

Ephesians 3:1-13

Introduction

Imagine Paul walking back and forth in his jail cell. He's talking out loud as he walks. Sometimes he seems more calm, and sometimes more intense. Sometimes he can't seem to get his words out fast enough, and sometimes he lingers over what he's saying. There are times when it seems he'll never reach the end of his sentence. Sometimes he gets carried away by his excitement and this leads to some very complicated Greek. And then there are times when he suddenly interrupts himself to say something else that just came into his mind. All this time there's a man sitting at a small table with pen and ink and writing furiously – attempting to put down on paper all that Paul is thinking and speaking out loud. That's a very likely picture of how Ephesians came to be (on the human side of things).

Today is one of those days where we see Paul beginning a thought, and then all of a sudden interrupting himself with another thought. This has happened before, but this time Paul won't come back to his original train of thought until thirteen verses later (in verse 14). Imagine the stress for the man who was writing down Paul's words! Paul starts out: "For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles—" But then this leads him to think of something else: "assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, how the mystery was made known to me..." Paul goes on with this interruption for so long that by the time he's ready to pick up again where he left off, we don't even remember that this was an interruption. It's likely that the man sitting at the table didn't remember either. But if we go back and read verse one, we see it: "For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles—" For this reason, *what?* We don't find out until verse 14 where Paul finally finishes what he started in verse one: "For this reason I bow my knees before the Father... that you... may have strength to comprehend... the love of Christ."

So what was it that interrupted Paul's thinking? What was it that Paul suddenly felt the need to say?

I. "For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles—"

Paul was at that moment a prisoner *of Rome*. He was a captive in Roman chains, under Roman guard. But as he lived day after day, and year after year in Roman captivity, he felt that he was more than anything else a prisoner of Christ Jesus. In other places, Paul says that he was a "bond slave" of the Lord. But these were "willing" bonds. As the hymn writer says: "Behold I sit in willing bonds beneath Thy feet." (Isaac Watts) Maybe Paul was thinking of what Jesus had said to Ananias (cf. Thielman):

- ✓ Acts 9:15-16 — Go, for [Saul/Paul] is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.

Paul knew that his imprisonment at Rome was just the result of how gladly and how willingly he was a prisoner of Christ. And so this changed his whole perspective – his whole outlook on life.

As he sat in Roman chains, he thought of himself only as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. Is this how we would think? Is this how we *do* think of ourselves?

But then Paul goes on to say that he was a prisoner of Christ Jesus (meaning he was confined in a Roman prison) “on behalf of you Gentiles.” Now Paul has just said a whole lot about the Gentiles:

“Therefore remember that at one time *you Gentiles* in the flesh... were separated from Christ... But now in Christ Jesus *you* who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ... So then *you* are no longer strangers and aliens, but *you* are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom *you also* are being built together into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.”

And now Paul says that it’s *on behalf* – or *for the sake* – of these same Gentiles that he himself is suffering as a prisoner of Christ Jesus under Roman guard. That’s real life. That’s the “nitty gritty” if anything ever was. And that means that everything Paul has just written is for him all about “*real life*.” These aren’t just fancy ideas that fancy theologians talk about in their ivory towers. What we’ve been talking about for the last several weeks is the truth for which Paul himself suffered imprisonment. Paul writes to the Ephesians because he has a vested, personal interest in them. Paul writes to the Ephesians because it’s on their behalf that he’s been confined in prison for these several years. Paul writes to the Ephesians because obviously he must deeply love them and care for them. These aren’t just fancy ideas that fancy theologians talk about in their ivory towers.

But now that Paul has reminded the Ephesians that he is a prisoner of Christ Jesus on their behalf, all of a sudden he feels compelled to stop and... — to stop and... *do what?* He suddenly feels compelled to stop *and rejoice*. I believe that’s the key to understanding these verses. The key is to see that Paul is rejoicing – even though he never uses that word.

“For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles—”

“assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God’s grace that was given to me for you, how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly; whereby when you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit – 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 servant according to the gift of God’s grace, which was given me by the working of his power.”

“To me, the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone what is the administration of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers

and authorities in the heavenly places, according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through faith in him.”

Now that’s a mouthful by any standard. All of these words make up only two sentences. The first sentence (including verse one) is 106 words long. The second sentence is 82 words long. But then we see that at the end of all that long mouthful, Paul comes right back to where he started. Paul comes back to that same theme that sent him “off course” in the first place – the theme of imprisonment and suffering on behalf of his Gentile readers. He ends his interruption with this sentence of “only” 14 words: “**So** [therefore] I ask you not to lose heart over **my sufferings on your behalf**, which are your glory.”

Paul spends these two long sentences in rejoicing so that those Gentiles on behalf of whom he is imprisoned won’t lose heart and be discouraged. That’s real life. That’s the “nitty gritty.” Instead of losing heart over his sufferings for their sake, Paul would have his readers *also rejoice* because Paul’s sufferings, he says, are actually *their glory*. So now let’s look at those two long sentences and see why it is that Paul is so full of joy – and why it is that he wishes his Gentile readers never to lose heart.

II. “assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of **God’s grace that was given to me** for you... of which I was made a servant according to the **gift of God’s grace, which was given me by the working of his power. To me, the very least of all the saints, this grace was given.**”

See how Paul begins and ends the first sentence, and then begins again the second sentence with almost the exact same words:

- ✓ “assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of **God’s grace that was given to me** for you,”
- ✓ “of which I was made a servant according to the **gift of God’s grace, which was given me by the working of his power.**”
- ✓ “**To me, the very least of all the saints, this grace was given.**”

Paul was overwhelmed by grace from beginning to end. For Paul, even his imprisonment was just another clear reminder of God’s grace.

In Ephesians 2, we saw that God’s grace is especially His gift of salvation to undeserving sinners (2:5, 8). But now Paul is rejoicing in a special gift that God has given uniquely to him. And just like the gift of salvation is given to undeserving sinners, so Paul feels that this gift that God has given to him is *wholly* undeserved. We could actually translate: “To **me!** – who am **less than the least** of all the saints, this grace was given” (Hoehner; NIV). Paul could never forget that before God saved him, he was a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and a violent aggressor – the foremost of sinners (1 Tim. 1:13, 15). Paul’s goal in life was to destroy Christ’s church. And yet it was **to him**, of all people, that this **grace** was **given**. As Paul says, “**to me(!)**”

So what is this grace that Paul refers to no less three times? What is this grace that Paul’s imprisonment reminded him of? What is this undeserved gift that so overwhelmed Paul with awe and amazement?

III. “assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God’s grace that was given to me for you, *how the MYSTERY was MADE KNOWN to me by REVELATION*, as I have written briefly; whereby when you read this, you can perceive *my INSIGHT into the MYSTERY of Christ*, which was *not MADE KNOWN* to the sons of men in other generations as it has *now been REVEALED to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.*”

See those words repeated over and over: “mystery... made known... revelation... insight... mystery... made known... revealed.” God had made known to Paul—along with the rest of the holy apostles and prophets—a deep and secret mystery – a mystery that as Paul says in the next sentence had been “hidden for ages in God.” It was a mystery because it was not made known to the sons of men in other generations. And yet until it was made known by God, it could never be imagined or conceived of by the mind of any man or woman in all of history or in all the world. But now, after having been hidden for all those ages in God, the time had finally come for this mystery to be revealed. And when that time finally came, to whom did God reveal the mystery, but *to Paul* – to *Paul*, who felt himself to be less than the least of all the saints. *To Paul* this grace was given by the awesome working of God’s power.

What was this mystery hidden for ages in God, and now revealed to Paul?

IV. “– *THAT the Gentiles are fellow heirs, and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.*”

Now there’s something special going on here. In chapter two verses 5-6, Paul says that –

God	made us alive <i>together with</i>	Christ
	<i>synezooipoiesen</i>	
[God]	raised us up <i>together with</i>	[Him]
	<i>synegeiren</i>	
[God]	seated us <i>together with</i>	[Him]
	<i>synekathisen</i>	

Then in chapter two verses 19-22, Paul says to his Gentile readers:

You are	citizens <i>together with</i>	[the saints]
	<i>sympolitai</i>	
[You are] being	fitted <i>together with</i>	[each other]
	<i>synarmologoumene</i>	
You are being	built <i>together with</i>	[each other]
	<i>synoikodomeisthe</i>	

And now once again in chapter three verse 6, Paul says that –

The Gentiles are	heirs together with	[the saints]
	<u>syn</u> kleronoma	
[The Gentiles are]	members of the body together with	[the saints]
	<u>sys</u> soma	
[The Gentiles are]	partakers [of the promise] together with	[the saints]
	<u>sym</u> metocha	

Why is Paul so excited about that preposition “*syn*” – “*together with*”? The answer is that as God is joining us **together with each other** in this new creation called the Church, this is how God is accomplishing his plan to unite His whole creation in Christ. Remember what Paul said in chapter one (vv. 9-10):

[God has] ***made known to us the mystery*** of His will according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Him for the administration of the fullness of the times ***to unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth, in Him.***

How is God uniting all things in Christ? – By uniting all of us **together with** each other as members of Christ’s body. The point of our unity – the point of our oneness with each other – is *so that Christ* might be all in all, and the one who “*fills all in all.*” (1:23) This oneness, this unity, this church, this new creation in Christ is the mystery that was hidden for ages in God – the God, Paul says, “who created all things.”

Now why does Paul say that? Well, when God created this world, He intended a perfect unity and harmony that would rebound without ceasing to His glory. Through Adam’s sin, this unity and harmony was replaced with rebellion, and hatred, and alienation. But now, by means of this new creation in Christ, God is **restoring** His first creation to its original purpose and goal. That’s why Paul says that this mystery was hidden for ages in God **who created all things**. The God who created all things is the God who **recreates** and makes all things **new**. This mystery is the very thing that has now been revealed and made known to Paul. The revelation of this is the gift of God’s grace that was given to Paul, who is less than the least of all the saints. And yet there was more to this gift of God’s grace than just the revelation of the mystery to Paul.

V. “assuming that you have heard of the **stewardship** of God’s **grace** that was **given to me for you**... of which I was made a **servant** according to the **gift of God’s grace**... **To me, the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ,** and **to bring to light for everyone what is the administration of the mystery hidden for ages in God.**”

In His amazing grace, God revealed to Paul the mystery of this new creation in Christ so that as a **steward** and a **servant** of this mystery Paul could *preach to the Gentiles* the unsearchable riches of Christ, and *bring to light for everyone* (both Jews and Gentiles) how God is now administering and unfolding this mystery which had been hidden for ages in God. This is the very thing Paul has been doing in his letter to the Ephesians. For Paul, his whole life’s work *on behalf of the Gentiles* is one constant reminder of God’s undeserved grace *to him*. And so for Paul, *even his imprisonment and suffering* on behalf of the Gentiles was a *part* of this constant

reminder of God's undeserved *grace* to him – the one who was less than the least of all the saints.

But then at the end of the day, it's not just the fact that Paul has been entrusted with the mystery that causes him to rejoice in God's undeserved grace. It's also the *nature*, and the *goal* of the mystery itself.

VI. “To me, the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles *the unsearchable riches of Christ*, and to bring to light for everyone what is the administration of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, *so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places, according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through faith in him.*”

The unsearchable riches of Christ... The manifold wisdom of God.

The Greek word for “manifold” means “many colored,” “very many-sided,” (cf. Thielman), multi-faceted, “richly diversified.” (cf. O'Brien) One commentator translates “beautifully complex.” (Thielman) Another one translates “many-splendoured.” (O'Brien) Jeremiah says:

Jeremiah 10:12 — It is he who made the earth by his power, who established the world by his wisdom, and by his understanding stretched out the heavens.

If the wisdom of God is displayed in His *first* creation, how much more can we see His beautifully complex and many-splendoured wisdom in this *new* creation where Jews and Gentiles are being joined together in a perfect unity and harmony, so that in this new creation Christ Jesus Himself is all in all? It's this manifold wisdom of God that Paul has the privilege of bringing to light *for everyone*. But there's more.

As this new creation comes into being in the church, the church then becomes a living display of God's wisdom so that *even the evil rulers and authorities in the heavenly places* are *forced to see* and then *to know* that God in His wisdom *will* have the final victory (cf. 1:20-23). The display of God's wisdom in the church is the testimony to Satan of his final destruction.

At the end of the sentence, Paul comes back one more time to the access that we have been given to God the Father (cf. 2:11-22). In chapter two verse 18 Paul said:

✓ Ephesians 2:18 — For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.

But this time Paul pulls out all the stops when he says: “in whom we have *boldness* and access *with confidence* through faith in Him.” As we claim access to God Himself with boldness and confidence, the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places tremble, because they see in this powerful miracle of God's wisdom their own undoing.

So then, after all of this, isn't it obvious why Paul felt compelled to interrupt himself after saying that he was a *prisoner* of Christ Jesus *on behalf of "you Gentiles"*? After all of this, isn't it obvious why Paul now concludes:

VII. *"So [therefore] I ask you not to lose heart over my sufferings on your behalf, which are your glory."*

For Paul, his imprisonment and sufferings on behalf of the Gentiles was nothing more than a constant reminder of God's undeserved grace to him – the one who was less than the least of all the saints. Therefore, for Paul, his imprisonment and sufferings on behalf of the Gentiles was nothing more than the sign of their glory – both now, and in the future, and for all eternity.

O that we could always see so clearly. O that we could always be so full of joy, and hope, and triumph. O that God would do this work in our hearts.