

## The Mystery of Christian Unity, Part 1

Scripture: Ephesians 3:1-14

Code: 49-10

Well this is a wonderful day for me because after being away from the book of Ephesians, we are coming back after a number of months away from it. And my favorite thing of all things is to be teaching progressively and systematically through books of the Bible; and this is a great one to be looking at. So if you will open your Bible to the book of Ephesians and the third chapter, you will be in the right location.

Now this is going to be a bit of an interactive sermon. By that, I don't mean that you can stand up and argue with me. But what I do mean is you're going to need to interact with your Bible as we consider this most fascinating portion of Scripture, that on its surface appears a bit benign. But as we shall see, it is loaded with important truth. The third chapter—and I want to read for you verses 1 through 14. We're going to be very patient in working our way through this, but I do want you to have the whole passage in mind because I will make some reference to it.

Ephesians 3:1, "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. By referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit; to be specific, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel, of which I was made a minister, according to the gift of God's grace which was given to me according to the working of His power. To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things; so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and confident access through faith in Him. Therefore I ask you not to lose heart at my tribulations on your behalf, for they are your glory.

"For this reason I bow my knees before the Father."

Now there is a lot there. The word that jumps off the page is the word *mystery*. When we talk about Christianity we don't really, usually, talk about things that are mysterious because the Christian truth is revealed in the Word of God. We are not trying to find something that is hidden or something that is below the surface, only accessed by some esoteric spiritual insight.

When we talk about mystery, we're talking about something very specific. The New Testament refers to things that are mysteries; and by that, what the New Testament always means is something that was hidden in the past and is now revealed. There are no mysteries, as such, in the New Testament that are yet to be revealed, because we have the final revelation of Scripture in the New Testament.

So when we talk about mystery, we're talking about something that has been hidden in the past and been revealed in the New Testament. And Paul of course is referring here to this mystery in particular, of the unity of the church—that “the Gentiles,” verse 6, “are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” So the mystery that Paul is talking about is that the Jew and the Gentile are one in Christ in the church.

Now we've already heard Paul make reference to mystery back in chapter 1. If you go down to verse 9, Paul referred to “the mystery of [God's] will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in [Christ].” What that's telling us is that in the New Testament there are things that have previously been hidden, as to their fullness, that are now revealed.

Now these are referred to by our Lord all the way back in Matthew 13, when He was talking to His disciples on that day in Galilee. He said to them, “To you”—verse 11 of Matthew 13—“it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted.” To those who are believers and followers of Christ, the understanding of the mysteries has been granted. Paul's language indicates that. In verse 3 he refers—of Ephesians 3—to “revelation [that] was made known to [him].” And then in verse 4, he says, “[So] you can understand my insight into the mystery . . . which”—in verse 5—“in other generations [has not been] made known to the sons of men.” So there is a reality in the kingdom of heaven—as it's defined in the New Testament as the church—there's a reality of the revelation of things that have been hidden in the past. There are a number of these mysteries in specific. Paul refers to the mystery of the indwelling Christ, that is, the full understanding that when the Messiah came He would literally dwell in His people. That was not something clarified in the Old Testament.

In Colossians 2, he refers to the mystery of the incarnation, God in human flesh—again, in its fullness, not revealed in the Old Testament. In Romans 11:25, Paul refers to the mystery of Israel's unbelief. No Old Testament reader would have assumed that Israel would have rejected their Messiah to the degree that they have done that. That is not disclosed fully until you get to the New Testament.

Writing to the Thessalonians, Paul refers to the mystery of iniquity. That is to say there is a level of iniquity that is coming to the world that has not been known in the past. In Revelation 17 there is Mystery Babylon, the final form of world society and government that sets itself against God and against Christ at His Second Coming, which will be beyond anything that the world has seen up to that point. And then you have in Ephesians 5 the mystery of the church as Christ's bride; that too is not seen in the Old Testament. And then you have the mystery of the rapture, 1 Corinthians 15:51 and 52.

So there are a number of those truths that are very familiar to us in the New Testament that were not fully revealed in the Old. But the one that Paul is focusing on here is this very, very foundational and important one: the unity of the Jew and Gentile in the church. And there it is in verse 6, “The Gentiles are fellow heirs, fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” That was not seen clearly in the Old Testament.

Now to say that is not to say that it isn't there indicated that God is going to save Gentiles, because I'll show you in a moment that it is. But there's nothing there in the Old Testament that blends the Jew and the Gentile into one spiritual organism. So this is a more full revelation of that reality than is found in the Old Testament.

And this is essentially our unity in Christ. We are all members of one body; we all belong to each other. Christ is the head, and we are the members of His body. So what Paul is talking about here is the unity of the church. We know we are one in Christ. All true believers who are in Christ are one with Christ, and therefore one with each other; that's the spiritual reality. But life in the church does not always reflect that. In fact to be honest with you, it rarely reflects that. Unity is a very hard thing to experience, to get the church to experience. It is a huge issue to the apostle Paul. But he faced the fact that discord was apparently more frequent than unity. Look at his letters. Particularly to the Corinthians, he talks about the divisiveness that was manifest there. To the Philippians, he calls them to unity in several other places, even in Ephesians.

So experiencing unity in the church is a challenge; it is a challenge. Why? Because people tend to be selfish, self-centered, proud. They tend to hold grudges. They tend to envy. They tend to be jealous. They tend to prefer themselves rather than others. So it's a challenge because we're overcoming the flesh. But the unity of the church is a critical issue to the apostle Paul, and I want to show you that as we begin to look at these fourteen verses. It's going to take us a while. I'm going to go slowly through this because I want to be patient, and I want you to understand the very important reality of this passage of Scripture.

So look back at chapter 3 for a moment, and in particular at verse 6. This is the heart of the passage: "Gentiles"—meaning all non-Jews, meaning all nations of the world, all people groups, all tribes and tongues (as Revelation identifies them)—are designed by God to be "members of the body" of Christ, one body. That is to say, God designed salvation not only for Jews but for Gentiles as well.

We know this. But this was a very difficult thing to get across to the Jews in the ministry of the apostle Paul, and I'll show you why. But before I do that, I want to go back and make you to understand this. In the Old Testament the salvation of Gentiles is clearly indicated, OK; the salvation of Gentiles is clearly indicated.

When you go back into Genesis chapter 12, verse 3, Genesis 22:18, Genesis 28:14, we read there that God is going to bless the nations. Right off the starting line in the book of Genesis, God repeatedly says, "I'm going to bless the nations of the world." And then in Psalm 72 and verse 17, Scripture says the Gentiles in turn will bless God. So this is speaking of a genuine relationship with God and Gentiles, so that He blesses them, and they bless Him—or honor Him, or worship Him.

And even more specifically, in the book of Isaiah—and I want to read this to you because it's very specific—Isaiah chapter 49 and verse 6 speaks specifically of Gentile salvation. Listen to what it says, speaking to Israel of His Servant, the Messiah: "It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and restore the preserved ones of Israel." It's not enough, it's too small for the Servant of Jehovah, who is the Messiah, it's too small a thing to raise up the tribes of Jacob only. The next line: "I will also make You a light to the nations so that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth." It would be too small a thing only to redeem Jews. "It's going to be to the ends of the earth that My salvation goes."

In chapter 54 of Isaiah, verse 1, "Shout for joy, O barren one, you who have borne no child; break forth into joyful shouting and cry aloud, you who have not travailed; for the sons of the desolate one will be more numerous than the sons of the married woman"—which is an analogous way to say

there'll be more Gentiles in the kingdom than even Jews. "Enlarge the place of your tent; stretch out the curtains of your dwellings, spare not; lengthen your cords, strengthen your pegs. For you will spread abroad to the right and to the left. And your descendants will possess nations and will resettle desolate cities." "You've got to open up the tent to encompass the world because God has salvation in mind for more than the Jews."

And then the sixtieth chapter of Isaiah: "Arise"—in verse 1—"shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For behold, darkness will cover the earth and deep darkness the peoples; but the Lord will rise upon you and His glory will appear upon you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising." So what we learn, then, is that the Messiah is going to save Gentiles. He will come to the Gentiles, He will save the Gentiles.

And then one more Old Testament passage that relates to this is Joel chapter 2 and verses 28 and 29, "It will come about after this that I will pour out My Spirit on all mankind." This is looking at the future time of Messiah. "I will pour out My Spirit on all mankind."

So what have we discovered, then? That the Gentiles will be blessed by God in Genesis. In Psalm 72, that the Gentiles will bless God. In Isaiah, the Messiah will come to the Gentiles. The Gentiles will receive the Holy Spirit because the Gentiles will be saved by the Messiah.

Listen to one other Old Testament passage: Amos, the ninth chapter, the eleventh verse, "In that day I will raise up the fallen tabernacle of David"—or the house of David—"and wall up its breach; I will also raise up its ruins and rebuild it as in the days of old"—this is a messianic kingdom—"that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations who are called by My name," declares the Lord who does this." So God is going to save Gentiles. That's all clear in the Old Testament. He's going to bless them; they're going to bless Him. The Messiah's going to come to them; the Messiah's going to save them throughout redemptive history, and they're going to be given the Holy Spirit.

So we're not saying the Old Testament says nothing about Gentile or global salvation; it does. But what it doesn't talk about is the Jew and the Gentile in one body, one organism—which means essentially the end of the theocratic kingdom of Israel. No longer will Israel be isolated from Gentiles; there will be a new man, a new singular identity, and that's going to be Jew and Gentile together in one body: the body of Christ. So the prophets clearly saw Gentile salvation, but what they couldn't have seen is the union of the two and the end of the theocratic kingdom of Israel as they knew it.

The prophecies we read were veiled, then, in some way. When you come into the New Testament, for example—and I'll give you some illustrations of it—and you go to Galatians—if you're in Ephesians, go back one book to Galatians chapters 3 and 4. And I'll give you a couple of illustrations. In Galatians chapter 3 and verse 8, "The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith"—so that's the Old Testament—"preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'All the nations will be blessed in you.'" That's quoted right out of Genesis 12:3 and Genesis 22:18, telling us yes, those Scriptures foresee that God would justify the Gentiles by faith. So here's a New Testament writer interpreting an Old Testament text about the salvation of Gentiles.

In the fourth chapter of Galatians, verse 27, we have a quote from what I read in Isaiah 54: "Rejoice, barren woman who does not bear; break forth and shout, you who are not in labor; for more numerous are the children of the desolate than of the one who has a husband." In other words, there

are more Gentile children in the kingdom than Jewish ones. So the New Testament writers make those connections.

In the book of Acts, in Acts chapter 13, a connection is made with the text in Isaiah 49. In Acts chapter 15, a connection is made with Amos. So I just want you to understand that we are not saying that there's no prophecy about Gentile conversion; that would be ridiculous, because Israel's responsibility was not to be the end of God's blessing but the means of God's blessing to the world. What Paul is talking about here is not Gentile salvation. That might have been tolerable, although it was barely tolerable. And if you need an illustration of that, remember Jonah. Jonah was furious that God saved the Gentiles in Nineveh. In fact he was so upset about it that he wanted to die; and it was such a horrifying thing for him that God would show grace to pagan Gentiles that he wished he were dead.

Now look, if that is so disturbing to a Jew who is a prophet, who doesn't even want Gentiles to be saved, how disturbing would it be to Jews to say, "There's no more theocratic kingdom of Israel. Jew and Gentile are not just recipients of a mutual salvation, they are in one body." This is pushing too much on them. Why? Because the animosity between Jew and Gentile was so profound. There was deep hatred by the Jews of the Gentiles, and it was reciprocated on many occasions. So here comes Paul, and he's got this really difficult job: to tell the Jews that their unique identification as the people of God is set aside for a new people of God, in which Gentiles are equal to them in the sight of God. This is too much to handle.

Look, unity's tough. It is really hard. It's hard to get people to sacrifice their prejudices and their animosities, especially the culture we live in, where everybody's siloed into some identity. We're fighting all kinds of resistance on all kinds of fronts, even in the church of Jesus Christ, to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. But Paul has an assignment from God, and that is to declare this unity to both Jew and Gentile.

So in Ephesians chapter 3, verse 1, Paul says, "For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—" Now he starts to talk about something that's on his heart. "For this reason," and then he gives an incomplete sentence. He's talking about being a prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of the Gentiles, and he stops in mid-sentence and digresses with a parenthetical statement from verse 2 all the way down to verse 13, where in verse 14, he picks back up his original intention: "For this reason I bow my knees before the Father."

"For this reason"—in verse 1. "I want to pray for you. I want to pray for you, as one who is a prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of the Gentiles; I want to pray for you." But before he can pray for them, he stops and he says, "I have to tell you more so you'll understand. The fulfillment of the prayer depends upon your understanding the truth. There's no sense in praying for you to live out, propagate, believe, trust, uphold truth you don't understand." That's why in Acts chapter 6, verse 4, those who teach the people of God are called to prayer and the ministry of the Word. "I come out and speak to you to give you the information, then go back to pray that you will understand it and be able to implement it in your life."

That's why so many times in Paul's letters, he stops to pray for the very people to whom he is giving this revelation. And he knows this is really hard, hard truth, much harder than you have thought of up to now—and when I'm done with you this morning, you'll understand why it's such hard truth.

He wanted to pray for his people to implement the reality of this one-body unity, but they needed more information. Both are essential parts of effective ministry. You pray for the people, but you have to teach them the Word of God so that they can be obedient when the Father prompts them in response to your prayers. And his objective here is this matter of the unity of the church. It's a mystery of the body of Christ, all of us being one in Christ.

Now, this is not new—and I want you to go back to chapter 2 and verse 11. This is such an issue that it started back in chapter 2, verse 11, and it actually runs all the way into chapter 4. Verse 11, “Remember that formerly you, the Gentiles”—because the Ephesians were Gentiles—“in the flesh, who are called ‘Uncircumcision’ by the so-called ‘Circumcision’”—this was a pejorative, from the Jews who were circumcised against the Gentiles who were called the uncircumcised, a demeaning way to identify them. “[But] remember [in that condition] you were . . . separate from Christ, you were excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, you were strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.” That's general Gentile status.

“But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who [has] made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, so that in Himself He might make the two into one new man,” verse 16, “[reconciling] both in one body to God.” Verse 18, “[You] both have . . . access to one Spirit and to the Father through the Spirit. . . . You [Gentiles] are no longer strangers and aliens, you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household.” Verse 21, he says you're a holy temple in the Lord. Verse 22, you're “built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.” So Gentile salvation wasn't the problem, it was the dismantling of Israel's unique identity as a theocratic kingdom that belonged in a special way to God. And now the Jew and the Gentile are together on an equal spiritual basis as one new man in the body of Christ.

Paul wants them to understand this. So important to understand it. And he starts to pray in verse 1, and then he stops from verses 2 to 13 to inform them more, so that there's enough information there that they can answer the prayer.

Now as we look at these fourteen verses, we're going to see something of the planning of this mystery; we're going to see something of the preaching of this mystery, the purposes of the mystery, and even the privileges of the mystery. But to start with—and this is very important—we're going to look at the prisoner of the mystery.

Look at verse 1, “For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles.” That's quite an amazing identification. What does he mean by that? Well he doesn't just mean some analogy that would describe anybody's relationship to Christ; that would be ridiculous because none of us would see our relationship this way: “I'm a prisoner, and Jesus is my jailor.” Really? You don't find that analogy in the Bible. He is Lord—benevolent, protective, supplying Lord; and we are gladly His slave. But we would never identify ourselves as a prisoner of Jesus Christ because that's involuntary. We're not locked up by Him; we're set free by Him.

So what does Paul mean, that “[I'm a] prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles”? What he means is this: He wound up in prison preaching this message—that's what he means. He wound

up in prison for preaching this message.

The idea of unity is so hard for the Jews to accept that basically they ran Paul right into the arms of Roman authority, and the Romans took him all the way to execution. And it wasn't about some over-defined doctrine; it was because he preached the Jew and the Gentile were one. This was completely unacceptable to them.

Now remember, Paul was a well-known leader in Judaism before he was saved. He was commissioned by the Jewish leaders to go and arrest Christians, put them in prison; and he had papers, official papers, to even take their life. He was a murderer and a blasphemer. He was a persecutor of Christians.

And on the Damascus Road, the Lord stops him and saves him. But his reputation is so widespread that he is a frightening figure. And eventually, after three years in Nabataean Arabia—not far away from Jerusalem, to the south—the Lord spends three years teaching him and refining him before he finally goes to Jerusalem. And when he goes—and it's been three years since he persecuted anybody—some of the people in Jerusalem are terrified of him, and he has to have Barnabas go in to soften up the crowd because his reputation has been so horrendous.

Well they finally accepted him. And he gave his report, and his report was all about salvation of the Gentiles. By this time he had even pastored a church in a Gentile city, Antioch, according to Acts chapter 11. All of his missionary journeys—there were three major missionary journeys—all three of them were into Gentile areas, to establish churches among the Gentiles that included the Jews. He went to whatever town he went to; he started with the synagogue to see if the Jews would respond to the gospel. And then, once he had made an effort to bring the Jews into the knowledge of Christ through the gospel, he would go after the Gentiles and establish church made up of Jew and Gentile.

The synagogues were hostile to him. They were probably more hostile to him in many cases than the Gentiles were. After all these missionary journeys and after his experience as a pastor up in Antioch, he finally came to the city of Jerusalem in Acts 15. And he gave a report to the church council on the conversion of all these Gentiles.

Why did he go to the Gentiles? Because when he was converted on the Damascus Road in Acts 9, the Lord said to him, "I'm sending you to the Gentiles." He repeats that in his testimony in Acts 26: "Look, the Lord sent me to the Gentiles." He is the apostle to the Gentiles, and his job is to tell Gentiles and Jews that they are one in Christ, in a new man, a new being, a new entity, a new organism: the body of Christ. He defends that unity in Galatians; he defends that unity in Ephesians; he defends that unity in Philipians—because it's so hard to sell.

While he was on his tours, he collected money from Gentile believers where he was preaching the gospel and planting churches. And he got all the money together, according to Romans 15, and he headed back to Jerusalem with this money. Why is he doing that? There are poor Christians in Jerusalem, and these Gentile believers wanted to show their love to the Jewish believers by giving sacrificially to help them. So Paul comes back, hoping that he can mitigate some of the hostility by this offering from the Gentiles.

The trip back is chronicled in Acts 21—and I want you to turn to it. This is where you're going to have

to follow me carefully through the text. Acts 21. So he's got however much money, the bags of money to take back to Jewish believers from Gentile believers, to help tear down the wall a little bit; and they head toward Jerusalem in Acts 21.

Along the way, you see in verse 8, they "came to Caesarea," which is on the coast of Israel, so they're getting close to Jerusalem. And they "[entered] the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the seven [deacons]," mentioned back in chapter 6, and "stayed with him." He had "four virgin daughters" whom the Lord used in some fashion to speak the truth. So while they were at this house in Caesarea for a few days, "a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea." A prophet shows up, "and coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands"—this is an object lesson—"and he said, 'This is what the Holy Spirit says: "In this way the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'"

Well somehow the Lord gave this information to this prophet Agabus, and puts on a demonstration as if to say, "You'd better not go there; you're going to get arrested. You're going to get arrested by the Jews. Even though you're coming to bring money from the Gentiles to reconcile, you're going to get arrested by the Jews."

So verse 12 says, "When we heard this, we [all] as local residents began begging him not to go to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, 'What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart?'" I mean, they were really worked up; they didn't want to lose him. But he said, "'I'm ready not only to be bound, but even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.' And since he wouldn't be persuaded, we fell silent, remarking, 'The will of the Lord be done!'"

He says, "Look, I'm going. I have been called; I have been called as an apostle to the Gentiles to proclaim one new man, one body of Christ. And I'm not sure what the price is, but I'm willing to pay it; I'm willing to pay it." So he proceeds to Jerusalem.

When he gets there, verse 17 of Acts 21, "the brethren received us gladly." This is referencing the leaders. "And the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. After he had greeted them, he began to relate one by one"—this is not a general report, this is specifics—"the things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry." So he gives the report on the salvation of Gentiles and the establishing of churches. "And when they heard it they began glorifying God; and they said to him, 'You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed, and they're all zealous for the Law.'" This is a problem, Jewish believers holding onto the Mosaic law.

In verse 21, "They've been told about you." "The word is out that you've been preaching to the Gentiles, that you've been preaching that Jew and Gentile are one, and they say, verse 21, "that you are teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs." Lies. He never ever did that, but they accused him of it. Verse 22, "What, then, is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come"—"you're in trouble."

These are believing Jews. I mean, obviously the nonbelieving Jews were hostile toward him, trying to make Jew and Gentile one in the kingdom of God. But even the believing Jews were in on this. "We've got to do something to save you from this false accusation that you have no place for the

customs of Moses. We're going to help you." "We have four men," verse 23, "who are under a vow"—four men want to take a Nazirite vow from Numbers 6. This was a most severe vow you could take. You shaved your head, and you didn't drink any wine or strong drink; and you were saying, "I'm going to take the highest level of dedication to God." And there was a certain routine and sacrifices that were to be offered when you made this vow.

So here are four men who want to take this Nazirite vow. "Take them," verse 24, "and purify yourself"—"you need to be purified; you need a ceremonial cleansing because you've been in these Gentile lands, and you're now sort of ceremonially unclean. So you go in, and you do a purification ceremony and you purify yourself along with them." "And pay their expenses"—there were fees for the Nazirite vow—"so that they may shave their heads"—which is part of it—"and all will know there's nothing to the things which they have been told about you, but that you yourself also walk orderly, keeping the Law." "You have to prove that those things that are being said about you are not true. So go with these four men, pay for their fees in the vow, go through cleansing yourself, and then everybody will know."

Verse 26 says, "Paul took the men, and the next day, purifying himself along with them, went into the temple giving notice of the completion of the days of purification, until the sacrifice was offered for each one of them." Seven days went by, according to verse 27—so he went through the whole process, which showed look, he wasn't overthrowing all the Mosaic traditions; this was not the time for that. But "when seven days were almost over," verse 27 says, "the Jews from Asia, upon seeing him in the temple, began to stir up all the crowd and laid hands on him"—and that was not for ordination; that was for arrest.

The Jews arrest him just because he's in the Temple and, verse 28, "crying out, 'Men of Israel, come to our aid! This is the man who preaches to all men everywhere against our people and the Law and this place"—the Temple—"and besides he's even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place." Non-Jews could only go so far into the Temple. And they're accusing Paul of bringing Trophimus the Ephesian into the inner part of the Temple, where only Jews could go; "they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple."

Now this is fomenting a riot. And what is this about? It's not about some theological issue, it's about the fact that they are unwilling to acknowledge that there is a place in the kingdom of God for Gentiles. "All the city" is "provoked"; the whole of Jerusalem is in an uproar. "And the people rush together, and taking hold of Paul dragged him out of the temple, and immediately the doors were shut. While they were seeking to kill him"—I mean, this is how resistant they are to his message about Jew and Gentile being one in the church. They were trying to kill him. They must have inflicted some severe wounds on him.

"A report came up to the commander of the Roman battalion that all Jerusalem was in confusion"; there's a citywide riot going on. And what is the issue? This guy, this guy is trying to bring Gentiles into the blessing of God, trying to join Gentiles with Jews as true members of God's kingdom. That's the crime.

So the commander "took some soldiers," verse 32, "and centurions and ran down to them; and when they saw the commander and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul." I don't know how far they had beaten him, but a mob is not going to be very delicate. "The commander came up and took hold of him, and ordered him to be bound with two chains"—just like Agabus said—"and he began asking

who he was and what he had done.” He arrested him before he knew anything about what he had done.

But this was protective custody, verse 34: “Among the crowd some were shouting one thing, some another, and when he couldn’t find out the facts because of the uproar, he ordered him to be brought into the barracks. When he got to the stairs, [Paul] was carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the mob; for the multitude of the people kept following them, shouting, ‘Away with him!’—or, ‘Kill him!’” Now you understand Jonah’s attitude about the salvation of Nineveh, right? They want to kill this guy because he is bringing Gentiles into the kingdom of God.

So when he says—back to Ephesians—when he says, “I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles,” he’s not talking about some spiritual identity; he’s saying, “Look, I’m in prison.” And by the way, when he wrote that, he was in prison as a result of what happened in Jerusalem. By then he had gone through numerous hearings before Agrippa and Festus and Felix, and then finally he was shipped to Rome, and he was in Roman custody in a Roman prison, where he wrote Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians, Philemon. And why? Because he was trying to make the message of unity between Jew and Gentile in the kingdom acceptable to the Jews. How deep is that animosity; how deep is that hatred.

Yes, he was a prisoner of the Roman government; but really, he was a prisoner of Jewish racism. He never thought of himself as a prisoner of Rome. He never thought of himself as a prisoner of the Jews. He was, after all, a prisoner of Jesus Christ because it was in serving Christ that he had been brought to prison.

Unity is a very difficult thing when there are deep-seated prejudices. They die very, very, very hard, very hard.

Everything Paul did was for the Gentiles. Go back to 2 Corinthians for a moment, chapter 4, verse 8, and look what he went through. Second Corinthians 4:8, “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be made manifest in our body. We who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death works in us [in order for] life [to work] in you.” “To get spiritual life to you, I have to face death.”

Why do you do this, Paul? Verse 13, because “‘I believed, therefore I spoke,’ we also believe, therefore we speak.” And furthermore, “[I know] that He who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and present us with you.” “The worst that can happen to me is they kill me and Jesus raises me from the dead.” And then verse 15: “All things are for your sakes.” He’s writing to the Gentiles in Corinth. “All things are for your sakes, so that the grace which is spreading to more and more people,” more and more tribes and tongues and nations, “may cause the giving of thanks to abound to the glory of God.” “I’m just trying to add people to the hallelujah chorus who are singing praises to God and to Christ.” It was costly.

In Philippians 1, writing from the same imprisonment, verse 12, “I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel, so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ”—that’s “the prisoner of Christ”; “my imprisonment at the hands of the Romans

under the prosecution, or accusations of the Jews, is really an imprisonment that Christ has called me to.” But “my imprisonment has become well known through the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else, and most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear.”

“My imprisonment for the cause of Christ”—he was a prisoner for the cause of Christ. So when he says, “a prisoner of Jesus Christ,” he’s not talking about a spiritual reality, he’s talking about an actual experience. It’s all about the stewardship, verse 2, “that God has given me by grace. It’s all because of the revelation that was made known to me about the mystery, it’s all so that you can understand my insight into the mystery. It’s all about that which was hidden and is now revealed. And what is it? That Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” You know, you really wouldn’t think that just that kind of hatred, hostility, would cause religious Jewish people to want to kill someone because he was trying to bring Jew and Gentile into one body.

Working for unity is very hard, very hard. There are all kinds of collective hostilities: hatred, envy, anger, vengeance. It was hard for Paul. And once they arrested him, that’s the rest of the book of Acts; he never is free again. The only time he’s free at all is on a boat going to Rome to be put in another prison. They wanted to kill the man. They literally drove him all the way to Rome under the adjudication of Caesar because they hated the idea of Jew and Gentile being one.

If that capacity is in the human heart, it’s little wonder that unity is a challenge, right? It’s little wonder. But Paul said, “Look, I’ll offer my life for this. I’ll be bound for this.” We saw that, Acts 21. “I’ll die for this because this is my calling.”

I couldn’t help but think, just watching all those little children up here. That’s a picture of the body of Christ, isn’t it? It was an absolute garden of human buds, wasn’t it? Precious. We wouldn’t think of saying, “You can’t be part of this; you’re in the wrong group.” How does that kind of attitude get into the church of Jesus Christ? It’s because of prejudice, envy, jealousy, selfishness. Humility and love dispels all that.

Well, at least we got through verse 1. Let’s pray.

Our Father, Your grace is abundant to us in Christ. We know You’re building Your church from every tongue and tribe and people and nation. The church is now the new theocratic kingdom. The church is Your living organism, the temple in which You dwell, a building of God not made with hands—the church made up of all people, all nations, all tribes, all tongues, all one in Christ, one spiritually, and then one organically in love and mutual service.

It’s so hard, Lord, to communicate that message in this divisive world in which we live. So many people who call themselves Christians fighting against the unity of the church for their own selfish reasons. We can only do what we can do. But Lord, help us to be a shining light for what it means to be one body in Christ: one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, one body, and one Spirit. May we celebrate and enjoy the richness of that unity, and may You receive the glory, we pray in the Savior’s name. Amen.

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