

## Looking Around Or Looking Ahead

*Ephesians 3:1, 13*

**T**homas Hearne of Dorset, England, made a name for himself as a hero of Arctic exploration. Once he was searching for the mouth of the Coppermine River in the frozen extreme north of Canada. He wrote that only a few days after they had started on their expedition, a party of Indians stole most of their supplies. At that point, Thomas Hearne and the members of his group had a choice. They could have found a place to sit, looked around them and moaned about their troubles. They could have given up and gone home. Or they could have pushed ahead. What would *we* have done?

But they had their eyes on a goal, which, even though distant, was far more interesting and important. This is what Hearne wrote about their decision: “The weight of our baggage being so much lightened, our next day's journey was more swift and pleasant.” His perspective was that now that they didn't have so much to pack around, they moved faster and easier.

Their choice was to look around, or look ahead. Their perspective made a world of difference. They eventually found and followed the Coppermine River until they finally stood on the shore of the partially frozen sea in July 1771. The journey was difficult, but that did not stop them from pressing forward to meet their goal.

As we continue our tour of the Grand Canyon of Scripture, we finally come to what we know as chapter three. Paul begins verse one by writing, “*For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—*” then begins talking about something else, not continuing his thought until verse 14. The words “for this reason” in verses one and 14 point back to the closing words of chapter two, where Paul used the metaphor of all of us being joined together into one building, in which God lives by His Spirit. Then he resumes in verse 14 by saying, “*For this reason I kneel before the Father.*”

But there's something buried right here in verse one that we focus on today. Paul has lofty ideas and grand doctrines to write about, and we've uncovered some of them as we've moved through on our tour. But don't miss the fact that Paul was in prison when he wrote this letter! Did you see that? “*For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner...*” How did Paul wind up in prison? He preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ, proclaiming that through Christ God had included the Gentiles in His plan for salvation.

At first glance, this might not seem to be that important, but notice how he phrases this. “*For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus.*” He didn’t see himself as a prisoner of the Romans. He wasn’t a prisoner of Caesar. He was a prisoner of Christ Jesus. The perspective made a lot of difference for Paul. And it can make a lot of difference for us.

But what does that mean: a prisoner of Christ Jesus? It simply meant that even though Paul was under house arrest in Rome, by the Romans, he was there because of Christ. He could have looked around at his circumstances and wondered why God allowed him to be put into prison. After all, wasn’t he doing what God told him to do? Wasn’t he faithful? Wasn’t he obedient? He could have just sat down and said, “If God’s going to treat me this way, I’ll just let those Christians back there in Ephesus tend to themselves. I’ve got too many problems of my own.”

But instead, Paul looked ahead to the “*eternal purpose which*” God “*accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord*” (v. 11). There was a larger goal in front of him, the goal of seeing that the believers in Ephesus and elsewhere were rooted and established in the love of Christ, that they might know God better, that they might understand their position in Christ, and that they might live out of that power. He knew there was a future awaiting the follower of Jesus, and he focused on that, in spite of the circumstances in which he found himself. He could have operated from his position in prison, or from the position of the power that Christ had given him.

The challenge is there for us, as well. We can live our lives from the prison of whatever circumstance we’re in, or from a position of power. When things don’t go the way we want them to, when life is turning sour, when the circumstances of our lives are not at all what we would choose for ourselves, it is extremely easy for us to look at all that and allow it to paralyze us. One real good way to measure our spiritual maturity is to look at how we respond to our circumstances when things go wrong.

My friends Durward and Jeanie Blanks live in Nashville, Tennessee. They had been leasing a 4000-square foot house, hoping to purchase it one day. But then the call came that the house was being sold to someone else, and they had thirty days to move. They wound up in a travel trailer in a KOA campground near Opryland, where they have been for some time—with many of their belongings in storage.

Some of us would complain about that. I know I would. But not Durward and Jeanie. They could have looked around at their situation, but instead, they look

forward, trying to serve the Lord and be obedient to His will in the meantime. While there, they have met a family that had relocated from a northern state. That family was living in a one room cabin with one bedroom, with no beds for the three children. My friends pulled mattresses out of storage for the kids.

They started a Bible study, reaching many people who do not know the Lord Jesus. In Durward's words, "So, I go about, serving one person at a time... God has taken us from living in excess to learning to rely on Him daily. One day, we will be back in a house. For the time being, we know we are where He has sent us. We've eliminated a lot of our excess; much of it was preventing us from fully serving God. As we shed the excess, we began to see His will for our lives more clearly."

Another friend, Rebecca Moreau, tells me that when her first husband, Charlie, was dying, that she felt an overwhelming sense of peace. As she sat in a large chair across from his bed, she felt she was sitting in God's lap with His arms around her. God told her that everything was going to be OK, that she should trust Him to take care of her and the children. She moved to Charlie's side and told him she was going to be ok, and within the hour, he was rushed to ICU where he soon passed. As a young widow with three children, Rebecca could have looked at her circumstances and given up. But her faith helped her to look ahead.

Another friend of mine is Joe Ginn, who used to attend church here. Joe lives now in West Monroe, Louisiana. He had a heart attack in April 2012. He described a peace that enveloped him, even when he should have been scared. A heart cath revealed three severe blockages and one minor one. By-pass surgery was the only option, but they had to wait a few days before they could operate. Joe's surgeon said, "I don't operate on anyone unless God gives me clear permission to proceed." Joe could have looked around him and thought, "I'm in big trouble now. Why me?" But he looked ahead. His doctor even commented on Joe's attitude, to which Joe replied, "It's my faith in God. It's not my power doing this; it's His."

Do you see a pattern here? We're all going to have problems. Every one of us will face difficulty and trial in our lives; some of us will go through a lot of it. We can't do a lot to avoid much of what comes our way. Our faith as believers in Christ provides a perspective that makes a huge difference, whether the difficulty is a life-changing one, or even a nagging little inconvenience. Prison, or power.

Two women met a frog on the street. The frog spoke up and said, "Kiss me, and I'll turn into a rich, handsome fellow." One of the women picked him up and put him

in her purse. The other woman asked, “Aren't you going to kiss him?” The reply: “No. A talking frog is really worth something.”

Her perspective was that a talking frog was worth more to her than would be a rich, handsome man. We all have ideas about what would be the most meaningful to us, and each day we are faced with choices. And we have choices about how we respond or react to circumstances. We may not be under Roman arrest, but we do have a choice. We can choose to focus all our attention, our energies, and our fears on what is going on around us. Or we can choose to look beyond the circumstances and center our hopes and faith on what is still ahead. Prison, or power.

In the little country church I once pastored near Benton, Mississippi, one family had been going through an extended period of uncertainty regarding the husband's job. The company he worked for had been on the verge of going out of business for at least a year, but the official announcement never seemed to come. As you can imagine, this was of great concern to them – and to the entire church family.

One Wednesday evening, I walked into the church sanctuary, and was greeted by the couple's only child, Jessica, at the time a precious five-year-old. (She's still precious—but she's in college!) She announced that she had some great news: her dad had found another job! We celebrated together, with several people watching (they had already heard the news).

Then her dad said, “Tell Dr. Rocky what that means.” Jessica's eyes lit up as she exclaimed, “We can still go to Wendy's!”

You see, the perspective of a child is much different from that of an adult. Going to Wendy's, or any other fast-food restaurant, was the last thing on her mom and dad's minds. The same is true in our lives as Christians. We can be spiritual five-year-olds about our situations, or we can grow up into Christ, and approach our problems with faith and hope in the Lord God. One thing is certain: Our perspective is always affected by our faith in Christ.

And in the meantime, regardless of the circumstances that crowd their ways into our lives, we can live with joy and peace. Paul wrote in 3:7 *“I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power.”* We can live in that power, and even though we may not be in the most ideal situation we can still look forward with faith, knowing that our Heavenly Father is working to strengthen us and encourage us with His Spirit.

Yes, our world seems to be more and more determined to oust God and His followers from our culture. And yes, it seems that the world is getting darker and darker. We can look at the news and think, “It sure doesn’t look very good for us Christians, does it?” Or we can look ahead, to the time when Jesus will return in glory to restore His Kingdom.

In the meantime, we can make a difference for the Kingdom of God and in the lives of others. You wonder why God doesn’t solve your problem for you? It may be that God has a very special mission for you, right where you are. That difficult job? Yes! That unhappy marriage? Yes! That serious illness? Absolutely. That seemingly impossible condition? Oh, yes! Even in the most uncomfortable, most distressing, most discouraging circumstance, our God is still God, and He still reigns! Will you trust Him today to know what He is doing, even if you can’t figure it out?

Will you stop looking so much at the circumstances that surround you, and lift your eyes to Jesus and what He has in store for you yet to come?

You’re either operating from “prison” or from power. I can tell you right now that prison is not God’s will and purpose for you. Which will you choose?