

THE SOVEREIGN GOD AND THE MYSTERY OF HIS WILL: A STUDY OF EPHESIANS

(LESSON ONE HUNDRED AND TWENTY- NINE)

“AN AMBASSADOR IN CHAINS”

EPHESIANS 6:18-20

18 Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints.

19 And for me, that utterance may be given unto me, that I may open my mouth boldly, to make known the mystery of the gospel,

20 For which I am an ambassador in bonds: that therein I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak.

In verses **18-20** of **Ephesians** chapter **6**, Paul addresses the matter of Prayer as it relates to spiritual warfare. In our previous Lesson, we made the point that there is a very strong and powerful relationship between prayer and the putting on of the “*whole armour of God.*” We said that without prayer, the Christian soldier will not have the spiritual energy or the expertise to use the defensive and offensive weapons that comprise the **panoplia** in an effective manner.

We cannot properly understand verses **18-20** unless we see how these verses are related to what Paul wrote in the preceding verses. Prayer is the divinely ordained means of communication with God. In all that Paul wrote earlier concerning the “*whole armour of God,*” he mentioned nothing about the personal access of the Christian soldier with his

Divine commanding officer. This access is given to him or her in prayer. While it is true that the *“Sword of the Spirit”* reveals God’s Word to the believer, it is in prayer that the believer communicates to his or her General.

Paul purposefully links the Word of God and prayer in this section dealing with spiritual warfare. The Word of God declares and explains the *“whole counsel of God,”* to the believer. But the Word only becomes a living and powerful weapon in the believer’s hand through his or her contact with Christ, and this contact is granted only by prayer. As **James G. Leyburn** remarked, “Whatever may be the character of other military men, the **Christian** soldier must be a man of prayer.” Thus in verse **18**, Paul exhorts the believers in Ephesus to, *“With every prayer and petition, pray at all times in the Spirit, and to this end be alert, with all perseverance and petitions for all the saints”* (**New English Translation**).

In verse **19** he speaks about prayer in a very personal manner. He writes, *“Pray for me also, that I may be given the right words when I begin to speak—that I may confidently make known the mystery of the gospel”* (**New English Translation**).

Brothers and sisters, Paul was not too proud to ask the saints to intercede for him. If the great Apostle Paul needed the prayers of the saints, how much more do you and I need them!

It is worthy of note that Paul’s request for prayer had nothing to do with his own personal needs. He does not ask for the believers in Ephesus to pray that he be set free from his imprisonment, but that, *“I may be given the right words when I begin to speak—that I may confidently make known the mystery of the gospel.”* Paul did not ask them to pray for his deliverance, comfort or safety, but for the effectiveness of his witness and ministry.

Paul’s Prayer request is specific. *“That I may be given the right words when I begin to speak—that I may confidently make known the mystery*

of the gospel.” Paul asks for prayer that he might proclaim the gospel both clearly and with a fearless power.

He says, *“That I may be given the right words when I begin to speak.”* It is instructive that even though he had preached the Gospel on so many occasions, in so many places and to so many people, Paul understood that every single instance of spiritually effective utterance is a gift from God. It is always the result of the Holy Spirit’s inspiration.

Paul desired for the right words to be given to him so that he would be able to *“make known the mystery of the gospel.”* The word *“mystery”* is a translation of the Greek word **mustérion**: (**moos-tay’-ree-on**). In classical Greek, the word meant “a hidden thing, a secret, a mystery.” In the New Testament, it means “the secret purposes and counsels which God intends to carry into effect in His kingdom.” The term *“mystery,”* as it is used in the New Testament, does **not** refer to something that can **never** be understood. Rather, it refers to something that **can** be understood, but only with divine assistance. It is a mystery in the sense that the human mind can never understand it as a result of its own efforts. But when it is revealed by God it is understood. In **Ephesians** the revealed mystery is that Jews and Gentiles alike, have been constituted one new people, one body, in their life in union with Christ. This is the truth that is revealed in the proclamation of the gospel.

Paul was very much aware of the inherent difficulties in communicating the gospel and thus he requested the believers to pray for him, believing that the Holy Spirit would overcome all the difficulties through the prayer of the saints.

In verse **20**, the Apostle gives his readers at one and the same time, an indication of how privileged he felt himself to be a herald and defender of the gospel, as well as the great personal cost of such a privilege. He writes, *“For which [the mystery of the gospel] I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may be able to speak boldly as I ought to speak”* (**New English Translation**).

Paul saw himself as an ambassador of the Lord Jesus Christ on behalf of the gospel. He was an “*ambassador in chains*” not simply because of the gospel, but because of his own effectiveness, both in proclaiming the gospel and in living out its principles.

The Greek word translated “*Ambassador*” is **presbeuó:** (**pres-byoo’-o**), which conveys the idea literally of being an elder, someone in the first rank, and then of acting as an ambassador. An ambassador was a messenger or envoy officially representing a higher authority such as an official representative of a king or government.

John Phillips states that, “One of the most important officials in the Roman world was the imperial legate. As one of the emperor’s personal representatives, a legate lived in an outpost of the empire and enforced imperial policy. He was directly accountable to the emperor, and lesser officials were responsible to the legate.”

Paul was an ambassador “*in chains.*” The word “*chains*” is a translation of the Greek word **halusis:** (**hal’-oo-sis**), which refers to “a chain by which the body, or any part of it is bound.” The word is used especially for handcuffs.

The Scottish theologian **William Barclay**, explains that the word **halusis** referred to, “The short length of chain by which the wrist of a prisoner was bound to the wrist of the soldier who was his guard, so that escape was impossible. The situation was this. Paul had been delivered to the captain of the Praetorian Guard, to await trial before the Emperor. He had been allowed to arrange a private lodging for himself; but night and day in that private lodging there was a soldier to guard him, a soldier to whom he was chained by his **halusis** all the time. There would, of course, be a rotation of guardsmen assigned to this duty; and...one by one the guardsmen of the Imperial Guard would be on duty with Paul. What a chance was there! These soldiers would hear Paul preach and talk to his friends. Is there any doubt that in the long

hours Paul would open up a discussion about Jesus with the soldier to whose wrist he was chained?"

It was universally expected that an ambassador, whatever his message and however delicate or risky his mission, would be treated with respect and dignity. He would be accorded appropriate hospitality, and guaranteed a safe exit, for he represented a person, or persons of authority, usually monarchs, and acted on their behalf and in their place, thus embodying their authority. To disregard or insult the envoy was to disregard or insult the sender. And yet Paul, an official representative of the greatest monarch of all, the King of kings and Lord of lords, was now chained to a Roman Soldier, and later would be detained in a Roman dungeon and eventually beheaded.

In his letters, Paul often spoke about his imprisonment. We will consider these references as they are rendered in the **New English Translation**.

Ephesians 3:1

*"For this reason I, Paul, **the prisoner** of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles."*

Ephesians 4:1

*"I, therefore, **the prisoner** for the Lord, urge you to live worthily of the calling with which you have been called."*

Philippians 1:7

*"For it is right for me to think this about all of you, because I have you in my heart, since both in **my imprisonment** and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel all of you became partners in God's grace together with me."*

Philippians 1:13-14

12 I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that my situation has actually turned out to advance the gospel:

*13 The whole imperial guard and everyone else knows that **I am in prison** for the sake of Christ,*

*14 and most of the brothers and sisters, having confidence in the Lord because of **my imprisonment**, now more than ever dare to speak the word fearlessly.*

Philemon 1:9-10

*9 I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love—I, Paul, an old man and even now **a prisoner** for the sake of Christ Jesus—*

*10 I am appealing to you concerning my child, whose spiritual father I have become during **my imprisonment**, that is, Onesimus.*

2 Timothy 1:8

*“So do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord or of me, **a prisoner** for his sake, but by God’s power accept your share of suffering for the gospel.”*

2 Timothy 1:16

*“May the Lord grant mercy to the family of Onesiphorus, because he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of **my imprisonment**.”*

2 Timothy 1:8-10

8 Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David; such is my gospel,

*9 for which I suffer hardship to the point of **imprisonment** as a criminal, but God’s message is not imprisoned!*

10 So I endure all things for the sake of those chosen by God, that they too may obtain salvation in Christ Jesus and its eternal glory.

In describing his ministry in **Ephesians 3:1**, Paul refers to himself as, “*the prisoner of Jesus Christ.*” The words are in a construction in the Greek which implies that it was Jesus Christ Himself who had made Paul a prisoner. Paul was awaiting trial before the Roman Emperor

Nero. But never once does he say that he is a prisoner of Rome or of Nero. He did not consider himself to be a prisoner of the Roman Empire, but the prisoner of Christ! In almost every reference to himself as a prisoner, Paul emphasizes the fact that, as a prisoner, he belongs to Jesus Christ. He was imprisoned because he was engaged in the service of Jesus Christ and it was for Christ's sake that he was being persecuted. Paul was a prisoner because of his connection with Christ, and for no other reason.

In a very real sense, Paul became the Lord's prisoner on the road to Damascus and he never sought to be free of that divine imprisonment. Yes, he was now a prisoner of the Roman Empire, but much more significantly, he was a prisoner of Christ. He was a prisoner of Christ voluntarily, which is the opposite of the world's definition of a prisoner! May it please Almighty God to give to every one of us a desire to be prisoners of Christ!

As he did in verse **19**, Paul again pleads in verse **20** for the intercession of the believers on his behalf: *"Pray that I may be able to speak boldly as I ought to speak."* The phrase *"speak boldly,"* is the translation of a Greek word which means, "to bear oneself boldly or confidently; to use freedom in speaking; to speak freely; to grow confident, have boldness, show assurance." The idea here is to speak out boldly regardless of what might happen.

The phrase, *"as I ought to speak,"* refers **not** to what is **optional** but to what is necessary. It refers to an **inward** constraint. This reminds us of Paul's farewell charge to Timothy in **2 Timothy 4:1-5**:

1 I solemnly charge you before God and Christ Jesus, who is going to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom:

2 Preach the message, be ready whether it is convenient or not, reprove, rebuke, exhort with complete patience and instruction.

3 For there will be a time when people will not tolerate sound teaching. Instead, following their own desires, they will accumulate teachers for themselves, because they have an insatiable curiosity to hear new things.

4 And they will turn away from hearing the truth, but on the other hand they will turn aside to myths.

5 You, however, be self-controlled in all things, endure hardship, do an evangelist's work, fulfill your ministry.
(New English Translation).

Earlier, he had written the following solemn words to the Corinthian believers: *“For if I preach the gospel, I have no reason for boasting, because **I am compelled to do this**. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!”* **(1 Corinthians 9:16 New English Translation)**

Brothers and sisters, I believe that there is a sense in which every believer is called to act as an ambassador for Jesus Christ, representing the interests of the Kingdom of heaven on the earth. In **2 Corinthians 5:17-20** we read the following:

17 So then, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; what is old has passed away—look, what is new has come!

18 And all these things are from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and who has given us the ministry of reconciliation.

19 In other words, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting people's trespasses against them, and he has given us the message of reconciliation.

20 Therefore we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making his plea through us. We plead with you on Christ's behalf, “Be reconciled to God!”
(New English Translation)

While Paul is most likely referring to himself and his associates as ambassadors in this passage, clearly this “job description” applies to all believers. There is therefore a sense in which every single believer has been given the ministry of reconciliation and has been called to serve as an “ambassador for Christ!” As “new creations” of God, believers have a new calling. Their assignment is to declare the **message** of reconciliation and to perform the **ministry** of reconciliation. And their assignment is to be carried out with a sense of urgency and compassion. The amazing truth is that God has already reconciled sinners to Himself by virtue of the sacrifice of His Son. It is the responsibility of His ambassadors to persuade sinners to be reconciled to God. As God’s ambassadors, believers are to plead with lost humanity to accept His Son and His great work of salvation. This is “**The Great Commission.**”

Brothers and sisters, ambassadors of Christ will not always be welcomed in this present world, for the world is for the most part radically opposed to the message of the gospel. Our Lord informed us of this in **John 15:18-21**. The **New English Translation** renders the passage as follows:

18 “If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me first.

19 If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. However, because you do not belong to the world, but I chose you out of the world, for this reason the world hates you.

20 Remember what I told you, ‘A slave is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they obeyed my word, they will obey yours too.

21 But they will do all these things to you on account of my name, because they do not know the one who sent me.

Ray Stedman asks, “Why do we send ambassadors?” And he answers, “Well, because countries do not always relate to each other very well. Things need to be explained, need to be approached with diplomacy and caution and carefulness. That is what an ambassador is to do. He is to

be a representative of a government, handling himself with such care and confidence that the message that his government seeks to convey is given in the most painless and least offensive way possible. Now that is dangerous. You can get yourself killed or taken captive as an ambassador in this world today."

Brothers and sisters, whether we are welcomed or persecuted, loved or hated, accepted or rejected, our duty as those who have been reconciled to God is to speak to others on God's behalf, telling them that they do not have to remain alienated from Him. As His ambassadors we are given the authority, privilege and power to speak for Him, and we are to speak as if God were speaking through us. As we carry out our ambassadorial duties however, it is critical for us to remember that even though we are representing the greatest of all monarchs and the greatest of all Kingdoms, we have not been given the power of independent action. We are merely the proclaimers of the gospel message; we are not the creators of the message and we have no authority to alter it.

Let us pray for all God's ambassadors and let us ask for prayers for ourselves, so that we may effectively represent our great Sovereign and His great Kingdom.