Anchored. Part Six. Brackets of Grace
November 8, 2026 Ephesians 3:1-13

One of the many things I love about your pastor is that David knows how to create and live out of the brackets of life. What do I mean by brackets of life?

Let's say you are in Orlando for a conference. It ends around 12:30 and your flight is at 4pm. Most of us would do what? We'd pack up our stuff, gas up the rental car before returning it, and then make our way to our gate enjoying some leisure time at Starbucks or an airport café. That's what normal people do. But not David. I am not making this up, here's David, *"O man, 25 minutes from here is a great hike through a wilderness area, but better, 35 minutes is a cypress swamp where we can rent kayaks. We could get there, paddle in the stream for an hour, maybe see some alligators, and then make it back to the airport*."





And he would do it, and somehow still make his flight. This is what I mean by creating brackets, parentheses, breaking into the flow of regular structured life, and living from something different.

This is what Paul does spiritually in our passage. Paul would have failed Greek Composition 101. He breaks all the rules. He's just finished telling these Ephesians of how God's grace has made them, Jew and Gentile, a temple of the Lord, a dwelling place for God. He's now moved to pray for them. But in Ephesians 3, the prayer doesn't immediately begin. Paul inserts a bracket, a parenthesis of thought.

But so what, it's a measly three sentences– yes, and 189 words! But in this bracket Paul highlights some glorious aspects of grace that speak to the astonishing reality of who we are church, and what we have in Jesus. Now partly, what I want to encourage us to do is this very thing; for us, like Paul, to develop the habit of breaking into the flow of ordinary life, inserting brackets of grace, and living large out of them. Well, as we dive into Paul's

bracket of grace, if you take notes, we will look at the Mystery of Grace, the Proclamation of Grace and the Access of Grace.

For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles— 2 Surely you have heard about the administration of God's **grace** that was given to me for you, 3 that is, the **mystery** made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. 4 In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the **mystery** of Christ, 5 which was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. 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. 7 I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's **grace** given me through the working of his power. 8 Although I am less than the least of all the Lord's people, this **grace** was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ, 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. 10 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, 11 according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. 12 In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. 13 I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.

I. **The Mystery of Grace.** Paul speaks of "mystery" four times in this bracket. In Scripture, mystery is not like an Agatha Christie or Sherlock Holmes thriller where we are in suspense trying to piece together clues in order to solve it and only at the end do we see it because of Sherlock's brilliant deductions.

Mystery is, Paul says, vss 3, 5 something formerly hidden, now made known. It's like a stage with a drawn curtain. We hear rumblings behind the curtain but can't see anything. Then suddenly the curtain is lifted and the mystery is revealed. That's what Paul says has now happened. Abraham, Moses, David and the entire OT cast only heard the rumblings behind the curtain, and now in Jesus the curtain has been lifted, the mystery revealed. It wasn't figured out by clever ones. It was a God act – God revealed this mystery to Paul, the apostles and prophets, vs 5. And what is the mystery? Vs 6:

> This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are **heirs** <u>together</u> with Israel, **members** <u>together</u> of one body, and **sharers** <u>together</u> in the promise in Christ Jesus.

We might read that and yawn. But in the first century, nothing brought Jew and Gentile together in any unity. This was a massive sledgehammer reality that both are now on equal footing together before God. Paul says he has written briefly about this mystery, and he did, back in 2:11-22. Jesus has *"made us both one and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility."* He has *created in himself, one new man* (2:15).

Paul now inserts a bracket to highlight the breathtaking grace of it all that in Jesus, God has united in community of former enemies. For us, this would be like Jews and Iranians, Black Lives Matter and White Supremacists, Democrats and Republicans, such disparate groups now united and loving each other.

If you asked a Jew in Paul's day, what God was going to do with the Gentiles, Gentiles were created as fuel for the fires of hell. There might be a few exceptions, Zech 8:23 says:

In those days ten men from nations of every language will take hold of a Jew, grasping his garment and saying, "Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you."

But that sounded to Jewish ears like Gentiles would become Jews. And some did. But proselytes were not full Jews, and therefore were looked down on, second class all the way. One rabbi considered proselytes scabs on Israel.

But the mystery of grace is that now, in Jesus, Jew and Gentile are fellow heirs. They will inherit together, equally so, everything God gives his people. They are Fellow members of the same body – of equal standing in the body, one new man, no scabs, no second class. And all the promises of God to his people, which are now yes and amen in Jesus - in the coming ages God will show Jew and Gentile together, and equally so, the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Jesus.

Ok, so what does all that mean for you here at Covenant? What it means is that at church, you don't get to pick your friends, God picks them for you. Or as Henry Nouwen put it, the church is the one place where the person you least want to live with always lives. In the church, God puts together people who might never otherwise want anything to do with each other. But in Jesus, God takes down barrier walls of hostility and unites a people, not by race, social or economic status, gender, politics, favorite sports team or pet agenda, but by Jesus Christ period. In Him we are one new man, a new society.

So, have we allowed something other than Jesus to be the determining factor in our fellowship with others here? Does your love for others hinge on something other than Jesus? This is the mystery of Grace that envelops you church, God takes enemies and makes them family, to himself and one another. And Paul would have us understand that this mystery of grace goes somewhere.

II. **The Proclamation of Grace**. Notice second, the Proclamation of Grace, vs 7:

I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. 8 Although I am less than the least of all the Lord's people, this grace was given me: to **preach** to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ, 9 and to **make plain to everyone** the administration of this mystery**.**

Paul writes from a jail cell. He's in prison for the very reason of proclaiming to everyone this mystery of grace. But then, look at vs 10. Paul says something astounding about us. It's a purpose statement, for the church–

His (God's) 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.

On the sleepiest of Sundays, in the most ordinary of services, Covenant Church, you are proclaiming something extraordinary. The curtain is pulled back, Jesus is on stage and you, with him, in a cosmic drama, are proclaiming aspects of the manifold wisdom of God. Paul says you are schooling rulers and authorities in this. These are most likely angels and demons. They all have been in the dark, so to speak regarding God's manifold or multi-faceted, multi-colored wisdom.



It's like the church is a prism and the light shaft God's wisdom is now being refracted through us in glorious fulness never before seen. Angels marvel, Demons tremble. The church catches them all off guard. They weren't expecting us. Angels, we are told in 1 Pet 1:12 says, *"long to look into these things."* Angels, who behold the face of God didn't see us coming – what God in his glorious wisdom has brought about. They lean over the ramparts of heaven with mouths wide open, not gazing upon the Grand Canyon or the pyramids of Egypt, but upon the church - they can hardly take in how it was that God saved and reconciled enemies by this grace creating one new humanity in Jesus.

On the other hand, Satan seethes and trembles. He hates our unity. He despises our love for one another. He winces when church, when you humble yourselves before each other and the walls of hostility crumble. He tastes his ultimate defeat as he sees the wisdom of God on display as you love the unlovely, showing grace to the undeserving, forgive one another, encourage one another, serve one another and unit with one heart and voice declaring the glories of our God and Savior Jesus Christ.

When you come to church and do church, how large is your perspective on who is viewing? There is a livestream audience, but there is also a larger cosmic viewing audience.

And this proclamation of God's manifold wisdom through you is not some afterthought of God, vss 10-1:

10 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, **11** according to his **eternal purpose** that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.

God's plan from eternity past to eternity future is to proclaim, through you, church, the manifold wisdom of His grace. Let that sink in, the importance of the church. We can float in and out of church so lightly with consumeristic attraction, oblivious at times to the eternal purpose of God through us. History is not the story of her wars or human achievements. History is the story of God revealing the mystery of Jesus Christ in his church in order to display the magnificence of his wisdom in salvation through Jesus. Church, you are central to history, central to God's eternal purposes in history.

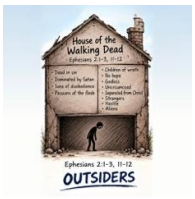
And so let me put a plug here for church membership, at least being present and part of a local body. I realize not all are physically able to get out to church, , but if we deliberately remove ourselves from participation in a local body, we may be a Christian, but we are despising the very bride of Jesus, the one he died to fashion for himself, and through whom, and only together with, God has designed in his eternal purpose to show off his manifold wisdom.

III. **The Access of Grace**. But, as the little ditty puts is – *Oh to dwell with saints above, that will be glory, but to live with saints below, that's another story.* How do we do any of this when we come to church and see the one person we least want to live with, yet who always lives here? How do we be the church together displaying and proclaiming God's manifold wisdom, when we have to do it with these guys? It has everything to do with where we live from. Look vs 12:

…Jesus Christ our Lord, in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him.

The NIV reads *"We may approach God with freedom and confidence,"* but that fails to highlight a key word used both here and back in 2:18 – "Access." Access conveys the idea of entrance before deity or royalty. We have been given access through Jesus and the gospel before the living God of the universe, to know him as our Father (2:18).

This was not always so. In Ephesians 2 Paul describes who and what we were outside of Jesus. Separated from Jesus we were living in the house of the walking dead.



We were dead in our trespasses and sins. We were dominated by Satan, the prince of the power of the air; we were sons and daughters of disobedience following the passions of the flesh. We were children of wrath, godless, without hope, hostile to God and others, aliens, and strangers to the covenants. We did not know, love, or fear God, and we justly deserved condemnation. We were outsiders.

But God



has relocated us in Jesus. Over 35 times in Ephesians Paul uses the phrase "in Christ" "in him," "in the Lord," "in whom." Christian, in Jesus you have a new address. You are not just a new creation but you have a new center of living – you have been given access to God's house, His household of grace. You are now reconciled to God and others. You have peace with God. You are now alive in Christ, raised with Christ, seated with Christ. In other words, your life is inextricably bound up in Him and his finished work of salvation. You can't be separated from him. You are no longer strangers or alienated from God, you have been brought near, brought in as fellow heirs, fellow members of the body, the temple of the Lord, God's dwelling place in the Spirit.

But there is more. There is also no going back to the old house.



There's no slipping back and forth between houses, for one reason, that old house doesn't exist anymore for you, Christian. It's been destroyed. Rom 8:1: *Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*. It's not less condemnation, or no condemnation five years from now when you finally get your act together, but no, none whatsoever condemnation now. You have been brought in, given access to God himself. Of all the blessings of Christian salvation and life, this is the pinnacle. We may come before God with boldness and confidence, fearless freedom from all apprehension that the Father will reject us. We can step straight in to his loving presence with absolute confidence he will receive us with delight.

So, is this the place from which you are living right now?

A number of years ago David and I spent time in Colorado at a retreat center. David was writing a book. Me? I spent my mornings reading through 25 years of old journals, trying to glean insights from my spiritual journey through the years. Well, in total honestly, sorry, but I wanted to throw up reading my journals. Outside of 20 pages or so that I ripped out to save, I burned all of them. The reason was, there was this constant sickening sense for 20 years of still being an outsider with God, along with a relentless begging of God to bring me in, to know his love. I knew I was "accepted" and had "access" to the throne of grace, but I was living like an outsider still, like that demolished home was where I deserved to live and was still trapped in – and there was plenty of evidence for this – sin in my life: pride, self-pity, lust, unbelief. In my mind God must be constantly disappointed with me. I could point out all my flaws, certainly God sees them and so must be shaking his head. So what I did, by faith, was to own what Jesus gave me - to take my stand in the access of grace. I came home, so to speak, to live in the love and grace of God rather than the faithless questioning of it.

Is this where any of you are living this morning, feeling as if God is disappointed with you? For some, you may truly be outsiders. You are living in the house of the walking dead having never given your life to Jesus, resting on His work rather than your own for being justified, right with God. Come on over, come home in Jesus. Why would you not?

But for those Christians living in ambivalence, doubt, uncertainty of the love of God for you and what you have in Jesus – take your stand, I dare you - come in with bold confidence that this is your home – not by virtue of anything you have done, it's all of grace, it's all of Jesus. He died to open the way and give you access. Come in.

But what about my sin? Well, yes we still struggle with sin. We can be defeated in our battle against sin. Yes we may feel like failures, and we are unworthy. But God is not ashamed of you. He is not ambivalent about you, saying, "If you ever….." You have been set free from the reality and stress of condemnation. *Outsider* is no longer who you are.

When you stumble in sin, God doesn't send you back out. When you stumble, know what house you are stumbling about in, the house of his grace. So stumble to Jesus. Here is where we gain strength in our fight against sin – we know where we live and fight from–His house, our foundational acceptance in Jesus. And so when we sin, this sounds crazy I know, but come boldly and confidently, confessing, repenting, "Father, I am messing up again. Forgive me and help me." And we don't do this as outsiders hoping to get in to God's good graces again. You are already in. Your heavenly Father can no more reject you now than he can reject Jesus. The Father will stop loving you when he first stops loving Jesus– and that's

not going to happen. In Jesus you have been given access to live in the acceptance of Father. Take your stand in this house, live from here.

And then, living from within your access of grace, this then is how we now deal with the saints below. For as we live inside the lavish grace of God, drinking in, vs 8, the boundless, unsearchable riches of Christ - these are riches we cannot possibly get to the bottom or top of, they are the vast overflow of the love of Jesus, the humility of Jesus, the kindness of Jesus, the mercy, joy, gentleness and peace of Jesus – when living inside this, filled with this grace, this is what empowers us to live with others. We can move with humility, love and mercy toward others, for God has so moved toward us. And as we live toward one another with such grace, the manifold wisdom of God is proclaimed to all.

So again, from where are you living? Any outsiders? Come in, all the way in with bold confident access. Believe the good news of the gospel!

Thanks be to God for these brackets of grace reminding us of who we are as a church and of what we have in Jesus. But don't leave this bracket at church. May I encourage us to do what Paul does, continue creating brackets of grace when you leave here. Develop the practice of breaking into the flow of your life and work with gospel realities. When criticized at work or school, insert a bracket. Instead of fuming or getting defensive, remind yourself of who you are to God in Jesus and deal with the criticism from that truth. When someone at church crosses you or fails you, instead of polishing up speeches in your head, create a bracket of grace reminding yourself of who you and they are to Jesus. Remember the access you have, pray, give the situation to the Father and trust that He is not absent but is present and working. The other night I was wide awake at 1:30am fretting over a situation in the life of one of my children. Catastrophizing, fearful and feeling absolutely helpless to do anything, I finally inserted a bracket of grace in the flow of fretting – God you are Lord, you are present. You love my family and are at work in this. God, rather than the circumstance, became larger in my mind and only then did I have any peace. Brackets of grace that break into the flow of our everyday life. Create them and live from them. Amen.