

EPHESIANS #48 3:1f 8-5-12

*THE CALLING OF PAUL*

(Ephesians 3) As we come to chapter three our pace will pick up considerably. Chapter three of Ephesians is one from which you have likely heard very few sermons, if any. RC Sproul says that no one preaches from this chapter unless they are doing a series on Ephesians. The reason for that is that it relates to us the special role of the Gentiles in the plan of God and the role of the apostle Paul as the apostle to the Gentiles. This is not something that we see as especially relevant for us. Nowadays we have no problem with this great concept of Jews and Gentiles in one church, but at the time this was written, chapter three would have been received with great interest and even perplexity. In addition, chapter 3 is the most personal part of Paul's letter. It gives us a glimpse into the apostle's self-understanding. Notice how Paul speaks of himself as we read **1-13** *For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—<sup>2</sup> if indeed you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace which was given to me for you;<sup>3</sup> that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief.<sup>4</sup> By referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ,<sup>5</sup> 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;<sup>6</sup> 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,<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ,<sup>9</sup> and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things;<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> This was in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord,<sup>12</sup> in whom we have boldness and confident access through faith in Him.<sup>13</sup> Therefore I ask you not to lose heart at my tribulations on your behalf, for they are your glory.* We shall wrap our thoughts today around three words that Paul uses in this passage to describe himself. And the first of those words comes from verse one where Paul calls himself a prisoner. "The prisoner of Christ Jesus." About four times in the New Testament the apostle refers to himself in this way. Do you know why? The most obvious reason is that he wrote several of his New Testament letters from

prison. For years Paul awaited trial before Nero in Rome and spent a great deal of his time in some state of incarceration. And you see how it affected Paul's attitudes. Well, how did it affect his attitudes? Apparently, in no way at all. There is not a hint of victimhood in anything Paul has to say. This Paul was not a guy who lived under his circumstances, but instead lived in the power of God's Spirit who gives us liberty even when we are in chains. You'll remember the story in Acts 16 of how Paul and Silas were thrown in jail in Philippi, and what do we read of them doing in jail? They were singing praises to God. It was from prison that Paul wrote that we should rejoice in the Lord always. It was from prison he said that he had learned to be content in every type of situation. It was from prison he offered that glorious doxology in Ephesians 1. Paul is an awesome example to me of a man who is dominated not by what is outside of him, but by who is inside of him.

Are you like that? I wish I was but I expect I would be just a little put out to find myself locked up. I may even have come to feel just a bit sorry for myself. I may even have become angry at those responsible for this. I'm impressed that Paul looked at his situation and said *I am a prisoner of Christ Jesus* as if that is the greatest thing in the world to be. He didn't see the imprisonment as anything confining at all. It was just God's place for him at the moment. That perspective is oh so instructive! Do you see the circumstances of your life as chains or guides? Maybe your age or your income or your connections limit you in certain ways. There is nothing you can do to change certain facts of life. Paul couldn't change his either, but you can change how you look at those facts. You can see them as restrictions or you can see them as guides. You can see them as keeping you from God's best or you can see them as leading you into God's best. You can see yourself as a victim of a cruel Nero, or as the prisoner of a loving Christ. I love what Paul says in Ephesians 6:20 where he calls himself an ambassador in chains. You look at him and you see a prisoner. Paul sees with the eyes of faith and says, "I am an ambassador." He was still fulfilling his mission even when in prison. It's just that God changed the venue. His incarceration forced Paul to sit down and do some work he may not otherwise have done. When you are physically restricted there is a lot you can't do, but there is a lot you can. You can still study and Paul did that. You can still pray and Paul did lots of that. You can still write letters and, thank God, Paul did lots of that as well. Disappointment. His appointment. Change one letter and you'll see that the thwarting of my purpose is God's better choice for me. There was a time when Martin Luther was in serious jeopardy of being killed by

the Pope, and it was not safe for him to be out and about. He was restricted to a certain castle in Germany, but he didn't sit around saying, "Woe is me." Instead, he took that opportunity to translate the Bible into German. John Bunyan, the great preacher of the next century, was put in jail by the forces of Rome and while there he wrote his magnificent book, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, that has blessed every generation of believers since. We who believe that God is sovereign, that every thing works for good, need to apply that conviction practically and see every restriction as just a direction. What are your chains? What makes you want to wallow in self-pity? By God's grace and the light of the gospel, turn those chains into ladders, and climb on those very chains to higher ground for the glory of Christ. Paul says he is not Nero's victim, but Christ's prisoner and glad to be such.

On now to our second word that describes the apostle. This is the word, "revelator." (R) Rather an odd word, not a common word for us, but one I think you will understand. Simply put it means to be an instrument of revelation. 3 *by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief.* God revealed something very special to Paul. It was not to be Paul's little secret though. He was to declare what was revealed by God to the entire church. 4-5 *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.* He says there was something that in previous ages was not revealed by God that now has been. And we are not left in the dark on this. 6 *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.* This is what he had been teaching about at the end of chapter 2, this union of Jew and Gentile together in one Lord and in one church. This was a source of endless astonishment in the first century world. This was the mystery of which Paul is speaking. By *mystery* he simply means something that is both new and newly revealed. Now, the grace that came to the Gentiles was not something unannounced. The Old Testament spoke of how the redemptive love of God was ordained for the Gentiles. Isaiah 9:2 *The people who walk in darkness will see a great light; Those who live in a dark land, The light will shine on them.* Isaiah 49:6 quotes God speaking of and to the coming Messiah 6 *He says, "It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also make You a light of the nations So that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth."* The fact that the rule of Christ and the blessings

of Christ would extend to all nations is not what is so new and shocking. That had already been revealed. But the mystery which Paul himself unveiled is the radical nature of God's plan, that the theocracy of Israel would be terminated and would give way to a new, international community, the church, which would include Jews and Gentiles on equal terms, like he says here - "fellow-heirs, members and partakers." You see, often the racist will be able to say, "Yes, Lord, go and save those poor aliens out there" but he doesn't mean that he's ready to break bread with them. He doesn't mean that he's ready to have one of "them" be an elder in his church. I learned in Europe that there is a certain hostility between Romanians and Hungarians. There is a hostility between Poles and Jews. Racism is so pervasive and insidious and it can infect the church. Let's never forget the revelation that came thru Paul, a revelation that should forever protect us from a racist faith and a racist church.

On now to our third word that describes the apostle. We find it in verse 7 and it is the word, "minister." (R) The NIV says, *servant* and the Greek says *diakonos*. It simply means that Paul was given a task to do. He was given a position on the Jesus team. But hey, there are lots of different jobs in the church, lots of different ministries. What was Paul's? Well, the one he refers to here is the ministry of preaching. *8 To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ*, How often I have used those very words to express my own feelings! You pick up from the words that Paul saw the gospel ministry to be one of enormous privilege. He says his calling was the gift of God's grace. You also see how astonished he is that such a privilege should come to one like him. He says, "to me, to me, the very least of all saints this grace was given." Why did Paul call himself the least of all saints? I can only assume that he really felt that and he felt that due to his past. You'll remember that Paul was not your average convert who one day fell into repentance and faith. He was converted while in the very process of persecuting the church. Paul says I Corinthians 15:9 *I am the least of the apostles, and not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God*. I expect that same thought is behind what is in our text. The situation may be peculiar to Paul but the sentiment is one that every knowing Christian will share --this astonishment that God could use me in the advancement of His glory. It is almost laughable when you look at the qualifications of the minister and the grandeur of the ministry. Paul could never get over this, that a rotten, self-righteous, hateful persecutor could enjoy the highest calling known to man - a minister of God's gospel. Charles Spurgeon, the great preacher in

London, was encouraged to run for prime minister of England and responded by asking why he should be interested in a demotion. Preaching the gospel is a task that is nothing less than angelic. It is the power of God to salvation! Not everyone can see this, of course. To some, being a preacher is a pitiful position. I had a sister who told me I was wasting my life to become a preacher. My father, the day I went to tell him I had decided to go to seminary, all I had said is that I need to talk to him about something and he looked at me and said, "Don't tell me you're going to be a preacher." I remember talking to a man whom I had counseled some around his ordination, and he told me that after just a year he had come to hate pastoral ministry. Someone wrote to Christianity Today and said this, "I would sooner encourage gifted persons to drink bleach than bid them to enter such a joyless profession as pastoral ministry." You have any idea at all why someone who has been a pastor would describe it that way? I think I do. I get it. I understand why some folks find it so draining. But, I also see the other side of the matter. What explains the gulf between those perspectives and Paul's? It is simply that Paul had eyes to see what his calling was all about. He saw the gospel as truth from God, not just another religion. He saw the gospel as riches for mankind. Paul was thrilled because what he got to proclaim was no ordinary message. He wasn't assigned the job of peddling a religion. He was called to preach what? Look at how he puts it - "the unfathomable riches of Christ." (R) When we share the gospel we are like beggars telling other beggars where to find bread, and it's much more than bread. It is a treasure beyond compare. Oh, how I would wish for everyone of you to understand why Paul would speak of the unfathomable riches of Christ. This is a phrase the seeks to put in words the great pleasure of having a personal relationship with God. Those pleasures are unfathomable. Amazing! And when you have experienced it, you want to sing, it's fresh like spring, you want to pass it on. And doing so becomes your highest joy. I have come to see my work in this way. No matter what trouble or difficulty I may have in ministry Monday through Saturday. Come Sunday, I get to stand before you and proclaim the unfathomable riches of Christ and that is so good, it makes all the rest easily worth it. Easily!

Do you know the story of the lepers in II Kings 7? The king of Syria had laid siege on Samaria, the capital of Israel and those in the city were running low on food. There were these four lepers who lived by the city gate and they decided that it couldn't hurt to go ask for food at the Syrian camp. They figured the worst that could happen to them would be a quick death. So they went out to the Syrian camp and found it deserted. All the animals and provisions were

still there but the army of Syria had been scared off. So the lepers started helping themselves to what was there. **8** *When these lepers came to the outskirts of the camp, they entered one tent and ate and drank, and carried from there silver and gold and clothes, and went and hid them; and they returned and entered another tent and carried from there also, and went and hid them.* Now look at the next verse. **9** *Then they said to one another, "We are not doing right. This day is a day of good news, but we are keeping silent.* So, these beggars who found treasure went to announce it in the city. Is there a lesson there for us? If you are a Christian you know and understand that we live in a day of good news. And I ask you, as the lepers asked themselves, "is it right for you to keep silent?" The old saying is that silence is golden, but when you know the truth it can be a sickly, pale yellow. Oh, may God thrill us anew with the unfathomable riches of Christ. May we see as never before the enormous privilege that is ours to be ambassadors of the King and announce to men and women the way of peace. **8-10a** *To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ,<sup>9</sup> and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things;<sup>10</sup> so that.* Here is God's purpose in it all **10** *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.* The rulers and authorities in the heavenlies would be what we call angels. Angels are ministering spirits that are not all-knowing. Jesus said that his disciples were learning things into which angels longed to look. In the same way it appears that the angels discovered the plan of God as it unfolded. They learned of God's plan for the church, through the church. They form an angelic audience observing the stage of human redemption so that when they see it they may render praise to the God of all wisdom. Thru us, think of it, thru us the angels behold the wisdom of God. The manifold or many-colored wisdom of God. I expect the angels watch the story of redemption with open mouths and join with Paul to say **Romans 11:33** *Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!* The marvel of men like me preaching a message like this. The wonder of people like you coming together into one body and one family. Even the angels are astounded and led to wonder love and praise. So, bless the Lord all you his angels, mighty in strength who perform His word. And bless the Lord all you works of His. In all places of His dominion, bless the Lord O my soul. Let's close our time together with some worship around the table of the Lord.