



**Ephesians 3:1-13**  
**Jesus is the Jailor**

As we return to the book of Ephesians this morning we have the classic division of the message and the messenger. Paul is the messenger and the gospel is his message.

We spent time looking at the message two weeks ago in chapter two where we marveled at the fact that people from all over the world would come to know and worship the God of the Jews so that today you have Christian churches in almost every country on earth. We talked about why that is and how it came to be and if you weren't here I encourage you to download the podcast or the audio from the website and check it out. Paul is going to revisit that issue in the text we're reading this morning, and we'll touch upon it lightly, but our main focus will be on the messenger this morning.

So let's remember who Paul is – he was an ethnic Jew, he had a very proud family heritage, he has a top-notch education, he had been groomed by the most respected academic of his time. He was a rising star in the ruling class. But he didn't know Jesus. In fact, he was so zealous for the Jewish religion that he sought out Christians as heretics and threw them in jail. He was on his way to arrest Christians in Damascus when God radically interrupted his life.

Jesus, who had already been alive, crucified, risen from the dead, and ascended to Heaven came back and appeared to Paul and he was converted. Paul surrendered to Christ right there on the side of the dusty road and became a Christian himself. From that moment on Paul's life goal was to tell everyone about the God who would forgive your sins no matter who you are and no matter what you have done. After all, he reasoned, if God could save Paul he could save anybody.

But that belief, that God could save anybody, is what eventually got Paul thrown in prison. You see, his own countrymen, some of his former associates, the religious leaders of the Jews, could not believe that God would save people who were not Jews. Accepting Jesus was one thing, accepting that Jesus would save Romans and Greeks and anyone else was just too much. And so they instigated a riot one day that led to Paul's arrest.

So now we find him in jail, awaiting trial, and he's written a letter to a church in Ephesus, in modern Turkey, encouraging them to hold on tightly to the truth that Jesus Christ wanted to save non-Jews like them.

As we come out of chapter two he's been sharing that message with his readers and now he reflects on his present condition, read with me in

**Eph 3:1 For this reason**

For what reason? Because he so sincerely believes everything he shared in chapter two, the message of the gospel, the message about what God is doing for people,

For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles— 2 if indeed you have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which was given to me for you,

Paul begins to talk about himself and he gets tripped up because it reminds him of something else he wants to say about the message

3 how that by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I have briefly written already, 4 by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ), 5 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:

God has brought Paul in on a secret that is now being made know to everyone – it's the big reveal, the grand unveiling of God's special project, and here it is:

6 that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel, 7 of which I became a minister according to the gift of the grace of God given to me by the effective working of His power.

So here's that crazy message we saw two weeks ago – that God was working through the Jews to reach all of humanity. He wasn't just the God of the Jews, He wasn't limited only to them, He was actually working through them to bring His Son into the world to gather together a church that would include people from every tribe, language, and corner of the earth.

8 To me, who am less than the least of all the saints, this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, 9 and to make all see what *is* the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ;

God had told people that He was going to save us from sin, He made mention of it to Adam and Eve right before they were ejected from the Garden of Eve. And, He continued to reassure people of that promise over time. But He never said exactly how it was going to happen. He slowly unfolded details, much like a good story unfolds with little bits and clues being dropped as you go until finally, it all comes together in a big ah-ha!

It turns out God didn't even tell the angels what was happening in advance, so what Paul is telling everyone is a surprise even to them as they watch on from above and see what is happening in the church as Jews and non-Jews are brought together to worship Jesus:

10 to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly *places*, 11 according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord, 12 in whom we

have boldness and access with confidence through faith in Him. 13 Therefore I ask that you do not lose heart at my tribulations for you, which is your glory.

So we have a pretty good grasp of the message – that Jesus Christ, the son of God, came to earth to be the savior of anyone who is willing to receive Him, regardless of their sex, their ethnicity, their past or the present, nothing can disqualify you from coming to Christ, finding forgiveness for your sin and receiving eternal life.

But let's go back and look at the messenger this morning. How did Paul describe himself?

He says he is “Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles.”

Now, Christians in modern America have come to accept the idea of being a ‘prisoner for Christ’ or a ‘slave for Christ’ as normal Christian imagery, Christian lingo – we hear the terms from preachers and sermons or Christian authors. We see it as we read the Scripture, and we become sort of numb to them, they're illustrations, analogies, they're poetic explanations to us. But they were very real things to Paul. When he calls himself a prisoner of Christ Jesus he isn't just speaking figuratively, he got the analogy from his reality.

So, remember again for a minute who this is. This is Paul – we know from other places in the Scripture that he came from a good family, had a good upbringing, had a good education. Prison wasn't in his future. But now he finds himself there. His entire social standing has been turned upside down and he finds himself in a humiliating status of weakness in a culture driven by power.

And how did he get there? How did his life get turned upside down? Christian brother and sister, or those of you who are simply interested in Christianity and you're considering it's claims – you must hear this: *Paul got into this condition by following Christ.*

Paul was doing everything right and it brought about difficulty and trials. He was doing God's will and it didn't make his life easy. He was walking with God and it led him through pain. You must see this. You must hear this. You must consider this lest you think that when difficulty comes your way it means you're doing something wrong.

Paul would later write to a younger man he was mentoring in ministry, in his second letter to Timothy, in chapter 3 he commends Timothy because, he says, “You have carefully followed my ... persecutions, afflictions ...”

**2 Tim3:12** Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.

Friends, it really says that in the Bible. **Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.**

So make note of the fact that Paul is imprisoned for a reason. Make note of the fact that he suffered because of what he believed. He suffered for the sake of responding to God's call to ministry, for the sake of obediently taking the gospel to the Gentiles.

But right after you make note of that, make note of this: how did Paul respond to what happened to him?

The answer is: without complaint. He never mumbles, "Why is this happening to me?" He doesn't vent. He doesn't grumble about how 'this isn't what he signed up for.' I've heard that very phrase from several Christians in the middle of trials, and even considered it myself. But I don't find Paul using it.

We also don't find Paul just grinding it out, muscling his way through the trial with sheer strength of will and determination. There's no stoic acceptance here.

Actually, it's almost the opposite.

If you read the chapter you get the distinct impression that Paul is rejoicing in his circumstances. Paul thought it was marvelous that *he* would suffer for *Christ's* sake!

While he was in jail he also wrote his letter to the Philippians and while he's telling them about his imprisonment he says,

**Philippians 2:17** Yes, and if I am being poured out *as a drink offering* on the sacrifice and service of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all.

Paul saw his suffering for Christ as the supreme honor of his life. He told the Colossian church:

**Col 1:24** I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church,

Now, you read or you hear a couple of things like that and it's easy to tell yourself Paul was just a bit extreme, a bit of a zealot, surely that's not how we're supposed to respond today.

Well, lest you think it's just Paul, listen to what James has to say:

**James 1:2** My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, 3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience.

Do you get the sense that there's something going on in the Bible that is out of touch with most of our modern expectations in the church? Do you get the sense that these men knew something of Christ, were experiencing something in their souls that seems to be distant and alien from us? What did they know, what did they experience or understand that made them say these things and respond this way? And, can I have some of that?

So let's go back and make sure we understand what's happening here. See the connection and see it clearly: Paul rejoices in suffering and hardship because it means identifying with the suffering of Christ for the sake of other people.

His logic goes like this: Christ suffered for us, so when I suffer for others in the course of doing what God has called me to do, it helps me know and understand my Savior even more. We actually meet, or more properly, we are met by God *in the crisis, the hurt and the trial*. There are things that persecution and difficulty and pain can teach us about our Lord that we cannot learn any other way.

When he speaks of his imprisonment, Paul doesn't go on and on about his suffering, or the trial he going through, he doesn't carry on about how bad things are. No. *He goes on and on about His God, the gospel, and the people he's called to reach and serve!*

In fact he tells the Ephesians not to lose heart at his tribulations for them - "Don't get all down and depressed because you heard I'm jail. Don't beat yourself up or wonder why it has to be this way." Paul tells them he sees his imprisonment as a gift, an opportunity for him to do something important for them.

**Eph 3:13** Therefore I ask that you do not lose heart at my tribulations for you, which is your glory.

He says don't pity me, don't say how hard I have it, don't be sad.

But put this in modern terms, if we discovered that one of our missionaries had been arrested, aren't those the first emotions we would feel? When we see someone suffering, or hear a report of all the trials that they're going through, don't we tend to lose heart? Or become angry? Do we ever believe God might be permitting their suffering? Do we ever believe that it might have a purpose?

Paul is willing to suffer for the gospel and the ministry and encourages others not to be ashamed of him for it (2 Tim 1:8). Are we? Most of us are not going to be arrested for our beliefs, but are we willing to suffer a loss of reputation when people discover we're one of those religious types? Are we willing to suffer a loss of our time or sleep in order to do devotions, or pray, or for Bible study, attending church, or for fellowship with other Christians? Are we willing to suffer financially by giving? Are we willing to suffer such loss as gain?

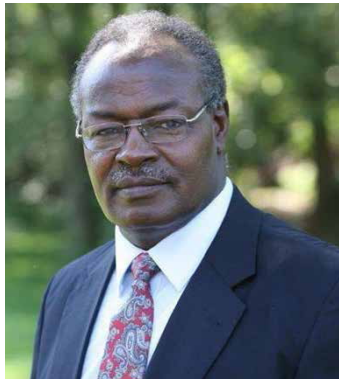
We already said that there are things you can learn about Christ through suffering and pain that you can't learn any other way, but there are also things others can learn as well, as they watch you suffer.

Paul told Timothy

**2 Tim1:8** Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me His prisoner, but share with me in the sufferings for the gospel according to the power of God,

Paul is not private about his trials. He opens up his life and tells the Ephesians and tells Timothy, “Look at what’s going on with me, look and learn, look and praise God.” Paul saw some amount of suffering for the gospel as normative, as commendable, but notice he also says it is [according to the power of God](#).

So let me ask the hard question here: would you be willing to suffer for the sake of showing someone else the love of God, or for the sake of bringing them good news about God?



When I was in seminary one of my professors was Dr Kaleli. Dr Kaleli is Kenyan and holds a PhD in missions. He also has an amazing story. His grandfather had been part of a village visited by British missionaries in the early 1900s. His grandfather told him how a white man showed up and seemed to have some message to share with them but they ignored him. He eventually caught malaria and died and the people thought nothing else of it. Until another white man showed up and wanted to share his message with them.

They ignored him as well and after some time he too became sick and died. Some months or years later another white man showed up and this one had brought his wife and kids and the elders of the village said, “these people are dying to come here and share some message with us, there is something they really want us to understand, perhaps we should listen to what it is. Perhaps there is something in this message.”

That message was the gospel of course. They had been compelled to leave their homes in England, leave their comfortable lives and families and friends and neighbors, leave all their conveniences and go to some far off place they might never return from because they believed the gospel was for the people of Kenya as much as it was for the people of Europe. And they were willing to suffer for the sake of the message.

Dr Kaleli’s grandfather was one of the men who accepted the message and was transformed by it. He had a family of his own and his son, Dr Kaleli’s father, became a Christian and was called by God to be a pastor. When Dr Kaleli was born he grew up going to schools run by the missionaries and was among the first of his tribe to receive a formal education.

He became a Christian himself and was given opportunity to go to university and then later to come to the United States and study. He earned Masters degrees and eventually his PhD and when I met him he was teaching in a US seminary training men and women to go out and affect people like his grandfather so the process could continue unfolding to the glory of God.

It's an incredible story, isn't it? It's a powerful testimony when you see the whole thing. But that played out over the course of three generations. What if you're missionary number one or number two instead of missionary number three? Those people didn't know exactly how it was going to turn out. They just knew that God was calling them and that He was worth it. Those missionaries, even the third family, never got to see the final fruit that came from their obedience, because that fruit is still being produced.

But the fruit is being produced because someone planted a seed long ago in difficult soil. So friends, as we read Ephesians, let us not miss this: Paul landed in prison by following God.

We could say imprisonment was God's will for Paul's life. Can you accept that? Can you accept that following Christ is not always easy? There will be times in your life when you feel imprisoned by your circumstances, imprisoned by your good choices. That doesn't mean you were wrong to make them, that doesn't mean you're doing the wrong things. Just because your life is difficult that doesn't mean you're doing things wrong.

And you need to know that, you need to see it in the Bible because there are others out there who will try to tell you differently. They'll tell you God has a victorious plan for your life. That you can have your best life now. That if you're trapped in prison it's because of some sin in your life or a lack of faith. You need to proclaim God's promises and rebuke your troubles, tell them they can't hold you back any longer. And I'm telling you that line doesn't work for Paul and his experiences.

We're all entrusted with some form of ministry. Each of us has been called to represent Christ in the life of someone else – to be the hands and feet of God in that person's life. If you're married it's your spouse, if you have kids, it's them too. If you're employed it's your boss. Paul will make all of that clear in chapters five and six of this letter.

And as you serve, as you *minister* in that context, at some point you will suffer. So what do you do then? Most people want to be thought of as servants, but few people want to be treated as servants. How do we respond to the difficulties of fulfilling our ministries?

Let me give you a starting point: face them, name them. Don't deny them or pretend like they're not there, not real. Paul didn't deny his reality, he says I AM a prisoner, but it's for Christ Jesus.

And then, start to ask what does God want to accomplish through this? What does He want you to learn? Consider, how does this present difficulty help you know more about Him? Does it invite you into the fellowship of His sufferings?

And in light of that understanding, is there something God wants you to do? Paul was productive in prison – he wrote letters like this one to the Ephesians and another to the Philippians and others to people like Timothy that he might not otherwise have taken the time to write. Paul took his suffering, he took a life that wasn't going the way he wanted, and he turned it over to God who made something eternally valuable out of it.

We're going to celebrate communion this morning, to remember what God suffered for us. And as we do, I encourage you to reflect on it – to consider what it cost God to make salvation a gift to you. What did He suffer for you?

And after you do that, after you thank Him, would you consider responding by asking Him: Father, what do you want me to do for you? Who do you want me to love? Where do you want me to go? What do you want me to say? How do you want me to face this or that? And ask Him for the strength to go on, for the strength to do it, for the strength to obey.

Ask Him to help you face your present difficulties with joy, with faith, to make you more aware of His presence in your pain than you've been before. Ask Him to let us see lives impacted as we love Him and love others. Paul had a tremendous impact on the Ephesians; European missionaries had a tremendous impact on a Kenyan village and its people. Where does God want to use you and who does He want to impact, if we're simply willing to say yes Lord, I'll go, or yes Lord I'll stay, and I'll endure this prison for You and for them.

Let's pray.