

**Ephesians 3: 1-7; “The Mystery of Christ”, Message # 20 in a series entitled –
“The Exceeding Greatness of His Power”, A Bible Study prepared
by Pastor Paul Rendall on March 4th, 2020,
for those gathered at his home.**

So we learn here, that the apostle Paul was a prisoner of Christ Jesus for the Gentiles, from verse 1. What does this mean? It means that Paul went to prison for preaching that salvation in Christ should be offered freely to the Gentiles as well as the Jews; offered on the same terms, as it was offered to the Jews first; namely, that it was by faith in Christ that a person is saved and justified and brought into the kingdom of God, and the family of God. The unbelieving Jews did not like this, and so Paul had been persecuted and hounded wherever he went. And eventually, his preaching Christ in this way landed him in prison in Rome. What I want you to see was that this was according to the will of Christ. Christ had led him to preach the gospel in many places before. But now, he was locked up. Paul, from this vantage point in prison, would now show all Christians how the gospel was not bound, but that he could still preach it and see fruit borne to eternal life, even though he was imprisoned.

This evening we want to think together about the mystery of Christ, not only in the apostle Paul's life, but also in our own life as Christians. 1st – I will speak to you about the mystery of Christ in relation to Paul's being bound over to the Gentiles. 2nd – I will speak to you about the mystery of Christ in relation to Paul's having revelatory knowledge concerning the Church. And 3rd – I will speak to you about the mystery of Christ in relation to Paul's becoming an effective minister of grace. In giving you these truths, it is my prayer that you will better be able to know and comprehend the reality of the mystery of Christ in your own day to day experience as a Christian.

1st – Let's think about the mystery of Christ in relation to Paul's being bound over to the Gentiles. (verses 1-3)

“For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles – If indeed you have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which was given to me for you, how that by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I have briefly written already).” Now, I want to further develop this idea that the mystery of Christ involves not only the message of Christ but it also involves the advance of His kingdom in accordance with His eternal purposes. We tend to think that it is only when the messenger of the gospel is in the most protective and peaceful conditions that Christ's kingdom can go forward to spread and conquer in the hearts of people. We might tend to think that for the apostle's ministry to be fulfilled, that oppositions and difficulties would so hinder the messenger, that the message would not get through, to those whom the Lord had purposed to bring it to. We will see that this was not the case.

However, first, I want you to turn with me over to 1st Thessalonians 4: 9-12, where I want to show you a complementary principle of truth. “But concerning brotherly love you have no need that I should write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another; and indeed you do so toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, that you increase more and more; that you also aspire to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you, that you may walk properly toward those who are outside, and that you may lack nothing.”

I am trying to show you that a man's ministry, or any Christian's personal ministry can be perfectly fulfilled, according to the will of God, even though they are in the midst of great difficulties and oppositions. However, what we are told here is that it is right, on the other hand, to aspire to lead a quiet life, and to mind your own business, and to work with your hands. This is what we should desire for ourselves; to lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness. You don't have to think that you need to go looking for trouble, for Christ's kingdom to advance. If you are faithful, and if the Lord thinks that in order for you to fulfill your ministry that you must go through many trials, troubles, or sufferings, He will ordain those things which are necessary for you to go through, to fulfill His

purpose. Turn with me over to Acts chapter 9, verses 10-16. This is exactly what happened in regard to Saul after he saw the Lord on the road to Damascus and was saved. He was led into the city of Damascus blind, and the Lord appointed a man named Ananias to go visit him and instruct him in what the Lord wanted him to now do with his life.

“Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and to him the Lord said in a vision, “Ananias.” “And he said, ‘Here I am, Lord.” “So the Lord said to him, ‘Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for one called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he is praying.” “And in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias coming in and putting his hand on him, so that he might receive his sight.” “Then Ananias answered, ‘Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he has done to Your saints in Jerusalem.” “And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name.” “But the Lord said to him, ‘Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name’s sake.”

Now I want you to know that Ananias was a very godly man, and the Lord was asking him to do something which he thought was very shocking; to go to the chief persecutor of the Church and to lay his hands on him so that he might receive his sight. Ananias objected to this, based upon Saul’s past sinful actions and his opposition to the gospel and the people of God, God’s saints. But look at how the Lord speaks to Him so definitely of His own purposes. “Go, for he is a chosen vessel, a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel.” For – I will show him how much he must suffer for My name’s sake. This should convince us of the mystery of Christ in relation to each of his elect people; especially those who preach the gospel.

How could God use a man who was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a violent aggressor, to fulfill His purposes to open the door for the gospel to come to the Gentiles? This is the mystery of Christ. How could God convince the believing Jews of this? He would use Saul. And He would confront unbelieving Jews with their shameless unbelief, through him. This was the mystery of Christ. This should show us just how important it is, for us not to become prejudiced against the idea of the worst of sinners coming to faith in Jesus Christ. The mystery of Christ is, that our Lord did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. But the mystery of Christ goes even further than this. How could Christ use Paul to bear His name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel? He would do this through Saul’s defense of himself before all of these people, when he was falsely accused of being a troublemaker.

You see, there was a stewardship of grace which was given to Paul to accomplish all that God had determined would be useful to further Christ’s kingdom, and His cause, to the Gentiles. Paul was a steward of this mystery. His bringing the gospel to the Gentiles would come through the great conflict of sufferings that would come to him in relation to his being a good witness to both the Jews and the Gentiles. But Paul had become the prisoner of Christ Jesus long before he was ever put in the physical prison in Rome. He called himself the Lord’s bondservant, and he went wherever the Lord would lead him to go, in preaching the gospel. But now, let me show you how he came into the custody of Gentile leaders, so that he could witness to kings and many in authority.

At one point, in Acts 21, verses 8-14, it says – “On the next day we who were Paul’s companions departed and came to Caesarea, and entered the house of Philip the Evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him.” “Now this man had four virgin daughters who prophesied.” “And as we stayed many days, a certain man named Agabus came down from Judea.” “When he had come to us, he took Paul’s belt, bound his own hands and feet, and said, ‘Thus says the Holy Spirit, ‘So shall the Jews bind the man who owns this belt, and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.” “Now when we heard these things, both we and those from that place pleaded with him not to go up to Jerusalem.” “Then Paul answered, ‘What do you mean by weeping and breaking my heart?” “For I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.” “So when he would not be persuaded, we ceased, saying, ‘The will of the Lord be done.”

Well, I haven't time to lead you through all of the chapters of Acts 21-28, but I want you to see that the mystery of Christ would be that Paul, who was called a Jewish servant and an apostle of Christ, would fall into the hands of the Gentiles, even as was prophesied of him. Look at Acts 21: 27-33 – “Now when the seven days were almost ended, the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him, crying out, ‘Men of Israel, help!’ “This is the man who teaches all men everywhere against the people, the law, and this place; and furthermore he also brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place.” “(For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city, whom they supposed that Paul had brought into the temple.)”

“And all the city was disturbed; and the people ran together, seized Paul, and dragged him out of the temple; and immediately the doors were shut.” “Now as they were seeking to kill him, news came to the commander of the garrison that all Jerusalem was in an uproar.” “He immediately took soldiers and centurions, and ran down to them.” “And when they saw the commander and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul.” “Then the commander came near and took him, and commanded him to be bound with two chains; and he asked who he was and what he had done.” So, we see here that Paul was bound over to the hands of the Gentile authorities, but it would lead to a great witness being born, where Paul would be confronting both Jews and Gentiles with the truth, and some would be saved. That was the mystery of Christ, and that was Paul's stewardship of grace in relation to his being bound over to them; that Christ would be with him in all of his trials.

2nd – Let's think about the mystery of Christ in relation to Paul's having revelatory knowledge concerning the Church. (verses 4-6)

... “By which when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ, which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets: that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel...” Paul is saying that there was certain and definite knowledge that was given to him, and to the other apostles, concerning the Gentiles becoming heirs together with the Jews; of the promise of eternal life in Christ, through their believing in the gospel. This had been revealed before in the Old Testament, but not been revealed as it was now, at that time, when the apostles preached this truth, and sought to establish it everywhere, through their letters and books, which came to be a part of the New Testament Scriptures.

What we want to see for our study tonight, is how this worked out practically for Paul in his ministry. Paul, after receiving the prophecy from Agabus that we read about before, goes to Jerusalem, as he knows that this is where the Lord is leading him in order that he might fulfill his ministry. Sometimes in order to fulfill what we know the Lord would have us do in our personal ministry and obedience to Him, we must go to places and people, who will not be happy that we came. This is the mystery of Christ. Paul was being protected by the centurion from the Jewish mob mentioned in Acts 21: 35, and he received permission from the commander of the barracks to speak to the Jews, and they listened for awhile, while he related his testimony of how he came to faith in Christ, when before he had been a zealous Pharisee.

But then he said this to them in Acts 22: 17-24 – “Now it happened, when I returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, that I was in a trance and saw the Lord Jesus saying to me, ‘Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, for they will not receive your testimony concerning Me.’ “So I said, ‘Lord, they know that in every synagogue I imprisoned and beat those who believe on You.’ “And when the blood of Your martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by consenting to his death, and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.” “Then He said to me, ‘Depart, for I will send you far from here to the Gentiles.’ “And they listened to Paul 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!’ “Then, as they cried out and tore off their clothes and threw dust into the air, the commander ordered him to be brought into the barracks, and said that he should be examined under scourging, so that he might know why they shouted so against him.”

Now, what I want you to see here was the great and unreasonable hatred of the Jews that Paul was speaking to, towards the Gentiles; especially, that Christ would send Paul to them! They simply could not stand the thought that Gentiles would become heirs of eternal life; that they could become fellow heirs together with believing Jews, being placed into the same spiritual body, and then that they would all be made partakers of all of God's promises in Christ in the gospel. This seemed to be utterly wrong and objectionable to them! This led to Paul's being brought before the Jewish council in chapter 22, verse 30, and Paul had the opportunity to preach to them as well.

In Chapter 23, versed 10 and 11, it says – “Now when there arose a great dissension, the commander, fearing lest Paul might be pulled to pieces by them, commanded the soldiers to go down and take him by force from among them, and bring him into the barracks.” “But the following night the Lord stood by Paul and said, ‘Be of good cheer, Paul; for as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome.’” And so this led, over the next few years to Paul's being able to speak before Gentiles and kings, and rulers of Israel; which things are recorded in chapters 23-28 of Acts. He had the opportunity to preach before the governors, Felix and Festus, and even before King Agrippa and Bernice his queen when they came to Caesarea.

I want to remind you that all of these things fell out, in the way that they did, as a result of God's providential ordering of them in just this way, so that Paul would be able to preach to all the persons that he did preach to; both Jews and Gentiles, kings and rulers. Paul was very willing to be led this way because he had special knowledge into the mystery of Christ. He knew that even the Old Testament Scriptures had prophesied of these things, even though it was not something as clearly revealed in Old Testament times as it was by Paul and the other apostles who had special revelation from God upon the subject. He knew that the mystery of Christ in relation to His Church was, that the Church that Christ was building through the foolishness of preaching. The Jews did not want Christ themselves, but they did not want the gospel to come to the Gentiles either.

Acts 13: 44-47 – “On the next Sabbath almost the whole city came together to hear the word of God.” “But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy; and contradicting and blaspheming, they opposed the things spoken by Paul.” “Then Paul and Barnabas grew bold and said, ‘It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; but since you rejected it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold we turn to the Gentiles.’” “For so the Lord has commanded us: ‘I have set you as a light to the Gentiles, that you should be for salvation to the ends of the earth.’” This is a quote from Isaiah 49: 6 concerning what Christ should do for the Gentiles. “I will give you as a light to the Gentiles, that You should be My salvation to the ends of the earth.” The apostle Paul was a part of that light that the Lord Jesus was shining. This was the mystery of Christ to be able to do such great things through His servant.

3rd – Let's think about the mystery of Christ in relation to Paul's becoming an effective minister of grace.

Verse 7 says – “...Of which I became a minister according to the gift of the grace of God to me by the effective working of His power.” Well, we have seen how much Paul had to suffer for Christ in relation to his preaching the gospel. Now let's think in closing of how effectually Paul ministered the gospel by the effective working of Christ's power. Romans 15: 15-21 – “Nevertheless, brethren, I have written more boldly to you on some points, as reminding you, because of the grace given to me by God, that I might be a minister of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles, ministering the gospel of God, that the offering of the Gentiles might be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.” “Therefore I have reason to glory in Christ Jesus in the things which pertain to God.” “For I will not dare to speak of any of those things which Christ has not accomplished through me, in word and deed, to make the Gentiles obedient – in mighty signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God, so that from Jerusalem and round about to Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ.” “And so I have made it my aim to preach the gospel, not where Christ.” “And so I have made it my aim to preach the gospel, not where Christ was named, lest I should build on another man's foundation...” Paul's success in his preaching and ministering the gospel of grace to the Gentiles was simply astounding! But you will

notice that he does not dare to speak of any of the things which Christ has not accomplished through him, in word and deed, to make the Gentiles obedient. He gives all the glory to Christ.