never overstep their authority. If someone is roughed up, it is because they deserved it." But when you see it, when you see 4-5 police officers kicking a man who is on the ground and beating him with nightsticks and other cops standing around doing nothing, it affects you.

Have you ever had a vision from God that changed you? You saw something that you didn't previously see or pay attention to? You closed your eyes to it in the past, but now you see it and you can't pretend that you haven't seen it. Have you ever had a vision of God opening your eyes to something?

A number of years ago I heard a woman named Jackie Pullinger speak. Jackie has lived and worked in Hong Kong in the inner city for about 30 years now. She was, I think, ministering to some of the most broken and tragic people that you and could ever imagine. She has this ministry to prostitutes and to heroine addicts, to wino's and 60-year old ex-prostitutes that are absolutely broken in body and spirit, who have lived this degraded life for 40 years. She ministers to little boys and girls that are forced into prostitution. Jackie said something in her message that still sticks with me a decade later. She said, "Oh, if you could only see what I have seen, if you could only see what I have seen, you would have to do something. You would feel the way that I do, if you just saw."

She pointed out that on the way into the conference that morning there was a man going through the garbage looking for something to eat. He was standing right outside the conference center and she asked, "Did you see him? Did God allow you to see him?"

Have you ever seen anything that changed you? Has God pulled back the veil and shown you something ever about yourself that just shook you to the core? You said, “I never saw myself like that before.” Or has he shown you the world, or a person, or a need?

Here at Vineyard a lot of folks who have careers and families and are busy choose to take a few weeks of their vacations and go on short-term missions trips to places like Brazil or to barrios in Mexico City or to India. And for the first time, they see the world outside of Central Ohio and they are changed. Suddenly, the whole world is not like the suburbs of Central Ohio. For a lot of people in the world, the most important discussion that they are going to have today is not about the choice of tile for their upstairs bathroom, or what dessert to pick at the newest restaurant in town.

A friend of mine went on a short-term mission trip to Mexico City and they visited a garbage dump where 8-year olds, who are homeless basically, sit around all day sniffing inhalants – gasoline and refrigerator coolants – absolutely destroying their brains. I have been to villages in India, personally, and I have seen hundreds and hundreds of people who have never heard the name of Jesus Christ even once. It is hard to get up and preach that Christ is the only way to God and know that there are literally millions of people in the Indian villages that have never heard the name of Christ even once. To know of places where the infant mortality rate is 60% and you are considered to be an old person when you are 40.

God changes us by giving us a vision. God can open your eyes, however crowded your world is with stuff and difficult relationships, the pressures of work and school, financial worries and illnesses. God can open your eyes, if you ask him to, to someone or something that you have never paid attention to before. He can open your eyes to the needs of children, or to the affects of racism. He can let you see a disabled person struggling down the street in their wheelchair and you realize how difficult we make it. That maybe some of the laws regarding disability aren't just some sort of social experiment. Maybe they really are the proving ground of our American character.

God can open you eyes not only to need, but he can open your eyes to blessings. You have a child. The birth of a child, whether healthy or unhealthy, is a blessing of God. A marriage. The birth of a grandchild. The enjoyment of a friend's company. For a long time, you may have taken those things for granted, but then God opens your eyes. You see that he has been the giver of these things and you are changed.

In today's message, I want to talk about Visions that Change Us. Let's pray.

Ephesians 3:1-13 *For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit of God's holy apostles and prophets. 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.*

I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. Although I am less than the least of all God's people, his grace was given me: 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 known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.

You know, throughout this text, the apostle Paul uses the language of vision, the language of revelation. In verse 3 he talks about the mystery made known to me by revelation. In verse 4 he talks about insight into the mystery of Christ. In verse 5 he talks about something that was not made known to men in other generations, but it's been revealed. In verse 9 he talks about making plain to everyone the administration of the mystery, which was kept hidden. Listen to these words, which are revelatory words: mystery, insight, revelation, making known, making plain, wisdom, knowledge – this whole text is a celebration of the effect of fresh vision on our lives.

You read the apostle Paul's letters and he is forever praying that God would open our eyes and we could see. He doesn't merely pray for people's health or blessing, although he does pray for those things. He doesn't merely pray for prosperity or for the growth of the church. The apostle Paul, as you read his apostolic prayers, often prays for something that I think modern Christians rarely pray for. He prays that the eyes of our heart would be enlightened. That we would see what we normally walk around blind and spiritually dull to, that God would pull the veil away and take the scales off of our eyes.

For example, in Colossians 1:9-10 the apostle Paul prays for this reason, *Since the day we heard about you we haven't stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. We pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way.*

To live a life that God wants you to live, to please God, you need revelation. You need spiritual insight. You need a vision that changes you.

It is not surprising that Paul prays a lot for Christians in various churches to get revelation, visions from God, to see what we otherwise don't want to see. It is not surprising that Paul prays for revelation. His Christian life and the journey of his Christian faith began in a blaze of revelation. The apostle Paul was actively persecuting Christians as a very zealous Pharisee when God broke in on him in a blinding flash of light.

And in this moment of revelation that took place on the road to Damascus when Paul was going there to round up some Christians to drag them to prison, God gave this man a successive series of visions that changed him. He saw himself.

If there is one thing that will change you forever, it is God giving you a vision of yourself. That you begin to see the real truth about who you are and what you are like, or what your character really is. Most of us run from a vision of ourselves. We are masters of covering up and only showing the world and even ourselves what is good about us. The times we really have tried.

On the road to Damascus Paul saw himself as he really appeared in the sight of God. And he wasn't the great person he had imagined – one zealously doing God's will and work, pleasing God by his strict adherence to OT law. No, he was a man who was opposed to God at the core of his being. A person who regularly fought God off. A person who pushed God away to establish his own little kingdom.

Have you ever caught a vision of yourself, friend? Have you ever seen yourself the way God sees you? The way you are in truth? You know, you can't walk away from seeing yourself without being changed.

On the road to Damascus, Paul saw the church. He saw that God's plan for the ages was to include Gentiles together with Jews as equal participants, equals sharers, equal heirs in the people of God. He saw Jew and Gentile reconciled together and he saw Jesus. And he was changed. It's no wonder that having begun his Christian life in a blaze of revelation, Paul regularly prays for his converts and for churches he planted would similarly be enlightened, that they would have fresh revelation and vision.

So what is the vision that Paul had that changed his life? He saw himself. In Ephesians 3:1 the apostle Paul says, *For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles...* In verse 7 he calls himself not a prisoner of Christ, but a servant. *I became a servant of this gospel.* Verse 1, *I am a prisoner of Christ Jesus.*

At the time of the writing of Ephesians, Paul was under house arrest for preaching the gospel. It is really a fascinating way for Paul to describe himself, prisoner of Christ Jesus. He doesn't say, "I am a prisoner of Rome. I am a prisoner of the mighty Roman Empire that exerted its force against me, poor little Paul." He doesn't say: "I am a prisoner of the Emperor Nero. That tyrant who persecuted Christians and hangs Christians on pieces of wood. The one who sets them on fire to light his gardens." That's what Nero used to do. He would literally set Christians on fire as living torches in his garden.

No, he says, "I am a prisoner of Christ Jesus. The reason I am in prison is because of Christ." What an amazing insight. Do you understand what Paul is saying? He is saying if I wasn't a Christian, if I wasn't attached to Jesus, and specifically if I didn't preach the gospel and share the implications of the gospel that Gentiles were to be admitted into the church as equal members with Jews, that Gentiles were not second class citizens – then I would burst. Well, that's what got Paul into trouble. That's what enflamed the Jews in the book of Acts and finally got Paul arrested and sent to Rome to await his trial. It was because of Christ, Paul says. Not because of Rome or the Emperor or the Jews. It was because of his attachment to Christ that he ended up in jail.

You know, throughout the history of the church, there have been many, many people who have suffered and died because they were Christians. What most people don't know is that there are more people martyred at the present time for the sake of Christ than were martyred in the early church under the Roman persecution. According to the World Christian Encyclopedia, in AD 100 there were close to 156,000 Christians martyred under the Roman Empire. When the persecution was its most fierce, under the Emperor Domitian, 156,000 Christians were martyred, fed to lions, herded into the Coliseum, slaughtered by gladiators, lit on fire, burned at the stake. Last year, it is estimated that 168,000 Christians died for their faith around the world. More than during the worst Roman persecution.

We Christians in America don't see it. The Lord has to give us a vision regarding what our Christian brothers and sisters are enduring all over the world.

In Pakistan in 1997 a teenage girl named Anila met another teenager named Perveen in school. They became friends. As their friendship grew Anila gave Perveen a Bible and taught her some Christian songs. Anila invited her friend Perveen to a Good Friday service at a very small little church in Pakistan. When Perveen heard the gospel, she immediately responded and accepted Christ. She became excited about her Christian faith. Anila warned her that she would experience opposition from her family. They beat her and tried to marry her off to a Muslim man. She ran away. Perveen's family accused Anila and other Christians of kidnapping their daughter and brought charges against Anila. This 18-year old girl was thrown into jail. And then they tracked down Perveen. And her brother, to save the family's honor, stabbed her in the stomach and murdered

her. A Muslim judge let him off. This was considerable justifiable homicide. After several years of petitioning the Pakistani government, finally Anila was let out of prison.

I tell you this story not to shock you, but because it is fairly common throughout the Muslim world for Christians to experience great suffering upon receiving Christ. And it is important for us to correctly interpret why we Christians may go through persecution.

Some of you may be going right now through some real difficulty because of your Christian faith. Your faith may have alienated you from your family. They may object to your excitement about God. Why have you changed? You might hear that upon your conversion. Why have you changed? You never took religion this seriously in the past. Why have you become so fanatical? Why are you spending so much time reading your Bible? There are other things in life.

This weekend we will be baptizing 80 people, our largest baptism ever. And some of them will be paying a price to be baptized. They are coming from a different faith background, from a Muslim faith or a Jewish faith, or Hindu, or their families object to baptism by immersion. They were baptized already as a baby – what are you doing? I know husbands and wives have experienced great grief when one partner in their marriage has come to Christ and the other has not.

I just spoke with a young woman a few weeks ago whose college professor has refused to let her speak in an English class because the professor found out that she was a Christian. And the professor determined and said publicly that this Christian student, because of her Christianity, [this is what she said publicly in class] she would have nothing to add to the discussion because she was closed minded, an imbecile and stupid.

Listen, if a Christian suffers because the government is stronger than Christ or because mom and dad are stronger than Christ, or husband or wife is stronger than Christ, or a boss or college professor, or a teacher or other students are stronger than Christ – then what's the point? Let's just give in. Let's just give in. Give up your convictions. If the reason people around the world and even some of you in this congregation would be persecuted, is because there is a power that is stronger than Christ, then let's all just give up and give in. Go with the flow. Don't make such an issue of your faith. Hide it. Be quiet when you need to be quiet. Compromise where you need to compromise.

But if you suffer because of Christ, not because he is weak, but because he is the strongest power in your life, because you have captured a vision that Christ is all in all, that Christ is worth it, that Christ is true, if you see yourself as a prisoner of Christ Jesus, WOW, to be associated with him and not only with him, but with all of the folks who have suffered throughout Christian history – WOW. In some little way my name could be put on that heavenly honor roll, this is all worth it.

I want to encourage you to pay attention to the stories of the martyrs and those who have suffered for the name of Christ. There is a wonderful book that you could read with profit or give to your teenager. I would especially recommend it to young adults. It is called *Jesus Freaks*. DC Talk lent its name to the publication of this book. It is put out by the Voice of the Martyrs. It is a collection of stories of people throughout history, especially a lot of young people, who have stood for Jesus and paid the price. I don't think anyone can read the stories of the martyrs of the church without being changed. When God gives you a vision, he opens your eyes to see what our Christian brothers and sisters are going through and have gone through, it changes you.

There is a young man this weekend that is getting baptized. He had been away from God for a long while. He started to come here to Vineyard and while he was at the library he picked up a book called the *Big Book of Martyrs*. It is like a comic book version of Christians throughout history who have suffered. He was particularly gripped as he read about Christian missionaries in Cambodia who were branded and had limbs chopped off before being executed. God had been reaching out to him in a variety of ways, but when reading the stories of the martyrs, it changed him. He was gripped by the notion that some people in the world would believe in Jesus so much that they would die for him. He came to Christ as a result and this weekend, he is going to be baptized.

Testimonies of the martyrs and of prisoners for Christ have an effect on us. They teach us that because God is in control and we belong to him, we don't ever have to be afraid of anything or anyone.

There was a man named Jack Vincent, who was a missionary in China and was attacked by a group of bandits, one of whom held a gun to his head and said, "I am going to kill you. Aren't you afraid?" Jack Vincent replied very simply, "Kill me, if you wish. I will go straight to God." Jack Vincent's courage inspired his friend to write a poem. Listen to this:

*Afraid? Of what?
To feel the spirit's glad release?
To pass from pain to perfect peace,
The strife and strain of life to cease?
Afraid—of that?
Afraid? Of what?
Afraid to see the Savior's face
To hear his welcome and to trace
The glory gleaned from wounds of grace?
Afraid—of that?
Afraid? Of what?
A flash, a crash, a pierced heart;
Darkness, light O heaven's art*

*A wound of his a counterpart
Afraid—of that?
Afraid? Of what?
To do by death what life could not
Baptized with blood a stony plot
Till soul shall blossom from the spot?
Afraid—of that?*

Imagine living without fear. So many of you are controlled by fear. Imagine if you didn't have to be afraid of anybody or anything. The stories of the Christian martyrs, as you read them, tell us that there is something more valuable than personal comfort, that life is more than our comfort right now.

Friends, most of us arrange our lives to maximize our comfort and to minimize any suffering for ourselves and our loved ones. I do. Most of you do. But what is in the deepest part of our hearts as we read the stories of Paul and our Christian brothers and sisters throughout history who have suffered for the faith. What if God changed our minds so that in the deepest part of our hearts we really believed that the goal of life was not to maximize our comfort? What if we got a vision, we saw that there really was something more valuable than being liked by everyone? What if you didn't always have to please everyone around you? You, who are people pleasers, what if you began to live by a different standard? What if you caught a vision of what the prisoners and martyrs have seen throughout the ages, the reality of heaven, the truth about Christ, the emptiness of what this world offers?

Just imagine with me, will you? Imagine with me a group of Christians; imagine a church full of people. Imagine just one person who chose to live for Jesus Christ and not for personal comfort or security. That would be revolutionary. A person who chooses to hang in there in a difficult marriage because of Christ, a person who chose world missions and a difficult living situation over a good career here in America. A person who chooses to advertise a Bible study at work even though they know it will bring some level of disdain in the office. A person who chooses to turn down a job, instead of accepting it, or chooses to turn down a part in a play or a career *opportunity* because they couldn't do that and still honor Christ.

The experience of the martyrs also teaches us that suffering for Christ has an encouraging affect on others. The apostle Paul in verse 13 says, *I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.* In other words, my sufferings for you are things you can take pride in. They aren't to discourage you, these stories, they are to inspire you. I read the stories and I don't get depressed. I read the stories of my brothers and sisters around the world who are suffering for the sake of Jesus Christ and I get fired up. I think to myself, you know, if a teenage girl is willing to pay that kind of price, then this Jesus thing is really true. Boy, I want some of what she has. There is

an encouraging effect, an inspirational effect by the suffering of our Christian brothers and sisters.

Several years ago I was in Scotland by St. Andrew's University. It was on the beaches by St. Andrew's that the film Chariots of Fire was filmed. You saw them running along the beach. It was right by St. Andrew's. Well, at St. Andrew's there is a spot where a 23-year old man named Patrick Hamilton was burned alive in 1527 for refusing to stop preaching the Bible. The established church took his biblical preaching as an attack on itself. He was thrown in jail. While he was in jail, his preaching led a Catholic priest to Christ. And finally because he refused to quit preaching, he was burned alive in St. Andrew's. The day Patrick Hamilton was burned at the stake, someone said to his persecutors, "If you are going to burn anyone else alive, you had better do it down in the cellar because the smoke of Patrick Hamilton's burning is opening the eyes of hundreds across Scotland to the glory of Jesus Christ."

Visions change us. Paul had a vision of himself as a prisoner of Jesus Christ. And Paul had a vision of himself as a servant. Verse 7, *I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power.* That's the way Paul often thought of himself, as a servant of the gospel, or in many of his opening greetings, he called himself a servant of Jesus Christ.

I once heard the evangelist Luis Palau say that Christian growth is both a crisis and a process. He said a crisis takes place in a person's life either at conversion or sometime later when they realize they have a profound and far reaching decision to make. Will they serve God the rest of their lives or will they serve themselves, their own egos, their own interests, their own pleasures – that's a crisis. Christ or yourself?

But then comes the process after you've come to this crisis point and you've decided that God will be #1, every day after that is choosing, choosing, choosing. Today, who am I going to serve? Whose interest am I going to further? Seeing yourself as a servant of Jesus Christ requires a vision from God. I believe that most people sitting in a church never get this vision that they are servants of God. Most churchgoers are merely interested in the minimum necessary to get them into heaven. What do I need to do to escape the consequences of my sin? What do I need to say? What do I need to pray? What do I need to believe so that I won't be judged for my sin? What will get me over the line? That's what people ask.

And when people think about what is the minimum that I need to do to go to heaven, you give God your leftovers. The reason why churches in America are struggling financially is because most folks give God their leftovers. If I have any money leftover after I figure out what I need to buy and what I want to buy, if you have any time left over, if it is convenient, if it doesn't cramp your style, any time

left over to read the Bible or to go to a group. People who are just interested in doing what's necessary to step over a line give God their leftovers.

But seeing yourself as a servant of God, that I give my whole life to Christ, all that I am, all that I possess, I belong to him, to be available to him, I have seen people who have captured this vision of being servants of Christ change. I mean absolutely change in a matter of days. As a result of God pulling the veil back and giving them this vision, this new identity, servant of Christ, they suddenly have a whole different view of life. They have a whole different set of motivation from this one simple vision that you are a servant of Jesus Christ.

Have you had that? Have you caught that vision? Before you get this vision you are a student who happens to believe in Jesus. You happen to have prayed a prayer or gone to a church, raised in a Christian family. You are a student who happens to believe in Jesus. There are other students who believe other things. But you happen to believe in Jesus. But you are on campus primarily to get good grades, to get a degree, and to get out of there as quickly as possible with the minimum of struggle and difficulty and pain.

But then some of you catch this vision. This vision of being a servant of Christ on your campus or in your high school. And it changes everything. What classes you take. Who you talk to. How much time you spend working. What you do on your summer breaks. What you do over your spring break. You say, "God, I am here to serve you. I am available to you. I am on campus primarily for you. Not just to get an education, but for you."

I have seen the same change occur with people on their jobs. Before this vision of being a servant of Christ, there is all of this grumbling. I hate my job. I hate my boss. I hate my coworkers. This job really is not good. I am just here to get a paycheck and get out. Or I like my work. It is fulfilling. I enjoy it. But this vision of Servanthood, I'm here in this hospital or in this office building or in this store, I am here to serve Christ. When you get a vision like that, it changes everything. I know it.

That happened to me when I was teaching at Ohio State. I really did see myself as a servant of Christ and it changed the way I approached my day. It changed what drove me and what I was thinking about while I was talking to coworkers. It will change the way you think about talking with clients and how you make sales. It will change who you invite out for coffee and how you pray. It will change how you approach interruptions. Someone interrupts you. It is not how can I terminate this as quickly as possible, there is a thought that comes into your mind. God, it's not my time, it's your time. If you want me talking to this person, I am available to you.

This insight concerning being a servant alters the way you even think about what it means to be a good Christian. So many people think, "If only I had a different

platform. If I could just get a different job. If I could go into so-called full-time ministry, meaning paid for being a Christian, if I had a higher GPA, if I started on the team instead of being a benchwarmer, if God gave me a really big platform, I was a pro baseball player, or I was elected to some citywide office, well then I would be effective for the Lord. The apostle Paul here in Ephesians 3 says, *Although I am less than the least of all of God's people...* even his name, Paul, means little. I have a little name. He was a little guy. He had a little embarrassing past. But he was a giant in the kingdom of God because he was a servant of the gospel and a servant of Christ.

It doesn't matter if you have a big platform or a little platform. The only thing that matters is if you are available to Christ. You can be the boss. You can be the janitor. You can be the secretary. You can be the cook and bottle washer. It doesn't matter. Do you belong to Christ? Do you make yourself available to Christ each day and say, "Today, Jesus, use me. Today, fill me with your power. Today I want to serve you. Today I give my whole life to you. I choose for you."

Who, after all, was Billy Graham? He was the son of a NC farmer. He was a nobody. He was a Southern hick. I once heard someone say about himself, "I'm a nobody from nowhere, but I am speaking on behalf of a somebody from everywhere."

Henrietta Mears, who most of you never heard of, was probably the most effective American Christian woman in the 20th century. She was little, and so nearsighted that she was nearly blind. She was the most effective church Sunday school teacher ever. Her Sunday school department grew from a couple of hundred to 4200 in 2½ years. Henrietta Mears was responsible for discipling Bill Bright, the founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, and Richard Halverson, who became the chaplain for the US Senate, and dozens of missionaries and pastors. It was at Henrietta Mear's camp that Billy Graham finally settled his doubts about God and God's Word and committed himself to preach the gospel to all nations.

What was she? She was just a servant of Christ.

How do you see yourself?

And then Paul caught a vision of the church in verse 9. He says that his calling was *to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery or the plan of this mystery, which was hidden in God, but is now revealed*. And in verse 11, he speaks of God's eternal purpose. What Paul is saying is that the plan of God, the purpose of God revolves around the church.

I love history. If you've listened to me speak for any length of time, you will hear historical references. I always have a history book or some biography on my nightstand. Paul is saying that he received a vision; a revelation from God, that

the central story of history is not what is in the history or biography section at Barnes and Nobel or Borders. He is saying that he received a revelation or vision that changed him. The central story of history revolves around the church. The story of history is not essentially about what the great empires have accomplished. It is not primarily the story of the rise and fall of the British Empire or the rise and fall of the Roman Empire. It is not primarily the story of the Greeks or the Chinese or the so-called American Century. These other stories are peripheral to the central story, which is the story of the growth and struggle of the Christian church.

We think that history is the story of great men and women – Napoleon, Caesar, Lincoln, Eleanor Roosevelt. But these people are bit players. The story of history is not even primarily about wars – the Civil War, WWI and WWII, the conquests of Genghis Kahn or Alexander the Great. Listen to what Paul says is the central story of history. Verse 9 *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 known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms.*

What is Paul saying? He is saying I want you to picture a drama. The drama is the history of the universe. The writer and the director and the producer and the caster in the various roles is God. He is the one who purposed the drama. He is the one created the whole thing. The audience for the drama are the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, in other words the angels and the demons. And the actors are the church throughout Christian history. There may be some bit parts for people like Julius Caesar and Napoleon and the president of the US. They may run across the stage and be part of some crowd scene. But Paul is saying that he's got a vision. He's got a revelation that the main story in every country around the world for all of history, the main story, is what is happening in the church. That's what the angels and demons are watching. That's what God is about – the growth, the struggles, the wrestling in the church.

You may feel, friend, overwhelmed by the size of the various institutions in our country – the media, the government, the corporation you work for. Catch a vision for the church. The church is where the action is.

And history simply doesn't revolve around the church, but our lives revolve around the church. Listen. Paul says in verse 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.* It is absolutely the case that it is impossible to grow spiritually apart from involvement in the church. The major problem that I see over and over again with people's spiritual lives is they are not really linked in open, meaningful, accountable, honest relationships with other people in the church. This Christian life, this relationship that you want to have with Jesus, it cannot be walked out alone. The major heresy that affects

American Christianity is our individualism – the notion that I can live a pretty good life with Jesus alone.

Paul had a vision, a vision that changed his life and that vision was of the church. A bringing together of Jews and Gentiles who would walk this Christian life out in the face of all the opposition, in the face of persecution, in the face of challenge. We would walk this Christian life out together. You want to grow? Dig into the church. That's a vision that changes us. Let's pray.

Gospel Call: You know, when Paul was on the road to Damascus, he not only caught a vision of himself and a vision of the church, but he caught a vision of Christ. Jesus Christ spoke to him. For the first time in his life, he realized that all the stories that Christians were saying about Jesus were, in fact, true. That God did come into the world in the person of Christ. That Christ did live a perfect life and taught us how to live really good lives.

But people didn't want to hear what Christ had to say. They wanted to live their own lives free from him. So they nailed him to a cross. But God turned the tables on us. And rather than getting rid of Christ, God used the death of Christ to accomplish our salvation by allowing him to bear the punishment for our sins. And then God raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in heavenly places where he will one day come back to judge each one of us based on what we've done in this life.

Paul was on the road to Damascus and he caught a vision of Christ. Today there are some of you who desire a relationship with Christ.

Visions that Change Our Lives

Rich Nathan

March 10-11, 2001

"I Believe in the Church" Series

Ephesians 3:1-13

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II. A Vision of Ourselves

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1. Nothing Stronger than God
2. Something More Important than Comfort
3. Nothing More Encouraging than Faithfulness

B. A Servant of Christ (Eph. 3:7)

III. A Vision of the Church

A. History Revolves Around the Church

B. Our Spiritual Growth Revolves Around the Church