

Ephesians 3:1-13
Ambassador in Chains
by Grover Gunn
170115@McDonald

Paul wrote his epistle to the Ephesians after his third missionary journey during his first imprisonment at Rome. In Ephesians 6:20, Paul referred to himself as an "ambassador in chains." That is quite an unusual expression. We usually associate ambassadorship with an embassy and not with chains and prison. The embassy is a place of honor and privilege; the prison is a place of shame and punishment. The embassy is a place of power and influence; the prison is a place of helplessness and isolation. And yet Paul, the ambassador of Christ, the ambassador of the King of kings and the Lord of lords, the ambassador of the Sovereign of the universe, had a prison cell for his embassy in Rome, the city which was then the international capital of the civilized world. Yet instead of being outraged at the indignity or humiliated by the disrespect, Paul rejoiced in his treatment as an opportunity to suffer for the cause of Christ. Paul also wrote his epistle to the Colossians during this imprisonment. In that letter, here is what he said in chapter one, verse twenty-four:

24 I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church,...

Our passage for today helps us better understand Paul's joyful confidence while he was an ambassador in chains.

Before we begin looking at the details of our passage for today, let's consider how it fits into the flow of Paul's thought. Let's review the outline of the first two chapters of Paul's epistle to the Ephesians.

Ephesians chapter one begins with a psalm of praise to our Triune Savior God. This psalm praises each member of the Godhead for His particular contribution to our salvation in Christ Jesus. Praise God the Father, who planned our salvation in Christ in eternity past. Praise God the Son, who accomplished our salvation in history through His atoning work of redemption when He died on a Roman cross. Praise God the Spirit, who applied our salvation to our hearts at the time of our conversion. After this psalm of praise to the Triune God, Paul then prays that the Ephesian Christians will better understand the hope to which God has called them, better understand the glorious riches of their inheritance as the saints, and better understand the exceedingly great power which God exercised in their salvation through Christ.

In chapter two, Paul then explains something about the hope and the riches and the exceedingly great power of their salvation. Paul declares that their salvation involved the granting of resurrection life to the spiritually dead. Even when we were dead in trespasses, God made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved). Now that is power! The spiritually dead are made alive in Christ Jesus through a salvation that is all of grace.

Paul then declares that their salvation also involved the transformation of hopeless aliens into spiritual citizens. Before they had come to Christ, the Gentile Christians had been aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus those who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. They are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God. Now that is hope! Now that is spiritual riches! What a wonderful salvation we have in Christ Jesus our Lord!

That brings us to chapter three. Paul at this point starts to pray another prayer but stops. Before Paul resumes his prayer in verse 14, he stops and comments on his special call as the apostle to the Gentiles. Remember that Paul had just explained how the Gentile Christians who were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. So Paul here interjects a parenthetical explanation of his call as the apostle to the Gentiles. We will look at this parenthetical explanation under three headings: ministry, mystery and majesty.

First, we will look at Paul's special ministry. Paul assumes that the Ephesians have surely heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which had been given to him for them. The word here translated "dispensation" is also translated "stewardship" or "administration." Just as in the book of Genesis the Egyptian Potiphor had made Joseph his steward and had put him in charge of all his house, so Jesus had put Paul in charge of the apostolic mission to the Gentiles. Spreading the gospel message

among the Gentiles was the special stewardship which Jesus had entrusted to Paul as his assignment and responsibility. Jesus had given Peter the privilege of opening the door of the gospel to the Gentiles with the keys of the kingdom. We read about this in Acts chapter ten in the inspired account of the conversion of the uncircumcised Roman centurion Cornelius. The apostle Peter had opened the door of the gospel to the Gentiles, but Paul was the apostle especially assigned to promote that gospel among the Gentiles after the door had been opened. When Jesus first appeared to Paul on the Damascus Road, here is what Jesus said to Paul:

Acts 26:16b-18

- 16 '... I have appeared to you for this purpose, to make you a minister and a witness both of the things which you have seen and of the things which I will yet reveal to you.
- 17 'I will deliver you from the Jewish people, as well as from the Gentiles, to whom I now send you,
- 18 'to open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me.'

Here at the very time of Paul's conversion, Jesus made clear that He was calling Paul to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. God sent Paul on three missionary journeys to preach the gospel in the Gentile nations and cities of Asia Minor and Europe. In Romans, Paul refers to himself as "an apostle to the Gentiles" (11:13) and as "a minister of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles" (15:16). In 1 Timothy, Paul refers to himself as "a teacher of the

Gentiles in faith and truth" (2:7). In Galatians, Paul said that the leaders of the church in Jerusalem "saw that the gospel for the uncircumcised had been committed to [Paul], as the gospel for the circumcised was to Peter ..." (2:7-8).

After his three missionary journeys, Paul was imprisoned because of his special ministry to the Gentiles. You might remember the specific event which led to Paul's imprisonment. Paul was worshipping in the temple at Jerusalem in an effort to show his solidarity with the Jewish people. Some of the Jews noticed Paul's presence and rioted when someone falsely charged that Paul had brought the Ephesian Gentile Trophimus into the temple and had thus polluted it. When Paul gave his defense before this hostile crowd, they listened attentively until Paul mentioned the special commission which the risen Christ had given to him. Paul told this angry Jewish mob that when he had first returned to Jerusalem after his conversion, the risen Christ had appeared to him and had spoken to him these words, "Depart, for I will send you far from here to the Gentiles." Then this is what happened when Paul voiced that one word "Gentiles":

Acts 22:22

22 And they listened to him until this word, and then they raised their voices and said, "Away with such a fellow from the earth, for he is not fit to live!"

The Jews in general despised Paul for his ministry to the Gentiles, but Paul had an entirely different view. Paul viewed His ministry to the Gentiles as a privilege of which he was not worthy. Look at what Paul said in our own text in verse eight:

8 To me, who am less than the least of all the saints, this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ,

Paul elsewhere said that he was "not worthy to be called an apostle" (1 Corinthians 15:9) because he had once persecuted the church of God. Paul elsewhere referred to himself as the chief of sinners and said, "I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief" (1 Timothy 1:15,13). Paul seems to be saying that his actions when he persecuted the church had approached those of a person whose heart has been so completely hardened by sin that he has gone beyond the pale of gospel opportunity. Paul seems to be saying that he would have indeed gone beyond the pale of opportunity had he not done what he did in ignorance. Paul had come so close to this dangerous edge that he could refer to himself as the least of all the saints, as the chief of those sinners who have received the mercy of salvation, as the foulest of those now washed clean, as the darkest of those now made whiter than snow by the blood of Christ. The Jews in general despised Paul for his ministry to the Gentiles. Paul also looked down upon himself but in a totally different way. Paul regarded his ministry as an honor which he did not deserve, especially in light of his previous role as a persecutor of the church.

We have examined Paul's special ministry to the Gentiles. Let us now go to our second point, which is the mystery. Paul refers to the gospel privileges of the Gentiles in this age as a mystery.

When we hear the word mystery, we tend to think of something that is entirely beyond our understanding, something we can't fully comprehend with our creaturely minds, something such as timeless eternity or divine omnipresence or the trinity or the incarnation. That is not how Paul is using the word mystery here. He is referring to something that is humanly understandable but totally unexpected, something which no one would have even guessed unless God had chosen to reveal it.

I am not saying that the gospel privileges of the Gentiles in this age were an absolute secret in old testament times. It was then a relative secret but not an absolute secret. There are numerous old testament texts which teach that in the age of the Messiah, many Gentiles would acknowledge and worship the God of Israel as the one living and true God. The basic concept was taught in the old testament, but the full implications were not revealed until its fulfillment in the days of the apostles. For example, Joel had prophesied that the Holy Spirit would be poured out upon all flesh in the last days. On the Pentecost of Acts chapter 2 when this prophecy was first fulfilled, it was obvious that this prophecy about all flesh referred to people from all classes within Israel, to their sons and daughters, their old men and their young men, even to their male servants and their female servants. It was also clear on that day that the prophesy referred both to Jews in Palestine and to Jews scattered among the Gentile nations. It was not until the conversion of the Roman centurion Cornelius that the Jewish Christians realized that the "all flesh" of Joel's prophesy referred equally to uncircumcised Gentile believers.

Acts 10:45

45 And those of the circumcision who believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also.

In Acts chapter 10, the Holy Spirit was poured out upon believing uncircumcised Gentiles just as He had been poured out on believing Jews in Acts chapter 2.

As it says in Ephesians 3:5, "the mystery ... which in other ages was not known to the sons of men as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets." The passage is not saying that this was not known at all in other ages. It says that it was not known to the extent that it has now been revealed. It was then known in part but now it has been revealed with a new fullness and completeness. What had been seen as in a mirror darkly, we now see with the clarity of a direct encounter with the fulfillment in history.

Yes, the old testament taught that in the age of the Messiah many Gentiles would worship the living and true God and not pagan idols. Yet who would have guessed in old testament times that the ceremonial wall of division between Jew and Gentile would one day be torn down? Who would have then guessed that Jews and Gentiles would one day be fellow heirs and members of the same body and partakers of the same promise? Who would have then guessed that both Jews and Gentiles would one day have such bold and confident access to God through faith in Jesus? Who could have guessed these things until God had fully revealed them? The spiritual riches which are found in Christ Jesus are certainly unsearchable, and God is certainly able to do exceedingly above all that we ask or think.

Our first point was the ministry to the Gentiles. Our second point was the mystery hidden in the previous ages. Our last point is the majesty. Paul here explains the purpose in all that has happened. The purpose is that the majesty of the manifold wisdom of God might be made known through the new covenant church to all the supernatural creatures in the spirit realm, certainly to the angels and perhaps even also to the demons. Peter in 1 Peter 1:12 said that the fulfillments of old testament prophecies in this age through the preaching of the gospel are "things which angels desire to look into." That God has woven various threads of revelation found in the prophets into a glorious fulfillment in the international and universal church of the new covenant is a revelation of God's wisdom in all its glory. It is a manifold wisdom, a variegated wisdom, a many sided and multifold wisdom, a wisdom as complex and glorious as was Joseph's multicolored robe. The outworking of God's eternal plans in history is such a glorious manifestation of God's wisdom that even the archangels in heaven and the shining seraphim and the chanting cherubim desire to look into it and to gaze with wonder. The demons also look upon these evidences of God's wisdom and tremble. The Lord once said to Satan, "Have you considered My servant Job." The Lord can now say to Satan, "Have you considered my Gentile servants who once were enslaved in your dark kingdom, who once were bound by the aimless traditions of their pagan fathers, who once were your captives to do your will? They are now redeemed not with corruptible things such as silver and gold but by the precious blood of the Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot."

Paul closed this portion of his letter by exhorting the Ephesian Christians not to lose heart because of Paul's imprisonment and suffering which had resulted from Paul's ministry to the Gentiles. Paul told them instead to glory in his sufferings, for his sufferings were a measure of how important the conversion of the Gentiles was to God.

Beloved, let me close with this thought. We have much in common with the Apostle Paul. We too suffer in this life as we seek to live our lives for God. We too have been called to minister. We each have our own particular gifts and abilities and circumstances and opportunities through which we can serve God and advance God's kingdom. We also like Paul have the privilege to live in these last days, this age of the Messiah during which God's eternal plans are coming to fruition in marvelous ways. If we, like Paul, are indeed living our lives for Christ, then we are engaged in activity which makes known the majesty of God, even His manifold wisdom. We who live for Christ are living lives which fascinate even the shining angels of heaven. If the angels had sin natures, they would be tempted to envy us and our opportunities to bring glory to God. Beloved, do not lose heart. Do not grow weary in doing good. This short time of pain and affliction will soon be over. Offer this short life upon the altar of sacrifice and make it significant for eternity. Live each day before the face of God and in the light of eternity, and rejoice in the privileges which God has given you through Jesus Christ our Lord.