

## “A Prisoner of Christ Jesus”

June 19, 2024

Ephesians 3:1-13

### I. Introduction

The current Israel-Gaza war has been going on for 9 months; it isn't the first war and I suspect it's not the last either. The absolute hatred of the Palestinians, really all Arabs, for all Jews has been in existence for 1000's of years. This present war is just a demonstration of this hatred. The Jews return this hatred, but they are just more civilized in doing so. In the beginning, the early church thought that the Gospel belonged to the Jews because it had come *through* them and *to* them first in the person of Jesus Christ. The changes taught by Paul—especially the oneness of Jews and Gentiles—went against everything Jews had been taught and believed. As we saw last week, unity of all Christians is important. It was because of the seething hatred between Jews and Gentiles that Paul and his teachings eventually led to a riot in the temple in Jerusalem. What Paul was teaching was earth shaking.

Paul began this 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter with the intent of offering a prayer for believers that they would understand their resources as one in Christ but then, because of their importance, Paul was led by the Holy Spirit to reemphasize and expand some of the truths he had already mentioned. He didn't actually get to the prayer until [verse 14](#), where he repeats the phrase “**For this reason.**” Paul seemed to feel that the Ephesians and the others who would read this letter were not ready to hear his prayer on their behalf until they better understood the truths he wanted to pray about.

Twice in this letter—here in [Ephesians 3:1](#) and later in [Ephesians 4:1](#), Paul reminded his readers that he was “**a prisoner.**” In [Ephesians 6:20](#) he called himself “**an ambassador in chains.**” No doubt some of those reading the Letter to the Ephesians wondered why Paul was a prisoner in Rome. Why would God permit such a thing to happen to His apostle? In this opening paragraph Paul explained his situation and, in doing so, also explained one of the greatest truths in this letter, the “*mystery*” of the church.

In the New Testament, mystery is not some unknown thing or something like a “whodunit” story; rather a “*mystery is a truth hidden by God in times past and is now revealed to those who are in His*

*family.” In other words, a mystery is a “sacred secret” that is unknown to unbelievers but understood and treasured by the people of God. As he prepared to review these important truths, Paul began by reminding the reader of the effects of this “mystery” on his life.*

## **II. This mystery was important to Paul.**

In today’s Scripture, Paul described himself with three different terms: in **verse 1** he called himself “a prisoner,” in **verse 2** he called himself, in so many words, an administrator or minister and in **verse 7** he called himself “a servant.” (Some translations use “minister” in **verse 7**, but “servant” is a better choice.) Paul was a servant because he had made Jesus his **Lord** and Savior. Paul was an administrator or minister by God’s choosing. Paul was a prisoner because he believed God’s new program of uniting Jews and Gentiles into one body, and he had carried out God’s Great Commission. The orthodox Jews in Paul’s day considered the Gentiles “dogs”—the lowest of low; some of the Christian Jews did not have a much better attitude toward the Gentiles. This revealed secret—this mystery—was important to Paul. It was his revealing and teaching this mystery that led to his arrest and being taken to Rome. Paul’s life and actions demonstrated how important teaching and acting on the mystery of God was.

## **III. The Life of Paul**

**A. His Early Life** When he first appeared in Scripture, Paul wasn’t a follower of Jesus of Nazareth, he wasn’t a Christian; he was a devout Jew, and his Jewish name was Saul. Some might say he was a fanatic. **Turn to Galatians 1:11-14.** Now turn to the first record of Paul in the Bible—the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. **Turn to Acts 7:59-8:3.** Remembering that time, Paul said in **Acts 22:20** that “when the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.” Following Stephen’s death, Paul got more involved in eradicating Christianity. As a devout Jew, Paul felt that his calling was to rid the earth of the heretical faction called “Christians;” that is until his conversion.

**B. Paul’s Conversion** Paul didn’t choose his apostleship or his ministry as a servant of God—he was called by God in a special way. You may remember Paul’s encounter with God on the road to

Damascus—it's found in [Acts 9:1-19](#). God in His infinite wisdom and grace chose this intellectual, this extremely well-educated man called Saul, to be His servant; to be His minister. In his letter to Timothy in [1 Timothy 1:12-13](#) Paul wrote, "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief." To outwardly show the change that had come to his heart, Saul soon changed his name to Paul ([Acts 13:9](#)), which means "small" or "little."

**C. Paul's Ministry** Paul knew from the beginning of his Christian life that God had called him to take the Gospel to the Gentiles. This was Paul's ministry; Paul's calling. According to [Acts 11:19-26](#), after three years of being trained by Jesus in the deserts of Arabia ([Gal. 1:15-18](#)), Paul began his early ministry in a local church in Antioch that was composed of both Jews and Gentiles. Later in [Acts 13](#), under the direction of the Holy Spirit, Paul was sent out with Barnabas on his first of three missionary journeys to the then known world of the Gentiles including Turkey and Greece.

Life was not easy for Paul. We don't have time to look at each individual journey—at the particulars—I'll leave that up to you. But for the sake of time, listen to Paul's testimony from [2 Corinthians 11:21b-28](#): "Whatever anyone else dares to boast about-- I am speaking as a fool-- I also dare to boast about. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham's descendants? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food. I have been cold

and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.” Paul didn’t give up and quit because of the difficult times he went through. He was a servant of God and the Gospel. Since Jesus was his **Lord** as well as his Savior, Paul went where God directed him to go. Wherever Paul ministered, he established local churches composed of believing Jews and Gentiles, all “one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).

Paul was so consumed with understanding and preaching the mystery of Christ that he sacrificed his health, his freedom, and his very life as a minister teaching others so that they, too, could understand. In spite of, perhaps because of, all that he had been through, Paul was able to write the familiar verse of Romans 8:28: “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” For Paul, sacrifice for God was supreme joy. This sacrifice eventually led to Paul’s arrest.

**D. Paul’s Arrest** Because, Paul preached “to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ,” he was accused of being prejudiced against the Jews, particularly by the Jewish believers in Jerusalem. To show that this wasn’t true and trying to establish goodwill between Jewish and Gentile churches, Paul collected a special offering for the needy believers in Judea from the Gentile churches that he had established (Rom.15:25-33), and then delivered this offering in person to the Jerusalem Christians (Acts 21:17-19).

While in Jerusalem, Paul tried to pacify the Jewish believers by worshipping in the temple with some of them. But because of hatred of Paul’s teachings, rumors flew about Paul taking Gentiles into the temple. These rumors led to a riot in the temple. Since Paul was the center of attention, he was arrested by the Roman guards.

As he was being escorted out, the soldiers allowed Paul to address those gathered around him in the courtyard. He began by giving his personal testimony. The crowd listened to him until he got to the word “Gentiles” and then they rioted again. This whole scene is recorded in Acts 21:27 – 22:22. The rest of the Book of Acts explains how Paul got from Jerusalem to Rome as Paul wrote in Ephesians 3:1 as “the prisoner of Jesus Christ for the sake of you Gentiles.”

**E. Paul's Mission** Finally, there's Paul's mission. Paul's mission was not only to tell the Gentiles of the Good News of salvation through Jesus Christ. It wasn't enough to win them to Christ and then form them into local congregations. He was to teach them about their wonderful position in Christ. As members of the body of Christ, each Gentile believer shared God's grace equally with the Jews. This truth had not been revealed in the Old Testament Scriptures—this was the mystery. It was revealed to and then through the New Testament Apostles and prophets—[turn to Ephesians 4:11-13](#).

God revealed the mystery of unity personally to Paul, and it was Paul's responsibility—Paul's ministry—to share it with all Christians. It was because Paul was a faithful minister and servant, that as he wrote this Letter to the Ephesians, he was a prisoner in Rome. Like Joseph in the Old Testament, Paul's faithfulness resulted in false arrest and imprisonment. But, in the end, it brought great glory to God and salvation to Jews and Gentiles. [Turn to Philippians 1:12-14](#).

#### **IV. Conclusion**

From Paul's life and his acceptance of God's mystery and plan, there are a couple of things we can apply to our lives. First, perspective is important. That is, how we view and react to circumstances is more important than the circumstances themselves. If all we can see is our immediate situation, then our circumstances control us. We feel good when our circumstances are good and terrible when they are not. Had Paul been able to see **only** his circumstances—the beatings, the shipwrecks, the hatred and lies of his fellow man, Paul would probably have given up his ministry. Had he thought his life was ultimately in the hands of his persecutors, his jailors, his guards, or the Roman government, he definitely would have given up in despair.

But Paul's perspective was a divine perspective. He lived with total trust in God's purposes. [Turn to 2 Corinthians 12:7-10](#). It wasn't that he knew his future or fully understood the divine purposes behind his problems. But Paul knew that his future, his afflictions, and every other aspect of his life were totally and completely in His Lord's hands. Despite his special calling as an apostle and his several revelations from the Lord, Paul lived and worked by faith, not by sight. Paul was sure that God would cause all

things to work together for good. In 2 Corinthians 4:17 he wrote, “For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.”

Writing about trials, James wrote in James 1:2, “Consider it pure joy whenever you face trials of many kinds.” James went on to write that those trials or testings produce faith, and that faith produces perseverance, and the perseverance leads to our maturing as Christians. This was the perspective of the early Christians, where is your perspective—on your needs or God’s needs?

Second, you may not have had an extraordinary calling from God like Paul did on the road to Damascus, but every believer is a steward or minister called to use the spiritual gifts, opportunities, skills, knowledge, and every other blessing he has from the Lord. Everything we have belongs to the Lord, and we are therefore entrusted as stewards, as servants to manage our lives and everything we possess on behalf of the One to whom we belong. We are faithful servants when we use what we have to minister to those within the family of God and witness to those who are not. In 1 Peter 4:10 we are told, “Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms.” Paul used every opportunity he had to tell others of the Gospel and their place in the kingdom of God. When his death was imminent, he was able to write in 2 Timothy 4:7, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” How about you, do you use the opportunities God sends you to tell others of Him; to bring praise to God’s name? Can you say, “*I have fought the good fight, I have kept the faith?*” Are you a prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of others?