Opening Words

Some people will view our message as subversive and dangerous. Not everyone. Some will view our message as ridiculous. Paul said the preaching of the cross is foolishness to some.

137 Eph Paul the Prisoner

I had a strange dream. I was in the northern part of North Korea, and I had to make my way secretly throughout this land and get down into the southern part of the country where I could cross over into freedom and safety. In the dream, I was very much aware that I was in danger because the North Korea in the dream was the same North Korea we hear about in the news today – an oppressive, brutal regime where there is no freedom of religion and where hundreds of thousands of our brothers and sisters are in prison simply because they love Jesus Christ.

Why did I dream this? From time to time I think about North Korea and my heart is greatly saddened for this land that is now into its third generation of one of the worst dictatorships in the history of the world. Christians are persecuted in many places of the world. It is difficult and even dangerous to name the name of Jesus.

In Ephesians chapter 3 Paul identifies himself as the prisoner of Christ Jesus. He has been speaking in lofty theological terms for the first two chapters. In chapter 1 he listed many of the spiritual blessings that are ours in Christ Jesus in heavenly places. He ended the chapter with one of his greatest prayers of power. In chapter 2 he reminded us of our plight without Jesus Christ, but he also showed us that the work of Jesus Christ was more than enough to overcome our dreadful state in the flesh, in the world, and in the power of the evil one. He also showed us how God worked through Jesus to bring us back to himself and to bring us to one another in a new body and a new temple, God's new dwelling place on earth.

As Paul thought on this great reality, that Jew and Gentile are one body, one people indwelt by the living God through Christ, it moved his heart to pray again. And so, in verse 1 of chapter 3 he was going to pray for the Church, for the Body of Christ, for the Temple of God on earth and he began by saying, "For this reason, I Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles …" but then he stopped. He decided to hold off on his prayer and to fill in more details about the salvation that is ours in Christ Jesus.

This is another of Paul's great interruptions! We saw this at the beginning of chapter 2 when he said, "And you were dead in your trespasses and sins" and he was going to say, "but he has made you alive in Christ Jesus." But he interrupted himself and talked about the world, the flesh, and the devil, and did not complete his thought until verse 5.

Here in chapter 3 he does the same thing. He starts to pray but he doesn't get to his prayer until verse 14! I am glad for these so-called interruptions because they give us more of Scripture to think about, and Paul believed it was necessary to delay his prayer because he had many more thoughts to pass on to us before he prayed.

What does Paul want to pass on to us in the first thirteen verses? What is it that delays his prayer? What is it that is so important? This is what we are going to examine in the coming broadcasts and the first thing I want us to focus on is what Paul calls himself – a prisoner of Christ Jesus.

This brings us back to the reality that though we have risen with Christ and are seated with Christ, this is a representative resurrection and enthronement and is not yet a literal, physical resurrection and enthronement for us. The world has not yet been made new. We still live in a fallen world although it has been pierced with the light of God's kingdom. There is a war going on in heavenly places and sometimes on earth this war results in God's people being locked up in prison as they are in North Korea and in many other places of the world. Perhaps it is those realities that caused my dream. But for Paul, this was no dream. He was in prison, in Rome and though he expected release, he could not be 100% certain of it.

Paul begins this section by saying, "I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus." Paul isn't whining. Paul isn't looking for sympathy. Paul is just stating a fact but this simple fact has so much to teach us. This is one of eight places where Paul identifies himself as a prisoner in his letters and it reminds me of three things that I want to pass on to you today.

First, some people will view our message as subversive and dangerous. Not everyone. Some will view our message as ridiculous. Paul said the preaching of the cross is foolishness to some. Others view it as completely irrelevant to what they think are the real needs of society. Others still will view our message with total disinterest because it does not fit in with their pursuit of pleasure. But some will view our message as subversive and dangerous, and strangely they are closer to the truth than the others!

You see, our message is far more than about going to heaven when we die. Our message of the kingdom of God is about the restoration of all things on earth. Yes, when we die we go to be with the Lord, but the Lord is not staying in heavenly places! He is going to return one day and the Bible tells us that the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ. And our message is a message that Jesus is Lord of all. All people in all places must bow the knee to him who is Creator, Redeemer, and Lord. Paul said in 2 Corinthians 4:5 that we preach Christ Jesus as Lord and if Jesus is Lord then Rome isn't Lord. If Jesus is Lord then the dictators of North Korea are not Lord.

This kind of message gets us into trouble. Not that we are looking for trouble. And not that we hate people – far from it. We proclaim the Lordship of Christ with gladness and joy for all, including the rulers of the world. We proclaim it for their benefit and for the benefit of those over whom they rule. We proclaim it that they might be saved and that they might know the spiritual blessings that could be theirs in Christ Jesus. But, some people are threatened by this message and God's people end up in prison.

Second, Paul's imprisonment reminds us of commitment. Paul did not follow Jesus only when it felt good. I doubt if there were many "feel good days" for him. To be sure, he reveled in the glory of God and the joy of Christ, but Christ told him that he would suffer much for his name. Paul did not flinch from that. Listen to his famous words in Acts 20:22-24.

> "And now, behold, bound by the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, 23 except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me. 24 But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God.

That is how Paul became a prisoner. He went to Jerusalem after his third missionary journey. He met with the leaders. He delivered an offering from Gentile believers to help Jewish believers. He was quietly going about his business when one day, while he was praying in the Temple, some Jews from Asia who hated his message of equality between Jew and Gentile in the Messiah spotted him. They stirred up a riot and they were going to kill him on the spot when the Romans intervened and rescued Paul. It's not that these Romans had sympathy for Paul, but they wanted to keep the city in order and when they found that it had to do with Paul they arrested him. They were going to flog Paul when Paul told them he was a Roman citizen, and then he was treated with more respect and even allowed to address the Jewish people.

Paul told his story to the Jewish people. You probably could have heard a pin drop in the temple as Paul addressed them in Hebrew and told his tale of being educated at the feet of Gamaliel in that very temple. He told them of his vision of Jesus, his conversion, his baptism, and his commissioning to preach the Gospel. All was quiet. All listened up to that point but as he soon as he mentioned the word, "Gentiles" and that he was sent to preach to the Gentiles, the Jews in the temple broke out in anger and rage and wanted to kill him again.

The Jews would not have it. Some, erroneously thought that he had brought a Gentile into the temple. Paul never did that. But some accurately understood Paul's theology, that Gentiles were on equal footing with the Jews in the family of God. They did not have to become Jews. They did not have to keep the Sabbath laws or the dietary laws or the purification laws. They could live as Gentiles and still be in the family of God because of the grace that came to them in Christ Jesus.

Thus, Paul in Ephesians 3:1, does not just say, "I Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus," but "the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles." Paul was in prison because his mission to the Gentiles got him into trouble with his Jewish countrymen which caused him to have to appeal to Caesar because of an assassination plot against him. And so, Paul was in Rome, in prison, because of these events in Israel. The Jews hated his mission to the Gentiles and his theology of equality of all people in Christ Jesus. What is for us a glorious truth that can set people free and bring peace among nations, was for Paul, the source of his suffering. But he never wavered in his commitment.

I said there were three lessons to share from Paul's status as prisoner. The first was the reminder that our message will be subversive to the false gods and ideologies of the world that enslave people and that it will cause a reaction. The second is that Paul remained true to the Lord even when times were tough. And the third is this: throughout church history, God's people have been imprisoned for the faith and even to this day we have brothers and sisters that must meet in secret, brothers and sisters that are in prison, and brothers and sisters who die for the faith.

This is a sober start to chapter 3, and Paul is not going to stay there for long, but it is a good reminder for us as we study this great book, learn about the wonders of the spiritual world, and seek to live our faith for Christ. May God give us grace to follow him no matter the circumstances.