

The Prisoner of Christ – *Ephesians 3:1-7*

Introduction – Paul begins to pray in Chapter 3, but interrupts himself and doesn't pick it up again until verse 14. Some might consider these next verses as a rabbit trail of sorts, but as one man put it, "sometimes the rabbit trail is the point." Actually Paul clarifies why he has such confidence that causes him to pray the prayer that is vv14-21 considering his present circumstances. The circumstances are his present imprisonment and he doesn't want this to be a stumbling block for the Ephesians. Paul is not stumbled. He is not uttering a single word of complaint. And this is tied to the theology of Ephesians 1-3 and the prayer he will offer. Consider this short passage and multiple other Pauline writings that testify to a theology of God and the victory of the cross that gripped a man so tightly he could not see anything but success in the work of the gospel in his life – and yours. And this while a prisoner...

Quick Summary – Paul's personal ministry is the revelation of the mystery which he was given by God. He is at the time of his writing as a prisoner for the sake of the Gentiles (v1) primarily for the administration of his message of grace to the Gentiles (v2). The message was the revealing of a mystery made clear in the previous two chapters (vv3-4). Previous generations had not been given the extent of the revelation which has now been given to the apostles and prophets, revealed by the Spirit (v5). That mystery was that the Gentiles were to be fully included in all the promises made through the gospel (v6). Paul was appointed and equipped by grace to be the minister of this mystery (v7).

The Prisoner of Christ – Outside of the Lord Jesus Christ, Paul is by far the most dominant figure in the New Testament. In 1:1 he gives his credentials as an apostle of Christ but here he speaks of himself as a prisoner of Christ. Arrested on false charges by the Jews for bringing Greeks into the forbidden areas of the temple (Acts 21:27-29), Paul has been a prisoner for some five years. But Paul did not consider himself a prisoner of the Jews, of Rome, or of Nero. Circumstances and people bring us troubles, but Paul's way of speaking of himself reminds us that we must always remember Who sends the troubles. This changes the way we see everything.

The Perspective of a Prisoner of Christ – Paul knew that without his Lord's consent, Christians are not subject to the plans, punishment, imprisonment, or even the loss of life brought on by any person or government. Previously he had written to the saints in Rome of just such a confidence and now he was living it out (Rom 8:31-39).

A Prisoner for the Sake of the Gentiles – Just as Christ was not crucified for His own sake, so Paul was not a prisoner for his own sake, but for the sake of His Lord and those to whom God had called him to minister. This is what it means to "*fill up in my flesh...the afflictions of Christ*" (Col 1:24-29). Peter teaches that when such suffering comes to us we are invited to have the same perspective (1 Pet 4:12-16). God's protective Providence and His perfect purposes are just as much at work in our lives and callings as in Paul's and the apostles.

A Prisoner Who Knew He Could not Lose – Paul made the supreme sacrifices of unselfish service not with lip-biting stoicism, nor with self-exalting asceticism. First of all, he did not choose nor seek out his place of affliction. He didn't even seek to be an apostle, it was given to him (v7, also 1 Tim 1:12-13). Confident that God by His grace equipped him "*by the effective working of His power*," Paul knew that the afflictions were being used by God to bring "*more and more people*" to Himself (2 Cor 4:8-15). He even told the Philippians of how successful the gospel was going forth to the guards over him and how his chains empowered others to faithfulness (Phil 1:12-14).

The Mystery Unveiled – But second, Paul knew where this was all going. The resurrection of Jesus Christ meant the reconciliation of the world (2 Cor 5:16-19). His first move was to reconcile Jew and Gentile together – a mystery in shadows in the Old (Isaiah 49:6) which was now fully revealed in the New; the preaching of the gospel (Acts 13:46-47). Later, he would write to Timothy of the same optimistic confidence which held him fast (2 Tim 2:8-13, 4:17-18). Paul would run the race with faith – all the way to the end. We are charged to do the same, looking to Jesus (Heb 12:1-2).

Who's Prisoner are You? – God has declared to you of the immeasurable blessings that are yours in Christ: His electing plans, His adopting love, His redeeming blood-payment, His sealing work (Eph 1). Outside of Christ you couldn't have been further from God – dead, distant, no way to pay your debts, no way to be reconciled to Christ or anyone else, at war with God and one another, strangers and foreigners. "*But God*"....changed it all – in Christ – for good and forever (Eph 2). And yet, like Paul, you might find yourself in circumstances that have imprisoned you in any of a number of ways. Someone, something brings them to you and often with wicked motives, sometimes for no reason at all. But the bigger question is Who sent them? Who's prisoner are you, and what is He like? The answer makes all the difference in the world.