

# When a Herald Prevails

*Ephesians*

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**Bible Text:** Ephesians 3:4  
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We gather this morning to worship God through our Mediator, the Lord Jesus Christ, the one upon whom we as Christians have laid our hands, as it were, and transferred our guilt to him who bore our sins on the cross of Calvary. He suffered on a cross for sinners and offered his life to God as a substitute sacrifice to satisfy divine judgment against our sins. It was him in our place, taking our punishment, so that we might receive his righteousness and be made right with a holy God, that our sins would be washed away and we would be declared righteous before the judgment bar of God. God raised that Christ from the dead on the third day to show that the sacrifice had been accepted and now those who turn from sin and trust in Christ alone for their salvation can have forgiveness and the sure promise of eternal life. It's a wonder of grace. It's a marvel of the Gospel that that message goes out to all men everywhere and that the offer of salvation is presented to men without distinction, that men from any tribe, of any tongue, in any part of the world, could come to Christ and receive immediate forgiveness of their sins through the truth of the Gospel. Christ will save you if you're an unrepentant sinner here today. Christ will save you on an equal basis with every Christian if you come to him in the way that we just described. The Gospel is a wonderful thing.

Our familiarity with that message tempts us sometimes to take it for granted by being so familiar with it, there is that temptation ever present to say, "Oh, I've heard this before," and just start to assume things and to kick into autopilot. Brothers and sisters, today, let's not do that, shall we? Let's take what is familiar and think all the more about it to reflect on the wonder of what we have just heard, the wonder of the Gospel that saves our soul; the wonder of the truth that is sufficient to make us stand in the presence of a holy God and be accepted before him; the wonder of a Gospel that will allow us to pass through the day of the judgment unscathed and actually welcomed into the presence of God. Let's treasure these things by honoring them, by giving our minds over to think about the significance of what that truth means because you and I here in this location, here in this part of the Midwestern part of the United States, you and I in our humble life station, we have these things, these things have been given to us, they have been deposited to us when, mark this, they have previously been hidden from better men than us.

As you go back into time, go back into the Old Testament, the Scriptures say that the prophets looked into these things wanting to understand more about what we now have

freely given to us. We should realize the treasure that is ours, that we enjoy the spoils of battle that other men have won by the power of the Holy Spirit. We want to think on that this morning and I invite you to turn to Ephesians 3 in your Bibles so that we can do that here today. Ephesians 3. For those of you who are visiting with us, we are teaching verse by verse through the book of Ephesians and after a few months, we find ourselves here in Ephesians 3, at one of those passages that you wouldn't automatically turn to if you were just randomly looking for a devotional thought, but a passage that Scripture tells us specifically, "Stop and park here and think about what you are reading." The Holy Spirit calls particular attention to what is in front of us here this morning.

I'm going to read verses 1 through 7. We saw the first 3 verses of this passage last week but we need to set the context. This is one big long sentence in the original language. We're taking it piece by piece over about a three-week period. Ephesians 3:1 says,

1 For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles - 2 if indeed you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace which was given to me for you; 3 that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief. 4 By referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, 5 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; 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, 7 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.

There are a couple of things that I want you to see as we begin to consider the middle of this text today. I want you to notice in particular the way that the phrase, "God's grace which was given to me," brackets this passage and helps us understand the thrust of what Paul is saying. In chapter 3:2, Paul says, "You have heard of the stewardship of God's grace which was given to me," then he goes on and he talks about his apostleship. Look down at verse 7, he says, "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." The things that we're going to consider here this morning are a gift of God's grace to the church. God, in particular, showed grace to the Apostle Paul, giving him the office of an apostle and entrusting to him the great stewardship of ministering the Gospel to Gentiles who would one day come to faith in Christ. That was a gift not only to the Apostle Paul but through Paul to what would become the church. What God did in the life of the Apostle Paul was a gift to us as Christians here today because it is through the faithful ministry of Paul that you and I have ultimately come to hear the Gospel and have it presented to us as Gentiles. As those who are not Jews, we live in the wake, our spiritual lives are secured in the overflow, in the aftermath of the work that God did through the Apostle Paul.

So while we focus on the Apostle Paul here this morning, I want you to see that as we're talking about him, we're talking about a gift of God's grace that God in undeserved favor to Gentiles like you and me, did a marvelous work that brought salvation to us so that

rather than facing eternal judgment for our guilty sins, we might receive the gift of eternal life. Our consciences might be wiped clean and be forgiven of all of the prior guilt. That we might have an assurance and a confidence that we belong to the real God, that we know the real truth, that we belong to him in Jesus Christ. That is the greatest gift. Nothing else in life matters. There is no trial that you could go through that would overwhelm the greatness of the importance of what we're talking about here today. So we must learn as Christians, particularly in this day and age in which we live, in our culture, in our society and even in what's broadly called the evangelical church, we must learn to appreciate this gift. We must come to Scripture and treasure the things that are laid out before us because none of those other realms are going to impart that to our hearts and it would be a travesty of exponential order for such a great gift to go unappreciated by the people of God. We must learn to treasure this and Scripture brings us through so many different realms of thought so that we would treasure it and we're going to look at one aspect of that here today as we contemplate what God did through the Apostle Paul.

Now, as you we're reading here in this passage, Paul is talking about the way that God has brought Gentiles into the church on equal footing with the Jews. We'll look at that more next week as we look at verses 5 and 6 and 7, if I get that far. But Paul here in this chapter is reiterating things that he had already said in chapter 2, verses 11 through 18. Remember that he said in verse 13, "Now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off," talking about the Gentiles, "you who were far off," and separate from God and strangers to the covenants of promise that he made to Israel, "now you have been brought near by the blood of Christ." In verse 15, God has made "the two into one new man, thus establishing peace." Verse 18, "for through Him we both," Jews and Gentiles alike, "have our access in one Spirit to the Father."

Now, living 2,000 years after the events that gave rise to the New Testament, the historical events that gave rise to the New Testament, the ministry on earth of Christ, the subsequent ministry of the apostles and the outworking of the work of the Gospel, the work of the Holy Spirit in those subsequent centuries and coming to the point where the church is so broadly populated with Gentiles like most of us here today, there are very few Jews in our audience here today, we, you and I today in the year 2015, we take for granted the fact that Gentiles belong in the church. That's what we're used to. That's all that we have ever known. There is a temptation to think that it was always like that and that it was always going to be thus, but that wasn't the case in the first century and we're going to stop and we're going to slow down here so that you can see that with some measure of clarity.

Notice this: Paul has already said so much about the union of Jews and Gentiles in Ephesians 2, but in the passage that I read in Ephesians 3, he goes back and he starts to repeat himself and reiterate this theme once again. Apparently, note this, just on a very superficial observation, apparently for Paul to be saying this in chapter 2 and again in chapter 3, apparently it wasn't so clear and obvious right then. At the time that Paul wrote, this was a contested issue. Whether you and I had direct access to God in Christ or not was a matter that was disputed when Paul entered into his apostolic ministry. And so we, as I mentioned earlier, we stand in the flow, we are enjoying the fruit of the battle

that the Apostle Paul won by the power of the Holy Spirit and we need to appreciate this and understand it.

Look at verse 4, which is where we're really going to focus on here today and kind of expand out from, kind of like an expanding telescope. Paul says in verse 4, having just talked about his apostleship to the Gentiles, verse 4 he says, "By referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ." The mystery, as we said last time, is not something dark and hidden and foreboding as we tend to think of mystery here today in English, rather he is simply saying that he's teaching a truth that was previously unknown but now God has made known by revelation to the church and Paul was the agent through which he made this known.

Now, look at verse 4 and I just want you to think about this because here in verse 4, you see your responsibility as you hear this message here today. This is not something extraneous. This is not something incidental. This is not something that we can take or leave. I want you to see what Paul says here because he's calling attention, particular attention, to what he is saying in this passage and saying, in essence, "You need to pay attention here. There is something of rich spiritual importance for us here today."

Notice what he says, he says in verse 4, "By referring to this," in other words, by referring to his apostleship to the Gentiles which we looked at last week from the first 3 verses, he says, "By referring to this, when you read." He says, "And so I'm assuming that you are going to read this and make an effort to understand it. You have to refer to my apostleship. You need to read the broader context of the letter." "You can understand," look back at verse 4 with me, "you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ," and so what Paul is saying here, he is heightening, if that were possible, he is heightening our responsibility to pay particular heed to this theme which he is now focused on here in Ephesians 3. In essence he's saying, "Refer to this. I want you to think about the nature of my apostolic commission." He says, "As you're reading the broader context of the way that God has brought Jews and Gentiles together into the church, you focus on this and remember my role as an apostle so that you can have insight into the significance of what I'm saying. Refer to this. Read this. Understand it." So, Paul is emphatically calling our attention to the importance of what's being said right at this very point. Apparently, beloved, these matters are something that would be easy to miss, to overlook the significance of and be impoverished as a result, be vulnerable as a result.

Why is he calling such attention to this? Well, behind Ephesians 2 and Ephesians 3, is a great historical conflict that Scripture devotes a lot of time to that we, because we are not engaged in that same conflict today, we take for granted. You see, the prevailing sentiment in the days immediately preceding Paul's arrival was that Jews and Gentiles could never come together spiritually. They would never be on the same footing spiritually. Paul alludes to that in Ephesians 2, he says in verse 11, "remember that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called 'Uncircumcision' by the so-called 'Circumcision,' which is performed in the flesh by human hands - remember that you were separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world." As we looked

at a few weeks ago also, even the very construction of the Jewish temple perpetuated that and enforced that. There was a wall around the temple beyond which Gentiles were not allowed to go under pains of the death penalty. They would be executed for trying to go to where the Jews went into the inner sanctum of worship.

So there is this environment that made a sharp distinction between Jews and Gentiles in a way that was absolutely part of the conditioning of the human mind at that time in that area. There were deep presuppositions built into their thinking much, much deeper than the hostility that we think today when we think about red state versus blue state in America. Much deeper hostility than that which, perhaps, Americans would have toward overseas Muslims and the great conflict that is going on there today. This was embedded in the very warp and woof of human thought at the time in the audience that Paul was addressing. The men of his day thought the 2 groups could never be spiritual equals and unbelieving Jews hated and detested the very thought that Gentiles would be on equal footing with them.

I'm going to show you some passages to help you understand that. There are 2 main points here in today's message. First of all, we're going to look at the hostility to this mystery. The hostility to the mystery. The mystery that Paul is unveiling is the fact that Jews and Gentiles would be on equal footing in the church. There was great hostility to that because the Jews did not want the Gentiles to be a part of their club and so we're going to consider the hostility to the mystery. I want you to see the biblical background that informs what Paul is saying and what he assumes as he writes this letter that we know as the letter to the Ephesians.

Here's the thing, beloved, and let's step back for a moment and just kind of engage our minds about this a bit. Think back to when you first heard the Gospel, those of you who are Christians. Think back to when you were first born again. Some of you can remember a specific date like I can. Not all of you can but you, when there was an awareness that, "Now I am a true Christian," and the word of God became alive to you and you had a clarity of conscience and a freedom in your heart and a song in your spirit that said, "I am born again and I know Christ and my whole life has been changed," and the sweet joy of that time. You think back to that and trace it back to when someone shared the Gospel with you and you come back to that memory and you say, "That is really sweet. That is precious as I remember when the Gospel was first presented to me and God opened my eyes to understand and the Spirit worked on my heart and I embraced Christ by faith and nothing was the same ever again. 'Heaven above is softer blue. The earth around is sweeter green. Something lives in every hue, that Christless eyes have never seen.'" How sweet and how precious that is.

Well, not everyone thought that was a sweet idea for people like you and me to have the Gospel given to us. The preaching of the Gospel to Gentiles threatened the spiritual superiority of the Jews and they hated it and they resisted it. This is a dominant theme in the book of Acts. When you know to look for it, it jumps off the page at you. The term "Gentiles" is used 29 times in the book of Acts. I was very much inclined to read all 29 of them to you here this morning but in deference to time and the limitations of the human

body and the human mind, I decided only to highlight a few of them. Look at Acts 9. I want to walk you through just a few passages so that you get a taste of the fact of this hostility, of this antagonism, of this resistance that the Gospel would be brought to Gentiles in a way that you and I take for granted, in a way that you and I treasure. That everything that we hold dear as Christians, there was a group of people 2,000 years ago who did their utmost best to try to keep us from receiving it. There was a spiritual war going on.

Turn, first of all, to the book of Acts 9:15-16. I think some of these passages we may have looked at last time, touched on them, but it's very important for us to see them from this perspective here this morning. As you know, the Lord Jesus met a man named Saul of Tarsus as he was on the road to Damascus, pursuing and persecuting those early Christians and the Lord confronted him and changed him and miraculously converted him and now Paul, as we now know him, was about to be introduced to his new life. The Lord spoke to a man named Ananias in a vision in Acts 9:10 and he called Ananias to go and meet with Paul. Ananias, as we've said, didn't think that was too great of an idea because Paul, he only knew Saul of Tarsus as a man who persecuted the church and participated in the martyrdom of Stephen. But look at verse 15, "The Lord said to him," to Ananias, that is, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel." I'm sending him to Gentiles as well as to Jews and notice this in verse 16, Jesus says, "I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake." This apostolic commission that Christ gave to Paul of which Paul speaks in Ephesians 3 in our passage here this morning, from the very outset, the Lord said, "This is going to involve great personal suffering to him. He is going to suffer for what I am calling him to do, Ananias." And why did he suffer? Because it involved conflict. Because there was hostility to his ministry.

As you read along in the book of Acts, you see this playing out in almost wearisome repetition. Wearisome not because there is too much in the Scriptures, that could never be the case, we treasure God's word, but wearisome in the settled, dark, blind, demonic opposition that unbelieving Jews made to Paul's ministry. The fact that they were relentless. That they hated this so much and resorted to all kinds of lies and violence to oppose it. And I want you to see just a little bit of this and while I'm not going to read all 29, I'm going to read more than the few that I put into my passage because I think this is important.

Look at Acts 10:44. First of all, you need to have a sense that this was, what was happening with the Gentiles was not something that was expected. That's the point of this passage here. "While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message. All the circumcised believers," all the Jewish believers, here they are sympathetic, "who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God," just like it happened in Acts 2 when it was all Jews. Then Peter answered, "Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he? And he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ." What I want you to notice is that even the

believing Jews at this time when they saw the Gentiles receiving salvation authenticated by the exact same sign and spiritual manifestations that they had received in Acts 2 and 3, they were amazed. Why were they amazed? Because they weren't expecting it. We take it for granted. If we're going to understand the weight and the import of Scripture here today, we have to step out of our 21<sup>st</sup> century mindset and realize that what was going on in the first century was much different than what we're used to. To see a Gentile receive Christ, to receive the Holy Spirit, was amazing. It was something that they were not expecting. Because the Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles, they were stunned.

Now, as you read on in the book of Acts, you start to see how the unbelieving Jews opposed this. They incited persecution against Paul and his supporters. Look over at Acts 13. And you should have the sense, you have the sense of stepping into a slightly different realm and saying, "Wow, this is different. I'm seeing something that's different than what I'm used to thinking. I'm in a different realm of presuppositions than what I have known here in my own earthly existence, in my 10, 20, 30, 40 or 70 years of existence. I'm encountering a whole different way of thought with what I'm seeing here today from God's word."

Look at Acts 13:42, "Paul and Barnabas were going out, the people kept begging that these things might be spoken to them the next Sabbath. Now when the meeting of the synagogue had broken up, many of the Jews," there it is, "and of the God-fearing proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas, who, speaking to them, were urging them to continue in the grace of God." Watch what happens now, verse 44, "The next Sabbath nearly the whole city assembled to hear the word of the Lord." We would think, you and I would think as Christians today, "Wow, the whole city is there. This is a great opportunity. I hope the Lord does a work and saves more and brings more people into the hallelujah chorus." We would be filled with anticipation and hopeful that the ministry would extend still more.

Not true with these unbelieving Jews. Look at verse 45, "But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began contradicting the things spoken by Paul, and were blaspheming." They saw what was happening and they did not like it. Why did they not like it? The Spirit tells us, the Holy Spirit in what he has inspired for us to read now says they were filled with jealousy. The Jews liked the sense of spiritual superiority that they could convey. The Pharisees who were their primary teachers and their primary authorities, we'll look at that in much more detail one day, people viewed the Pharisees as those who spoke absolutely the word of God and yet they weren't and they opposed Christ and Christ had to call them out in the Sermon on the Mount and in Matthew 23 and rebuked them. They were not truly in tune with what God wanted. They were not truly in submission to what God wanted. They loved their position. They loved to go about in their long robes and portraying this external view of righteousness and being able to look down their nose at the Gentiles so that they were the ones who were built up, so that they were the ones who were esteemed by men. And the fact that Paul would presume to take the Gospel message to Gentiles so that they could enter into the blessings of God, they hated it. They hated the Gentiles and they hated the fact that God would do this for non-Jews. They were jealous. It threatened their position and so they opposed it. They

contradicted. They blasphemed. Verse 46, "Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and said, 'It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you first; since you repudiate it and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles.'"

Look down at verse 50, the Jews didn't give up. In verse 48, "The Gentiles began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord." Beloved, you and I are in their shoes. As many as have been appointed to eternal life believed. Beloved, you and I are in the position, put yourself in the sandals of those first century forebears of yours as Gentiles. A true commissioned apostle rebukes the Jews who tried to keep you under their thumb and says, "Since you repudiate it, we are turning our backs on you and we will go to the Gentiles." All of a sudden, all of that spiritual arrogance that stood between you and the true God has been wiped away and now a sympathetic spokesman comes and tells you that God will receive you, God will forgive your sins, God will bless you if you come to Christ and all of the darkness that you have lived in, all of the sins that were on your conscience, now suddenly there is release and the doors of heaven have been flung open wide. No wonder they rejoiced. The whole order of society was being overturned for their spiritual benefit. The hostility was being confronted by a courageous apostle sent and commissioned by Christ himself.

Well, the Jews didn't give up. Some of them to this day haven't given up, have they? But look at verse 50. As the word of the Lord was being spread throughout the whole region, verse 50, "But the Jews incited the devout women of prominence and the leading men of the city, and instigated a persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their district," doing their best by intimidation and threats and violence to silence what Paul was preaching.

The Jews, not only persecuted, they tried to corrupt the Gospel by injecting legal works into it. Look at Acts 15:1. I hear those pages turning. That's a sweet sound in the ears of a preacher. Yeah, some of you are doing it extra loud just to encourage me. I appreciate that. Acts 15:1, "Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.'" Interjecting into this advance of the Gospel, "No, no, you must come to the Jews first. Before you can be a Christian, you must first become a Jew. You must come through the Jewish religion, through the Jewish rituals. You have to be circumcised like any good Jew before you can be saved." Corrupting the message. Trying to grab the advance of the Gospel by the throat and strangle it saying that free and full forgiveness is not available by grace through faith in Christ, you must do these works first and bring their whole conscience under bondage to the Jewish system. They tried to corrupt the Gospel.

As you read on, you see that they utterly rejected Christ himself. Look at Acts 18. It's not that Paul ignored the Jews in his ministry, it's that they repudiated him and brought judgment on their own heads. Look at verse 4, Acts 18:4, Paul "was reasoning in the synagogue every Sabbath and trying to persuade Jews and Greeks. But when Silas and Timothy came down from Macedonia, Paul began devoting himself completely to the word, solemnly testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ." What did they do in response? Verse 6, "they resisted and blasphemed, Paul shook out his garments and said



to them, 'Your blood be on your own heads! I am clean. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.'" Paul says, "Jesus is the Christ." They curse in response. They reject. They resist. They blaspheme. They say, "We don't want any part of this." Paul says, "Okay, I'll go to the Gentiles then. They'll listen. If you won't, they will."

So you see the conflict. You see what's embedded in the biblical narrative as redemptive history unfolds and it wasn't over even then. Eventually they resorted to mob violence when Paul gave his testimony as he was defending himself as he had been unjustly charged. Look at Acts 22:17. We're picking up Paul's defense before the Jews in midstream here just for the sake of time. He reminds them of his encounter with Ananias that we introduced earlier. Look at verse 12, Acts 22:12, "A certain Ananias, a man who was devout by the standard of the Law, and well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there, came to me, and standing near said to me, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight!' And at that very time I looked up at him. And he said, 'The God of our fathers has appointed you to know His will and to see the Righteous One and to hear an utterance from His mouth.'" Ananias told Paul, "You are going to be uniquely sent by God and he is going to deposit in your mind and in your understanding truth that you are to carry to the world so that all men would hear." Verse 15, "You will be a witness for Him to all men of what you have seen and heard." All men, not just Jews. All men, Jews and Gentiles alike. Ananias said, "'Now why do you delay? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name.'"

So Paul continues talking in verse 17, reciting his testimony. He says, "It happened when I returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, that I fell into a trance, and I saw Him saying to me, 'Make haste, and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about Me.'" The Lord is telling Paul early on, "Get out of Jerusalem because they are not going to listen." This hostility was so inbred. And Paul, thinking about it with not all of the clarity that would come to him later, somewhat protested. He said, "Lord, they themselves understand that in one synagogue after another I used to imprison and beat those who believed in You. And when the blood of Your witness Stephen was being shed, I also was standing by approving, and watching out for the coats of those who were slaying him." He's saying, "Surely they'll listen because they know the reality, they know that I was a committed Jew and now I'm preaching the Gospel. Surely they'll listen because they'll respect my prior Jewishness." Verse 21, "The Lord said me, 'Go! For I will send you far away to the Gentiles.'"

So Paul is recounting his call to a Jewish audience. He explains to them the historical circumstances that led up to it. He introduces the fact that the Lord told him the Jews will not listen and that the Lord said to Paul, "I will send you to the Gentiles," and now watch what happens, look at verse 21 again, "He," meaning Christ, "said to me," meaning Paul, "Go! For I will send you far away to the Gentiles." Watch what happens in verse 22, "They listened to him up to this statement, and then they raised their voices and said, 'Away with such a fellow from the earth, for he should not be allowed to live!'" So deep was their hostility to the Gospel, so deep was their hatred of Gentiles, that the mere thought that the Gospel would be taken to them caused them to call for Paul's execution. It's hard for us to enter back into that mindset, isn't it? After 2,000 years of conditioning

of seeing the Gospel brought to Gentiles and being Gentiles ourselves, it's hard for us to realize that it was like that but what we need to see is that Paul lived that out. Paul was in the midst of it. And elsewhere in Scripture, it indicates that the Jews brought judgment on themselves with all of this hostility.

We'll look at one final passage. If you'll turn to 1 Thessalonians 2, the final passage as far as this hostility to the mystery goes. 1 Thessalonians 2. If you turn back to where you were at in Ephesians and go just a little further to the right you'll find the Thessalonian letters. 1 Thessalonians 2:14. Paul is encouraging this faithful church at Thessalonica and he says in verse 14, "You, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews." So the Thessalonians had believed in Christ and their contemporaries persecuted them. Paul is encouraging them and saying, "Your being noble and enduring that persecution just like the believing Jews endured at the hands of their countrymen when they believed in Jerusalem." And what does he say about those persecuting Jews? Not the persecuted Jews, the persecuting Jews. Verse 15, he says, they "both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out. They are not pleasing to God, but hostile to all men, hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved; with the result that they always fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them to the utmost." Paul in a very brief summary recalls all of this Jewish hostility that he encountered in his ministry and he says, "They hindered us. They made it difficult, sometimes impossible, for us to speak the Gospel to the Gentiles." Why? Because they are hostile to the Gentiles, indeed, they are hostile to all men and they would stop at no length. They would go to any length in order to prevent Gentiles from being saved. It's the clear testimony of Scripture.

So what I want you to see, here all of this is just by way of background for the passage that we're looking at in Ephesians 3. Behind Ephesians 2 and behind Ephesians 3, as Paul is talking about this unity of Jews and Gentiles who believe in one body in the church, what we need to remember, what we need to understand is that behind those inspired words of Scripture is a titanic struggle against Jewish opposition that did everything that it could to silence the Gospel to keep that from coming into place. In their error, in their pride, in their prejudice, in their self-righteousness, those unbelieving Jews resisted the inclusion of Gentiles into the body of God's people. They wanted to be the gatekeepers of heaven so that if any Gentile was going to come to God, they would have to come crawling to the Jews first.

Now, this matters to us, beloved. You say, "Well, why does that 2,000 year old controversy matter to me? What difference does it make to me?" I'm glad you asked. Think about it: if those wicked Jews had prevailed, which they did not, but if they had prevailed, if they had had their way, we today would still be under their wicked thumb. It was people like us that they wanted to keep away. It was people like you that they did not want to hear the Gospel. It was people like us trembling under the weight of sin, people like us that they wanted to bolt the doors of heaven against. Paul is a better man than me, by far in every conceivable way. When I think about it, you feel a righteous anger welling up in you. Not as a result of a personal affront but that this was direct opposition

to the purpose of God. This was direct opposition to that which would save souls and redeem them from eternal destruction. They were opposing the purpose of God and they aligned themselves against the well-being of the souls of men. We cannot minimize the guilt on that. As Paul said in the passage that we looked at in Thessalonians, when you contemplate the significance of it, you can see why Paul says, "Wrath has come upon them to the utmost." This is greatly culpable. This is greatly subject to God's judgment.

They had Christ in their hands and they crucified him. They had an apostle of Christ in Paul in front of them preaching to them and they did everything they could to silence him. Their hostility was pervasive and it was perverse. And beloved, I'll say it again: if they had had their way, you and I would not be here today. The Gospel would have been silenced and we would be in darkness and we would not enjoy the blessing of God's word, the fellowship of the Spirit, the wonder of Christ, fellowship in the body, all of the things that we hold most dear would not have reached us if they had prevailed.

So the question is: how did God work so as to prevent that unthinkable result? How is it that God overcame that inbred hostility? Well, that brings us to our second point this morning as we consider the herald of the mystery. The herald as in h-e-r-a-l-d, not as in Harrold the plumber, but herald as in the sense of the one who proclaims the mystery. As we saw last time, God called Paul to proclaim the Gospel to Gentiles. What the Jews were opposing was a work of God that they ultimately could not stop and the fact that Paul's ministry prevailed over them is a sign of the unconquerable power of God that attended his ministry.

Look back at Ephesians 3 with me. Paul says in verse 2, there is this "stewardship of God's grace which was given to me by revelation that 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." Verse 7, he says, "I was made a minister of the Gospel, according to the gift of God's grace which was given to me," look at this, "according to the working of His power." There was an omnipotent, indestructible, unconquerable power that was at work through Paul's apostolic ministry. The power of God was on display, the power of the Spirit was at work and nothing was ultimately going to hinder the purpose of God which he designed to accomplish through the ministry of the Apostle Paul. So Paul here is the human instrument in the hands of an omnipotent God accomplishing his purpose which he promised to Abraham thousands of years earlier that he would bring blessing to all the nations. So as we see Paul and as we consider him, we are actually seeing a work of God on display and as we see the work of God on display, we can humble ourselves under it. We can thank him for it. We can treasure it more than if we had not spent our time considering these things here this morning.

Look at verse 4 as Paul now expands on his calling. He says, "By referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ." Paul says, "As you're reading along here in what I've been saying," chapter 2, although he didn't have the chapter and verse markings when he wrote, those didn't come until much, much later, but just for our sake, "As you read chapter 2, verse 11, and you read through that and you

continue reading what I'm writing right now, you can understand why I know so much. You can understand why I can make these things plain to you. It's because it was made known to me. It was given to me. My insight comes because Christ called me as an apostle." Christ appointed Paul directly to be an apostle. He gave him a particular ministry to Gentiles and imparted divine wisdom and divine understanding and divine truth that no man had received before, that the others did not have at the time. So beloved, follow along as I string a few clauses together here. By imparting truth to Paul, by speaking through Paul, by protecting Paul in the midst of that opposition and by giving Paul victory over the hostility, our God guaranteed that the Gospel would come to Gentiles. It was displayed in a human life, that power, and Paul had to do his part but he was energized by a work of the Spirit to accomplish a purpose which God had established before time began.

You see, these things are so lofty. The things surrounding the Gospel, the historical manifestation and proclamation of the Gospel, everything about it is precious. It's wonderful. It's great to behold and contemplate. That's why Paul says in verse 4, look at it with me again, "Refer to this. Read this. Understand it." We're meant to grasp how it is that Paul came to be in this position where he could speak with such complete authority and clarity about the Gospel. That verb that's translated "understand," you can understand my insight, it refers to an ability to comprehend God's activity and plan in his works. Because God has pulled back the veil and made these things known to us, because they are recorded for us in an infallible, inerrant word, the 66 books of the Bible, you and I have the precious privilege of understanding the purposes of God in history. We have the immense privilege of grasping, contemplating with insight, what God is doing through the church, why it is that he brings Jews and Gentiles together in one body in the church. And part of that precious understanding which is an integral part of your own spiritual growth, part of that integral understanding is examining Paul's apostolic role. As we understand what Paul was doing and the environment in which he was doing it, we understand the work of God and we see that this has come to us and we treasure it all the more.

You see, people can treat the Gospel lightly because they don't appreciate what has taken place in order to bring it to them. People can diminish the Gospel and love this world more than the things of Scripture, in part, because they're not really convicted of sin. If you have a deep conviction of sin, you'll have a deep appreciation for the Gospel which reveals Christ and brought forgiveness of sin to you. So it's a shallow view of sin but also what guards us against that shallow view of sin is realizing the work, the labor to the point of exhaustion, the imprisonment, the persecution, the stripes, the execution that ultimately fell on the heads of so many of the apostles, 11 of 12. The other one was banished, exiled to Patmos.

Do you see it, beloved? The supreme price of your redemption was paid at the cross with infinitely precious blood shed on your behalf. That's ever paramount. That's ever the capstone. Along with that, secondary but consistent with it, is the fact that better men than us fought battles, endured rejection, endured resistance, endured suffering, endured earthly shame, endured deprivation because they were faithful to that Gospel which

exalted that Christ. It wasn't for human motives that they did it, beloved. They did it for Christ. They did it in loyalty and fidelity to his precious name. They did it by the power of the Holy Spirit at work in their lives. But they also did it in love for people like you and me. They refused to compromise. They refused to recant so that in their gnarled hand splattered with their own blood, with their very dying breath, they could take that baton and hand it to the next one, who took it and handed it to the next one, to the next one, to the next one until finally it reached us. You see, we have a treasure that has been entrusted to us. We have something of great high worth that is entrusted to us, supremely because Christ is at the center of it but we also recognize that it has been handed to us through a trail of suffering, a trail of rejection, a trail of blood and that's why, beloved, we take it seriously. That's why we honor it with our attitudes. That's why we treat it with reverence.

We understand, we have insight through the word that this did not come cheap and because it did not come cheap, we won't treat it as if it were cheap and we trust and we pray and we hope that in the limited time that that baton is in our hand, that we would be likewise faithful and that there would be faithful people waiting on the other end to say, "Here, let me take it now and I'll run with it." Just as the men before us ran, until God took their strength away and brought them up to heaven. We run for a time and one day our strength will die down and we want on the other end someone with vigor, not just of body but of a lion's heart to say, "I'll take that baton and I'll run." Which one of you young men is going to say, "I'll be that man"? Which one? Which one of you will stand up and rise to that great and lofty standard that men like Paul set for us and that we only feebly try to remotely emulate? Which one of you will stand and give your life over to the word of God, recognizing the supreme value of Scripture, the supreme value of the Gospel, the eternal value of lost souls and say, "I'll be that man that will call out for Christ in my generation"? You say, "But I'm only 8, 10, 12." It's not too early. It's not too early for you to say, "I'll be that one."

You see, all of those passions of heart are invoked when you realize that Paul prevailed over that kind of hostility and he persevered in the flesh to preserve the Gospel and pass it on. God had appointed him for that role in the outworking of redemption. When we read, we get insight. And when we have insight, it shapes our affections, it shapes our passions, it shapes the kind of people that we want to be. We see this world for its tawdry worthless mirages and say, "That's not what I want with my life. That's not what I'll give my energy to. I will not pursue the passions of my flesh. Not simply out of self-discipline but because God has given me this life, this mind, this time, this opportunity, in this point in history for me to be set apart for his purposes."

I'll say it again: which one of you? Which one of you young people will step up and be that man? Which one of you young ladies will step up and say, "I'll give my life to Christ with like passion. I, too, will be given over to truth and I'll either proclaim it on my own or if God brings me alongside a man like that, I'll support that man." Which one? You see, you can't be brought into the wealth of what was suffered to bring the Gospel to us without realizing that there is a concomitant, a corresponding responsibility to give your life over to it also. Would to God that Truth Community Church would be filled with

dozens, scores of people who have like commitment to the truth like the Apostle Paul that says, "I'll forgo earthly wealth. I don't care about the suffering it might bring. I don't care about the deprivation. Just let me be faithful to the cross."

Now, let's just as we close here make a couple of things clear. Why else does this matter to us? First of all, this affects and develops our discernment. God spoke through Paul in an extraordinary way, in a non-repeatable way. When God gave the Gospel to Paul as he did, he was doing something that was qualitatively different from the cheap imitations that are offered today in the church around us. "Well, God spoke to me and let me tell you all about Jesus' calling." Or, "God spoke to me and, you know, this hurricane is going to get turned." Do you see by comparison how cheap and how different that is? That is not the real thing. It is false. God is not speaking to them or through them. You can safely disregard everyone who today says, "God spoke to me and let me tell you what he said." You can turn and walk away and be confident that you're not missing anything that's truly from God. They have no claim on your conscious. They have no claim on your obedience because they are speaking beyond the apostolic word and we rebuke it all and we condemn it all out of hand as a church, just so you know.

What God delivered to and through Paul was the foundation of the church and you don't repeat the foundation, you build on it. We now have God's word in written form. It is final. It is sufficient. It is all you need. Don't look beyond the word for something else from God. So we don't follow those men or women who claim that God speaks to them today. We gladly rebuke them and we gladly disdain their place on the top of the bestseller lists. We don't care about that at all. Scripture specifically tells us, "Do not follow those who take their stand on visions that they claim to have seen." Not only are those claims false, beloved, they utterly cheapen what God did through the apostles.

Secondly, why does this matter to us? Again, alluding to all of this throughout the message, it matters because we need to be humbled by what has brought redemption to our souls. I'm going to close with this quote from, almost close, with this quote from Martyn Lloyd Jones. Martyn Lloyd Jones, someone should name their son after him, said this, "Let us learn the glorious character of what God has done for us in the Gospel of redemption. Has something of its glory come to us afresh as we have realized that the Almighty eternal God should have taken such trouble with those slaves in Ephesus, those pagans who came to know this truth and became the children of God? What a perfect plan. It is all of grace. It is all of God." He goes on to say, "Saul of Tarsus did not decide to become a Christian and preach in Ephesus, the Lord looked upon him on the road to Damascus and took hold of him because he had chosen him to be a steward of this mystery. What an astounding truth. As you and I contemplate the plan of salvation, we shall be made to glory in it and to triumph in it even as Paul desired these Ephesians to do."

The herald of the mystery prevailed over the hostility to the mystery. That is a manifestation of the power and the grace of God that is at work in salvation, in your salvation. This triumph of the herald shows us that God's sovereign purpose is certain in its fulfillment. The harshest, most powerful resistance could not stop the progress of the

Gospel and like a mighty freight train pouring down through the halls and on the track of history, it has come to us and reached us in our station of life. All of this has benefited you if you're in Christ. Isn't that amazing? Isn't that remarkable? Isn't that just the most wonderful thing to contemplate? Doesn't it make you, "O God, thank you," in response? Consider what God has done for your soul, beloved.

Let's pray.

*Our Father, Scripture says that, "I will give praise to You among the Gentiles." It says, "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with His people." It says, "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise Him." It says that, "There shall come from the root of Jesse, He who arises to rule over the Gentiles and in Him shall the Gentiles hope." Yes, Lord Jesus, this marvelous revelation of hope has come to us and we do hope and we do praise and we do rejoice and we glorify you, our heavenly Father, for your incalculable wisdom and for your boundless mercy that preserved the Gospel all the way until it reached us and then you didn't just leave it outside us, your Spirit did a work in our hearts and by the power of God, turned our life, turned our hearts to embrace the Lord Jesus Christ. Yes, Lord, we acknowledge your sovereign grace in our lives. Yes, Lord, we praise you for it. Yes, Lord, we rejoice in it. Yes, Lord, we thank you for it. And Father, my prayer now for those who are here this morning is that you as the God of hope would fill them with all joy and peace in believing so that they would abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

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