

The Apostles to the Gentiles

Ephesians

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Bible Text: Ephesians 3:1-3

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As we turn now to God's Word, and as we focus on it, I would invite you to turn to Ephesians 3:1-3 for our text this morning. I'm going to read it here to begin our message. We have turned the corner from Ephesians 2 where we were at for a number of weeks, and now we come to Ephesians chapter 3. Verses 1 through 3 is our text for this morning.

"For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles - if indeed you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace which was given to me for you; that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief."

We'll stop there. The sentence in the original text actually goes through the end of verse 7, but we are going to stop at the end of the English sentence break there.

What a great text, and this text, it may surprise you to find, lays a great foundation for your own assurance and confidence in Christ. It gives you a sense of assurance of the purpose of God in your life if you are a Christian here this morning. This is a great text for those of us that know the Lord Jesus Christ, because it explains so much for us about how God has provided for us in our salvation. You might not guess that on a first quick glance at the passage, but as you dig into what Paul is saying here, you realize that this passage is bursting with the purposes of God toward people like you and me.

Ephesians 2 has come to a climax. Paul has shown that God made Jews and Gentiles into one body, so that they would be a place, a people, of worship for Him. Look at the end of Ephesians 2 to help us reset the context here this morning. Paul said, in verse 19, "You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone." Notice that as Paul is drawing attention and bringing this chapter to a close, he calls attention to the role of the apostles in laying the foundation. That's going to be important for what follows in chapter 3. And he goes on, and he expresses, as we saw last week, the purpose of the church. Why is it that believers gather together? Verse 21, "In whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit." As we saw last time, Paul says, "The purpose of the church, the

purpose of individuals being saved and brought to Christ is that they might be fitted together in a manner so that they fit seamlessly together in a place where God can be worshipped and where God would display His glory, just as He did in the literal, physical temple in the Old Testament." And one of the things that we need to understand, particularly in this age of individualization, of individuals, and people thinking that they can be Christians without being part of a church, that is so very, very wrong. We see here at the end of Ephesians 2 that Paul says, "The purpose of God is to bring believers together and fit them together, so that collectively they become a place, a people, a body, a temple where God is displayed and where God is worshipped." For you to be a Christian here this morning and to be participating in the public worship of God, to be committed to a local body and serving and being committed to be in the worship services of this place week after week after week is an expression of the reality of your salvation. It shows that your conversion is real, because you are living out the purposes for which God saves us, for us to be fitted together into a body where we collectively worship Christ. It happens on a local level. It is part of the aspect of the universal church as well and this is simply a local manifestation of that.

What I want you to see is that participation in the life of a local church is essential, it is integral to true salvation. Those who stand apart from the church have reason to question whether they have actually been converted by the God who saves people so that, for the purpose that, he would bring them together as one body with many members. We reject the idea that people can just worship God by themselves and be true Christians as an ongoing pattern of their life. That's not true. That's not the purpose of God, and when God saves individuals, He saves them according to the same working purpose that is expressed that the building, the individual stones, would be brought together to build a building where He is worshipped, and we do that collectively together, not simply in isolation.

What Paul has done in Ephesians 2 is said that the purposes of God are so great that not only is it just individuals that are alike that He does that, but God brought together by His power, by the saving purposes of Christ, He brought Jews and Gentiles together who believe in Christ, and even Jews and Gentiles fit together in that way. And that is a mark of a great work of God, and we will review that a little bit more later in the lesson. Paul says that, in Ephesians 2, God brought Jews and Gentiles, so that they would fit together and be a worshipping body displaying the glory of God on earth. What a magnificent purpose the church fulfills in the purpose of God and on earth and you see that it transcends anything political. It transcends anything social. There's a vertical dimension to the purpose of the existence of the church that is unlike anything else on earth. The true church has a purpose that is not fulfilled anywhere else on earth, and that's why we're careful not to identify ourselves as a social service agency or simply a place where people can get together and have discussions. No, we realize we have a higher call. We have a higher purpose. That God has claimed us and saved us as His own so that we might belong to Him and fulfill His purpose in our existence and so as we come to realize that more and more, we start to get an ever more lofty and elevated view of why we exist as a corporate body, and how special it is to be able to share in the purpose of that together. Honestly, you know, to be able to serve such a lofty purpose for God, and to be able to do

it together with people that you love, and care about, and know in day to day life, and you minister to one another out of a sincere love for each other, we are greatly privileged to be able to be a part of something like that, aren't we? This is a wonderful thing to be a part of the true church of Jesus Christ.

Well, Paul had all of those thoughts going on in his mind as well when he was writing this in this letter and you see that having said these things in chapter 2, now in chapter 3 he's going to connect it to what he's about to say. Look at chapter 3 verse 1 here. It's very interesting what happens here. He says, "For this reason." For this reason. "Because of everything that I have just been saying in Ephesians, chapter 2. In light of everything that I have said about Jews and Gentiles coming together by the power of God collectively joined together to be a worshipping body, to be a place where God is displayed, and honored, and worshipped, and makes His glory known. What a lofty purpose," Paul says, "and for this reason, I Paul." He opens the chapter referring back to the section that we just read and what he's saying here, what the hinge is here, this is actually one of the places where there is a decent chapter break in the text inserted, you know, twelve hundred years later. We've talked about that in the past. This is a decent place for a chapter break. Paul says, "For this reason I, Paul." He's getting ready to do something. But what's very fascinating, and what gives you an insight into the great mind of this magnificent apostle is what you notice as you read in the verses that followed, there is no verb expressing what Paul is doing. He says, "For this reason I, Paul," and then he immediately goes on a tangent. I can relate to that. I understand. And Paul here, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, which is not a privilege that a preacher today has, of speaking under the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit in the way that the apostles wrote their letters, Paul here is getting ready to do something but the Spirit of God directed him in another direction.

What was he getting ready to do? He was getting ready to pray. He was about to take, in light of the great truths that had just been enunciated in Ephesians 2, he's about to pray, so that the position that these believers enjoyed would be manifested in their practice, and praying that, "God has given you this great position, and now I pray that your practice will correspond with the loftiness of your position." You can see that by looking over at verse 14. Paul went on a tangent, and in verse 14 he comes back to what he started to do in verse 1.

Verse 1, "For this reason I, Paul," then there is never a verb about what Paul is doing. Verse 14, now he picks it up, and he says, "Oh yeah, here's what I was going to do. For this reason I bow my knees before the Father," and then he goes into a magnificent prayer in verses 15 through 19 and prays for his readers. He is so moved by the power and the majesty of God's purposes in the church that he immediately wants to turn to prayer for the people that he is writing to and he says in verse 14, "I bow my knees before the Father." Verse 16, "That He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith." In a couple of three or four weeks, we will look at that text in greater detail. For now, I just want you to see that his intention was to move into prayer as he opens chapter 3.

However, something diverted him. Something grabbed his attention as he was about to pray. Now mark this. Mark this in your thinking: if an apostle is getting ready to pray, as he obviously was as we saw in verses 14 and following, he's getting ready to pray, but he goes on a tangent because something else seems important to him, if he goes on a tangent as he is writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, then this tangent must be phenomenally important for us to see, and understand, and grasp what it is that he is saying. What he stops to discuss is something that is going to buttress, that is going to reinforce, the purposes of God in the church. He's going to discuss something about his own ministry that will reinforce what God intends to do through the body of believers that constitute his true people on earth.

And so, Paul, getting ready to pray, says, "I've got something else I've gotta say," and that's what we're going to look at this morning. What is he doing here? What causes him to divert from prayer to be able to say something else for a period of time? What he's doing is he is stopping to discuss the significance of his own apostleship. He's stopping to relay to them elements about his ministry that they would otherwise not understand, or that they would overlook, so that they would appreciate even still more the magnitude of what God has done and, with even more the certainty, the purposes of God that He intends to carry out in the church and what you're going to see as we go along is that what Paul says was not just pertinent to those people in the first century who were believers, but rather that when we understand the nature of Paul's ministry, we're going to see that it has direct application to us as non-Jewish people here in the twenty-first century. What Paul says here in these opening three verses of chapter 3 unfold for you the certain high purposes of God in your own salvation.

It is magnificent to realize this, and it is tied up with the way that Paul handled and viewed his own apostleship. When you see the grounds of Paul's apostleship, when you see what Paul's apostleship meant to him, you will have greater clarity and confidence in your own salvation. By the end of this message you should be able to walk out and say, "I see in a new way the profound depths and the profound proofs of the purposes of God, not only in my own life, but in life of the true church of Jesus Christ."

How can we see this from what one man says and does? Well, first of all, Paul here writes, this is your first point if you are taking notes, Paul here writes as the prisoner of Christ. The prisoner of Christ, and the significance of this is great. The reason that it's significant is not immediately apparent so we'll try to take a little bit of time and show this to you. Paul has identified himself. He says, "For this reason I, Paul," and then he describes himself just a little bit further, not in order to call attention to himself in a proud, boastful way, but because what he has to say is central to the message that he's trying to communicate to them. He says, "For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus." Paul was writing this while under Roman guard, while being chained to a Roman soldier. He self-identifies as the prisoner of Christ Jesus. He is not at liberty. He is confined and under Roman watch.

He repeats this reference as a prisoner in chapter 4 verse 1. You can see that it's prominent in his thinking. He says in chapter 4 verse 1, "Therefore I, the prisoner of the

Lord." And if you look at the end of the book at chapter 6 verse 20, almost the end of the book depending on how technical you want to be with me here this morning, Paul says in Ephesians 6:20, he says, "I am an ambassador in chains." Now, let's think about this for a moment. He's an ambassador of Christ is what he means. He is not an ambassador of Rome, that's for sure. He's in a Roman prison. He's under arrest. How is it that he calls himself a prisoner of Christ Jesus? Christ is not the one who physically, literally placed the chain on him. Christ is not the one who holds the key that would release him. How is it that he is a prisoner of Christ Jesus when he's obviously under Roman arrest? Well, Paul was under Roman arrest for sure. But the reason that he was under arrest is directly tied to the purposes of his ministry. He was under Roman arrest, because his preaching had caused a commotion among the Jews.

Look over at Acts chapter 26. You could read about all of this in the last seven or eight chapters of the book of Acts and I can just give you a flavor for the sake of time of it. I just want you to see a little bit, Acts 26, a little bit of what is going on here. Paul is giving a defense to himself of King Agrippa, because he has appealed to Rome, and they are examining Paul, and he says, "I appeal to Caesar." And they have to give a reason to Caesar why Paul is being sent to them and he is explaining what happened to King Agrippa and says, "Here's how I got to be in front of you today." And we're picking it up midway in the story in Paul's narrative to King Agrippa. He says in Acts 26:19, "King Agrippa, I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision," referring to when he was met by Christ on the road to Damascus. He said, "But I kept declaring both to those of Damascus first, and also at Jerusalem, and then throughout all the region of Judea, and even to the Gentiles that they should repent and turn to God performing deeds appropriate to repentance." Verse 21. "For this reason some Jews seized me in the temple and tried to put me to death." The Jews hated Paul's preaching. They hated the fact that he was taking the Gospel message to Gentiles directly and so, they seized him. They falsely accused him of disrupting the Roman peace, and so Rome took him into custody in order to examine and see what the situation was.

Look at Acts 28:16 where you get a little bit more background on it. In Acts 28:16, Luke, the writer of Acts, was with Paul when these events happened, and that's why he uses the first person plural. "When we entered Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who was guarding him. After three days Paul called together those who were the leading men of the Jews, and when they came together, he began saying to them, 'Brethren, though I had done nothing against our people or the customs of our fathers, yet I was delivered as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans. And when they had examined me, they were willing to release me because there was no ground for putting me to death. But when the Jews objected, I was forced to appeal to Caesar, not that I had any accusation against my nation. For this reason, therefore,'" this is what ties into Ephesians, "For this reason, therefore, I requested to see you and to speak with you, for I am wearing this chain for the sake of the hope of Israel." Paul has explained in his own words in these passages that we've looked at why it is that he is in prison. He said, "I was preaching, and Jews seized me and delivered me over to the Romans, and now I have to appeal to Caesar in order to make my case." This is why Paul was a prisoner.

Now mark this, and this gives you, what we're about to see here over the next few minutes, will give you a sense of how you should view your own life as well, even though none of us are prisoners for Christ. Thinking of the Apostle Paul, thinking of him in chains for the sake of the Gospel, here's what's going through Paul's mind. Paul is thinking, and what he is alluding to is, "Christ called me to this apostleship. Christ is sovereign over my circumstances. Christ is the one that I was preaching when they laid hands on me. Christ is the one to whom I was accountable when the Romans took me into custody. Christ was the reason. Christ is the reason for my imprisonment." And so therefore, this is why Paul says, "I am a prisoner of Christ Jesus." Christ called him to the apostleship. He was preaching Christ to Jews and Gentiles alike, primarily to Gentiles, and it was in the course of being faithful to the call that this imprisonment came about. All Paul had to do to get out of prison was to promise not preach to the Gentiles anymore, and the whole problem would have gone away. But because he was unwilling to betray his apostolic commission, chains were the result.

And so, Paul was in prison because he was being faithful to Christ. Paul was in prison because these were the circumstances that Christ had appointed for Him at that point in His ministry. And so what you see coming out in these words of the Apostle Paul is this attitude that says, "I am not a prisoner of circumstance. I am not even a prisoner of Rome, ultimately. I am a prisoner because Christ Jesus put me here. I am a prisoner in furtherance of what Christ has called me to do."

Brief word of application for you here today. Look at Paul's example. Look at Paul trusting Christ with chains on his ankles. Look at the triumphant note that says, "I am a prisoner of Christ Jesus," and get a glimpse into the way that you should view your own circumstances in life. You are not a victim of circumstance. You are not a victim of what men have done for you. Particularly if you are a Christian, you have the life that God has given you right now so that that life that God has given uniquely to you would be the stage upon which you would glorify Christ. Don't resent it just like Paul didn't resent being under a Roman chain. Rather, view it as the fact that, "I am here as a slave of Christ. Christ is sovereign over my circumstances. God works in the midst of all of my circumstances ultimately to accomplish good in my life. I exist solely to be a vessel of the glory of God and here I find myself in this particular life in these particular circumstances, good, bad, or indifferent, whatever they may be. Because I believe in the sovereignty of God, because I trust in the goodness of God, I realize that the life that I have is what He has given to me, what He has assigned to me, what He has called me to do and be." Whether it's as a mother with small children with very little time for yourself, whether it's as the head of some organization, whether it's simply in the workaday world, God has assigned you the circumstances that you have, and you should view them, even if you are not a prisoner, you should view your life as, "I have the circumstances of Christ Jesus," by which you mean, "This is what Christ has given to me to live out. This is the portion that God has given to me, and I have the opportunity, the privilege and the duty, to glorify God in this life, because no one else can do it like I can."

So if life is hard, beloved, I say it gently, I say it as your pastor, but I call you in order to call you to higher ground. Don't resent it. Don't resent the difficulty of life that is brought

to you. Rather, humble yourself under the mighty hand of God as 1 Peter 5 says. Humble yourself under the mighty hand of God and say, "Lord, I accept these circumstances. I will honor you and glorify you in them. Please help me to that end." Be godly in whatever case you may find yourself. Honor Christ in whatever the difficult circumstances may be and realize that as you take that position, as you lay down the resentment, as you lay down the unhappiness, as you lay down the bitterness, as you lay aside the questions, realize that as you're doing that, and as you're shedding that spiritual and emotional baggage of it all, that you are honoring Christ, and your whole situation has now been ennobled into something much loftier and higher than anything the circumstances could ever produce on their own, because now you are viewing your life as what God has given you, and you say, "I embrace the challenge that it will be to glorify God and to be a godly person with Spirit-filled attitudes in the midst of what I am doing."

"I am a prisoner of Christ Jesus," Paul could say without a trace, without a hint, of resentment. For him to say, "I'm a prisoner of Christ Jesus," is a lofty statement of trust, and submission, and commitment and there is no reason why you and I cannot live that same way because the same Spirit that indwelt the Apostle Paul indwells us. The same Christ who was sovereign over Paul's circumstances is sovereign over us. For most of us the circumstances that Paul was enduring were far more severe than what we are facing, and so let Paul's example here, let his self-designation here cause you to rise up and to say, "Do you know what? It's time for me to be godly. It's time for me to grow in godliness," maybe that's a better way to say it. "It's time for me to aspire after loftier ends and not adopt the victimhood mindset of the culture around me and say, 'Praise God! He's given me a life to live. He's given me this life to live. I'm going to glorify Him in it.'" Why not?

Now, getting back to Paul after that point of application. Here's what you really, really, really, really, really need to see. Paul was in prison contrary to normal human motives. Paul could have avoided this suffering if he had simply set aside his commitment to preach the Gospel to Gentiles. He could have had his freedom if he had simply kept quiet, and life from an external circumstantial perspective would have improved dramatically for him by the way that men evaluate good circumstances. In a sense, Paul held his own key, but he set it aside, "I don't need that key. I don't want that key."

He could have had his freedom if he had just shut his mouth, but he didn't do that. And the question is, why? We'll get into this in the second point but he was internally constrained not to do that, because he had to be faithful to his apostolic commission. Listen. Paul's imprisonment for the cause of Christ, watch this because this serves to validate the truth of the Gospel to us still today: Paul's imprisonment was a seal of his authenticity. It was a statement. It was a stamp upon the legitimacy of who he was and what his ministry was because it wasn't from human motives that he was in prison. It wasn't from human motives that he says elsewhere in the Scriptures that he fought with wild beasts. It wasn't from human motives that he suffered in the depths of the sea in shipwrecks. It wasn't from human motives that he endured thirty-nine lashes from the Jews. And on and on it goes. He suffered for reasons that make no human sense! There was nothing in it for him that would benefit him in this life. He was suffering so that the

people that Christ had sent him to minister to would receive the message untarnished and undiluted. And he suffered persecution at the hands of those who opposed him, ultimately at the hands of the devil himself who was trying to silence the message, Paul suffered for the Gospel in a way that did not benefit him in this life, and when you look at that you have to say, "Why on earth did he do that?" He did it because his apostleship was real. It was a genuine commission from the true God. No one would do this otherwise. And the fact that he was willing to endure prison when he could have gotten out, the fact that he was faithful to the message at the expense of his own convenience and, ultimately, his own life shows that his message should be believed. It validates his message even to this day. He's a prisoner of Christ Jesus.

Keep that in mind as we go into this second point, as we see this second aspect of Paul's apostleship. Go back to Ephesians 3 with me. Ephesians 3. These things join together in Ephesians 3:1 and 2. Paul says, "I'm the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles - if indeed you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace which was given to me for you," that is for your benefit. He says, "I'm a prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles." He's writing to a predominately Gentile audience and he says, "My liberty is restricted. I'm suffering here so that you would receive blessing as a result of it."

He was an apostle to the Gentiles. God gave a stewardship of grace for them. Paul was uniquely sent to these Gentiles, to these non-Jewish people and as we have often said, "Here we are, in some senses you could say those who stand in their shoes also as non-Jewish people here today, receiving the benefit of Paul's faithfulness to his apostolic commission. We have the benefit of it today because he endured suffering two thousand years ago in the course of being faithful to his call to Christ." Paul says, "It's a stewardship that I have." It's as though God gave him a management duty. He says, "Here is your responsibility, Paul. You are to take the Gospel to Gentiles. Now, go do it."

Look back at Acts 9:15 just to reinforce this. We'll look at a couple of things here. Paul had this consciousness of his responsibility to be faithful to the Gentiles to whom he was sent. After his conversion, the Lord appeared to a man named Ananias. Look at Acts 9:10, "There was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and the Lord said to him in a vision, 'Ananias.' And he said, 'Here I am, Lord.' And the Lord said to him, 'Get up and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him, so that he might regain his sight.'" Now, Ananias wasn't sure that that was a good idea since Paul was a persecutor of the church. He said, "Lord," verse 13, "I've heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Your saints at Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name. And you're sending me to him? I don't know about this!" Now, for purposes today, pay particular attention to verse 15. The Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine," purpose clause, "to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake." So, Christ from the very beginning had laid his hand, as it were, upon Paul and said, "He will be one who will go to the Gentiles."

Now, with that in mind, Paul was conscious of this responsibility that was laid on him and explained to him from the beginning, and he came ultimately to see that it was an eternal purpose of God, not merely a temporal one. Look over at Galatians 1. Stay with me on this. I know we are bouncing around a little bit but this is all related to how you can know and be strengthened in the certainty of your own salvation, which is why Paul said it in the first place in Ephesians. In Galatians 1:11, Paul here is explaining his ministry in greater depth, in a way that parallels what he's saying in Ephesians 3. He says, "I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ." He says, "I didn't study my way into this knowledge that I have. Christ laid hold of me and gave it to me." This is very significant. So he says in verse 13, "For you have heard of my former manner of life in Judaism, how I used to persecute the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it; and I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions." Paul was such a committed Jew that he persecuted the early church. Paul was such a committed Jew that he could say, "I am a Hebrew of Hebrews," in Philippians 3 and he's advancing in Judaism. He persecuted the church. He was way ahead of his contemporaries and his religion. He was so very zealous, and that was a matter of public record.

Here's the point: the fact that he's now preaching the Gospel to Gentiles, he's preaching the Gospel as a Jew to Gentiles, he's preaching the Gospel that he tried to silence, he's advancing the cause of the church that he once tried to persecute, the fact that as a Jew he's going to Gentiles, none of that makes any human sense! It's a mark of something supernatural. It's all contrary to human motives, human explanation. There's no human explanation for the Apostle Paul other than true divine intervention in his life. So in verse 15 he says, Galatians 1:15, he says, "But," in contrast to my former life as this zealous unconverted Jew, "but when God, who had set me apart even from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, was pleased to reveal His Son in me so that I might preach Him among the Gentiles. I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood." He says, "God called me directly. Christ revealed this truth and gave it to me, and gave it to me with the purpose that I would carry the message to the Gentiles." In time, after Paul's conversion, the other apostles recognized the unique ministry that God had given to him. Look at Galatians 2:7. Paul says, "On the contrary, seeing that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been to the circumcised (for He who effectually worked for Peter in his apostleship to the circumcised effectually worked for me also to the Gentiles) and recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, so that we might go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised."

Point number two here, I don't think I ever got the point out. This is why the song that we sang says, "Will you pray with all your power while we try to preach the Word." Paul was the prisoner of Christ Jesus. What I've been talking about for the past ten minutes or so is that Paul was the preacher to Gentiles. Using the P word simply for alliteration's sake to help you remember it, he was specifically appointed to go to the Gentiles. That's the point.

Now, let's pull all of my incompetence together here and see if we can get something sensible out of it now. Mindful of the fact that we're reading this two thousand years later as Gentiles, God appointed this highly educated, highly advanced Jew to receive true conversion and to take a divinely revealed message and carry it to the Gentiles, to carry it to people just like you and me. And so what did Paul do? Paul made known to Gentiles who had no Jewish context, no Old Testament context, to understand about a Messiah. Paul made known to them that Christ had come and Christ had suffered for sin on the cross. Paul made known to them that Christ was resurrected from the dead. Paul made known to them, to these Gentiles that that death and resurrection was a sacrifice, an accepted payment for their sins against a holy God, and he made known to them that they could have the forgiveness of their sins and have eternal life given to them through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. A message that they were dark to, that they were dead to, that they had no access to. The Jews kept them away. The Jews hated the Gentiles, and they hated Paul for preaching to the Gentiles. Where were they going to hear? Where in their darkness of sin was light going to come to them? Paul says, "I was appointed for that purpose. Christ laid hold of me. He had set me apart from my mother's womb, and, when time came, confronted me on the road to Damascus, saved me, changed me, and said, 'You now will go preach to Gentiles. You will carry the Gospel beyond the walls of Judaism.'"

For you non-Christians here today, same message for you: Christ suffered for sin as a substitute for sinners. Christ was buried. Christ was raised again. Christ offers you eternal life if you will believe in Him for the forgiveness of your sins. If you will turn from sin, and repent, and put your faith in Christ, God will forgive all of your sins and give you eternal life never to be taken away. A free offer of grace made to you right here, right now and he says, "Come." Will you come? There's nothing keeping you back but your own self-will, because Christ will receive you if you come to Him and say, "Save me too, just like you did all of these other Gentiles that I'm hearing about."

Paul's message to these Gentiles was that they didn't have to become Jews first. They could go straight to Christ, and He would receive them in His kingdom. Now mark it, watch this, that is not the message that the Gentiles were hearing from Jews in that day. The Jews were hostile. The Jews built walls to keep them away from the temple. The Jews had thrown Paul into prison and so, now watch this, watch this, in all of that context, everything that we have said is leading up to this very point: Paul's message of salvation, and Paul's suffering in prison was a mark, was a public manifestation, that God was favorably disposed to Gentiles, even though the Jews were not. The very existence of Paul and his apostleship at that time showed that God was now displaying mercy to Gentiles that previously had been hidden from them. A favorable time had arrived, and Gentiles could be forgiven. Gentiles could be saved. And they didn't have to go through hostile Jews to get to God. They could go straight to Christ themselves and find forgiveness of their sins.

No wonder the Gentiles rejoiced. In Acts 13, you don't have to turn there, but in Acts 13:48, no wonder it says, in verse 46 Paul told the Jews, "We're turning to the Gentiles."

The Lord has commanded us. I have placed you as a light for the Gentiles that you might bring salvation to the end of the earth." And so, Paul says, "You Jews won't hear me? You Jews try to silence me? I'm going to go to the Gentiles now." And what was the Gentile response? "Yeeeeeeah!! When the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the Word of the Lord, and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed." Finally, there was a true messenger from God who was on the scene who was not intimidated by the Jews and says, "I proclaim to you for your benefit, for the glory of Christ, that you now can be forgiven. That God extends the promise of eternal life to you. Come to faith in Christ." And Gentiles rejoiced, because, finally, all of the Jewish stuff that was keeping them away was taken away, and God through the Apostle Paul was coming to them directly and says, "I will have you too." No wonder they rejoiced. "The truth has been brought to us. The darkness of my soul can be set aside. I can belong to the true Christ. He suffered for me too, not just for the Jews. A Jewish messiah, but the offer is extended to me as a Gentile. I was on the outside looking in, and now God makes known through this great apostle that He welcomes me on equal terms."

Beloved, Paul was speaking on a divine commission to the benefit of the Gentiles. He gladly suffered so that Gentiles could receive the Gospel. He was an apostle for their sake. He was an apostle for our sake too. Now notice this, we're talking about this in terms of the Apostle Paul. I want to stand right here as a point of emphasis. I won't do that. The theatrics would not be constructive anyway, but this is so massively important for you to understand. This is so incredibly significant for you and me to grab hold of. The existence of Paul's ministry, and the greatness of Paul the man, and his faithfulness to his commission is secondary to what it represents. What it represents is that God is favorably disposed toward people like you and me. Paul was there because God had sent him. This isn't to glorify Paul at all, Paul is a symbol. Paul is a representative. Paul shows us that God will receive sinful Gentiles and has made provision for them to be reconciled to Him and the truthfulness of that is seen in that a first class Jew is suffering at the hands of his own countrymen so that he can take that message of forgiveness to Gentiles that he used to persecute. This turns all human logic on its head and displays the greatness and the purpose of God that God is a saving, reconciling God, even to Gentiles.

The existence of Paul in the flesh spoke to a greater reality about God that was invisible. The gates to heaven were now open. You don't have to go through the Jews. You don't have to be circumcised. You don't have to keep the Law of Moses in order to approach. Free access, free approach to God is available in the Lord Jesus Christ and that was unheard of in that day and age. And Paul, when he says, "I'm a prisoner for the sake of you Gentiles; this is for you," he's manifesting the fact that this was the very realm of ministry that God had assigned him to. It's massive. If you want to tie it into things that we have studied on Tuesday nights, I'd invite you to our Tuesday night study at seven o'clock here to join with us in the study of God's Word.

Paul was an instrument through which God in part kept His promise to Abraham. God told Abraham, "In you all the nations are going to be blessed." Here is Paul as a Jew, as a direct lineal descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, now taking the Gospel to Gentiles. Paul is one of the primary means by which God established His faithfulness to Abraham.

Paul was furthering those great promises to Abraham. Abraham, four thousand years ago from us, God said, "Through you, through your line, I will bless the nations." Two thousand years later, the Apostle Paul is there preaching to the nations, preaching to the Gentiles. And now, for us two thousand more years later, here we are with the message that Paul preached all offered to Gentiles and many of us in this room having the benefit of new life through what Paul preached. A direct connection to the promises of Abraham. Better yet, a direct connection from Paul to the revelation of Christ. Christ revealed it to Paul, and we now have Paul's words reserved and preserved for us in the Scriptures and in what they proclaim, and as they unveil and present Christ to us, we have direct access to the one true and holy God, and all of our sins can be forgiven through faith in Christ. And now He saves us, and He begins to fit us together so that we would collectively be a place where His name is proclaimed and worshipped.

Here we stand, beloved, four thousand years after Abraham, forty centuries after Abraham, believing in Christ, unworthy sinners, forgiven and reconciled to God and in a position of blessing from Him. The transcendent nature of what Paul is saying here in Ephesians 3 gives us a sense of the magnitude and the greatness of the biblical message of salvation and we should bow, we should bow before that. We should worship the God who gave us such salvation. We should worship in the presence of the magnitude of an omnipotent, omniscient God who could promise something four thousand years ago and still be delivering on it today, and somehow knew us by name, and claimed us, and brought us into it, and said, "I'm going to share this blessing with you too."

What a precious treasure that is, worthy of the highest reverence and devotion, the greatest loyalty and fidelity to the Christ who purchased it all for us. Worthy of loving the Word in which we find these things revealed. So worthy! So great! So magnificent! That to trivialize it by announcing to the region that you're going to have a super bowl of preaching is deplorable, as some churches choose to do. Never! Never! Never should the Gospel be trivialized like that. Never should the Word of God be reduced to a human sporting event. Ever! Ever! Should we respect and revere this Word and the God who made Himself known through it. Ever! Ever should we line with the spirit of Paul and say, "I'll suffer for the Gospel if need be." This was not entertainment to Paul. He wore a chain, so that the Gentiles could hear. He wore a chain for One who bore nails, so that Gentiles could be forgiven. "O God! Forgive us for living in an age in people who claim Your name, that trivialize it like they do. O God! Give us grace that we would be separate from that! And by the way that we handle the Word, and by the way that we live our lives, O God, manifest the honor that is due Your name with reverence and awe bowing before the God who must be feared." Paul was a prisoner for our sake. God forbid that we would ever trivialize that. Ultimately, he gave his neck to Nero and sealed his apostleship with martyrdom, just like eleven of the twelve apostles did. Just like men who are far more worthy than us, far more noble than us, spilled their blood in the subsequent two thousand years. Martyrs. "Martyr" being the Greek word for "witness." Testifying to the truth of this great Gospel sealed with blood. Sealed with blood.

And so, beloved, bringing this all together for you: the Gospel in which you have believed, the Gospel in which you have set your hope, is certified by divine attestation

which transcends any possible human motives. Paul was in chains, so that you and I would one day get the Gospel. God assigned an apostle especially for reaching people like you and me. That's how much God wanted to bring the Gospel to us. Christ took on flesh and purchased it with His own blood. Don't you see, beloved, that God has blessed us? Don't you see that God is favorably disposed toward us? Out with the thought that God is unkind. And so our salvation is resting in something real and something true, not as mocking scoundrels would say, that we're believing in an imaginary friend. No. No. No, we are believing in Christ for the sure redemption of our sin-weary souls based on divinely attested truth. And so we're confident. We're unafraid. We're bold. We love Christ. We're glad to let this world pass away.

One last thing. Paul, point number three, was the possessor of truth. Look at Ephesians chapter 3 again, and I'll wrap this up. Ephesians 3:3. I need to finish this here today. Paul says, "I'm the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles - if indeed you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace," the stewardship about God's grace, in other words, about the grace of God toward sinners, "which was given to me for you." I'm merely an instrument, I'm a vessel. He says in verse 3, "That by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief." Paul says, "It came by revelation." As I said earlier, God disclosed divine truth to Paul that had previously been unknown about Christian salvation. Paul says that it was a mystery. In English we think of "mystery" as something that is dark and difficult to discover. That's not the biblical sense of the term. It's simply referring to previously unknown divine truth that now has been made known through revelation. This truth was always there, but God had not disclosed it to men yet. And so in Paul, He pulls back the veil, deposits it in Paul's mind, and says, "Now, Paul, you go, and take it, and proclaim it." Paul had insight, not because he had studied hard, but because God gave it to Him.

Next week we'll see what the content of that mystery is as we look at verses 4 through 7. For now, we simply see this: for the sake of Gentiles, God gave truth to a man who was faithful to the point of being in chains. And so when Paul says, "Here's Ephesians 1 and Ephesians 2, and now I'm going to pray for you. Oh, but you know what? I'm an apostle for your sake," we see the significance of that. We see that bound up in the life of the Apostle Paul is a divine attestation that everything that we believe is true and that our confidence is well placed. God loves us even though we're sinful Gentiles. God has reconciled us through the Lord Jesus Christ who loved us and gave Himself up for us. God has made us recipients of grace and given us equal standing in Christ that we never could have achieved on our own.

Beloved, closing point here. Closing sentence. The Gospel comes to us from our heavenly Father who loves us, who had our eternal good in mind, and put a plan in place, and sent men to fulfill it, and brought it to us, and has now sealed us in the Spirit, and will keep us throughout all the days of eternity. Paul, an apostle to the Gentiles, was His messenger. God has blessed us. Rejoice. Give thanks and sing.

Let us pray.

Father, we thank You for the truth of the Gospel. We thank You supremely for the faithfulness of our Lord Jesus Christ. We thank You that You sent Paul to the Gentiles. We thank You that we have received the Gospel two thousand years later in a river of attesting blood by men better than us who gave their lives because they would not compromise the message either. And Father, in this age where people prefer the Super Bowl to Your Word, where publishers claim the name Christian, and publish lies in the name of Christ, and laugh all the way to the bank, and in this age, Lord, where men who know those travesties refuse to speak out about it, have mercy on us that we would be faithful in this little corner of the world that You have given to us, together that we might be faithful. And have mercy on Your church, Father, and raise up men who would speak. Raise up Pauls in our own generation who would declare truth and be faithful to it no matter the cost, without calculating the royalties before they speak, without seeking the royalties in what they want. O God! O God! Do a work of Your Spirit that vindicates the truth of everything that we have seen here today. We repudiate the spirit of our age and we repudiate the spirit that prevails in Your church today, Lord, what professes to be Your church, and we ask that just as You did a great work through the Apostle Paul, Father, that You would once again rise up and defend Your truth here today. Here in this age. Here in our generation. That people might hear and believe who are wandering in darkness, while wicked men divvy up the profits amongst themselves. Let us be true Lord, not that we might boast before men, but that we might appear before You and say, "We are unworthy servants. We have only done that which we ought." Father, in the great and mighty name of Christ, in the name of the One who suffered for sinners, in the name of the great and coming King whom we will one day see face to face, we pray. Amen.

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