Put On the New Man

1. This I say therefore, and testify in the Lord, that ye henceforth walk not as other

men, in the vanity of their minds.

2. Having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through

the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart:

3. Who being past feeling "have given themselves over unto lasciviousness, to work

all uncleanness with greediness.

4. But ye have not so learned Christ;

5. If so be that ye have heard him, and have been taught by him, according to the

truth which is in Jesus;

6. That you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows old

according to corrupt desires;

7. And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true

holiness.
A person cannot earn salvation by being good or doing good.

The Bible tells us that before faith in Christ, we were dead in our sins (Eph. 2:1). This is true of all humanity. Regardless of how upright a person might appear, he or she cannot escape this indictment of deadness. Apart from Christ, we are dead in our sins—not sick, not dying, but dead.

But God, because of His love for us, makes us alive with Christ. Salvation is by God’s grace apart from our good works, “it is God’s gift—not from works, so that no one can boast” (Eph. 2:8-9).

Jesus Himself said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). Jesus is waiting for you now.

- **Admit** to God that you are a sinner. Repent, turning from your sin.
- **By faith receive** Jesus Christ as God’s Son and accept Jesus’ gift of forgiveness. He took the penalty for your sin by dying on the cross.
- **Confess** your faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Pray similar to this as you call on God to save you: “Dear God, I know that You love me. I confess my sin and need of salvation. I turn from my sin and place my faith in Jesus as my Savior and Lord. In Jesus’ name, amen.”

After you have prayed to receive Jesus Christ, tell a pastor or another Christian about your decision. Show your faith in Christ by being baptized by immersion in a local church as a public expression of your faith.
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*Evangelistic Emphasis
THE WRITER: IN MEMORIAM

Kendell H. Easley, writer of this issue’s studies in the Book of Ephesians, went home to be with the Lord on January 28, 2019, after an extended battle with leukemia and related illnesses. Frequently sought out to write for LifeWay’s Bible study resources and scholarly Christian materials over several decades, Dr. Easley retired in 2018 as professor of biblical studies and the director of graduate programs for Union University’s School of Theology and Missions in Germantown, Tennessee. He was a consummate yet humble family man, teacher, pastor, New Testament scholar, and writer. To careful readers of this issue of the Commentary, these virtues shine through like sparkling gems alongside his foremost virtue—an all-encompassing love for his God and Savior, Jesus Christ.
Often people will say to us, “Good luck!” You don’t have to be around me for very long to discover that I only believe in luck if it stands for Living Under Christ’s Knowledge! As followers of Jesus, we have something better than luck; we enjoy the blessings of Almighty God. In Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians, we discover some of the richest blessings that are ours as saints—we discover what it means to be “in Christ.”

Paul was in prison when he wrote Ephesians, but he knew that the Word of God cannot be bound. The decrees of ancient rulers of Paul’s day and time are forgotten today, but a letter written from a prisoner of Rome almost two thousand years ago is being read and studied by millions of people around the world in the 21st century.

The Bible is still the world’s most-read book. Although it was recorded by more than forty men over a span of 1,600 years writing in three languages, it has one central theme: God’s loving redemption of fallen humanity. This theme is reflected in Ephesians.

As you study this letter, I pray that God will revitalize you and bring revival to you and to your church congregation.

David O. Dykes

David Orlo Dykes has served as pastor of Green Acres Baptist Church in Tyler, Texas since 1991. He is a graduate of Samford University, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and completed post-doctoral study at Cambridge University, Cambridge, England. He has written sixteen Christian living books including Handling Life’s Disappointments; No, That’s NOT in the Bible; Finding Peace in Your Pain; and Pastor David’s Travel Guide to Heaven. In addition, he is completing a trilogy of novels that are set in Israel. Writing as David Orlo, he has published The Cloud Strike Prophecy and The Jerusalem Protocol. The Masada Proposal is scheduled for publication in late 2019.
INTRODUCTION TO EPHESIANS

According to much popular culture these days, being spiritual is in vogue. Being connected to a church, however, is thought by many to be old-fashioned at best and harmful at worst. Have you ever heard someone say, “Oh, I believe in God and Jesus; I just don’t believe in the church.” How could such an unbiblical attitude have arisen?

Far too many people have had traumatic church experiences throughout the years. Perhaps a once trusted church leader fell into serious moral failure or, worse, committed a crime and was arrested. Maybe some longstanding Christian friendships were ruined by malicious gossip. Yet there is good news concerning the church, if we will only pay attention to the New Testament teachings about the church. In this regard, Ephesians may be the best Bible book to help us understand God’s creation of the church and His plan to display His glory in Christ through the church forever (see Eph. 3:21).

The apostle Paul loved the church. After many years as a traveling gospel evangelist and church planter, Paul’s teachings about what the church is (the doctrine of the church) and what churches are to do (the practice of the church) came together brilliantly in his Letter to the Ephesians. In our journey through these thirteen studies, we will be reminded that the church is God’s masterpiece that was conceived in eternity and manifested in history through Jesus Christ, the Savior and Lord of the church. We will discover that those who think they no longer need the church have seriously misunderstood the church. We might even become God’s instruments for helping some of them reengage as active worshipers and participants in the life of a growing Christian congregation.

WRITER AND PLACE OF WRITING

Ephesians is one of thirteen epistles, or letters, in the New Testament written by Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ. Before his conversion to faith in Christ, Paul—known as Saul at the time—was a devout Jew and a member of the Jewish sect known as the Pharisees [FEHR uh seez]. As such, he despised the early Christian movement with its central claim that Jesus was the promised Messiah. He was so zealously opposed to the movement that he led efforts to persecute Christ’s followers by arresting, jailing, and even executing believers. Then one day while he was traveling to Damascus for the purpose of arresting known believers in that city, Paul encountered the risen Lord Jesus and was dramatically converted to faith. Christ later sent a believer in Damascus named Ananias to inform Paul that he would become Christ’s “chosen instrument” (Acts 9:15) to take the gospel message to both Jews and Gentiles throughout the Roman Empire.
Paul later engaged in several missionary journeys in which he and other Christian evangelists planted churches in numerous cities across the Roman world, including Ephesus. Ephesus was the leading city in the Roman province of Asia Minor (present-day western Turkey). Situated near the Aegean Sea, it was an important economic hub of both land and sea trade routes. In the chronology of the Book of Acts, Paul first visited Ephesus near the end of his second missionary journey (Acts 18:19-21). He spent a brief time teaching and debating with Jews in the synagogue. Then he departed the city, leaving behind two of his coworkers (Aquila and Priscilla) and promising to return if God willed.

Paul did indeed return to Ephesus during his third missionary journey and spent more than two years successfully evangelizing in the area (Acts 19:1-10). A number of other important events in Paul’s life and ministry occurred during this time as well, including exorcisms, imprisonments, and beatings (19:11-41; see also 2 Cor. 1:8-10). His heartfelt love and concern for the church in Ephesus was on display later when he met with the Ephesian church leaders while traveling to Jerusalem (Acts 20:17-38) and when he still later dispatched Timothy to Ephesus to help the church confront false teachers (see 1 Tim. 1:3-4).

Paul wrote the Letter to the Ephesians while in prison (see Eph. 6:20). Although he suffered imprisonment for the faith on a number of occasions, he probably wrote Ephesians during his first imprisonment in Rome, described in Acts 28:30-31 as a two-year period of house arrest during which he continued to meet with visitors and proclaim the gospel. Many Bible scholars believe that Paul eventually was released from that imprisonment; spent another year or two strengthening churches in places such as Crete, Ephesus, and Macedonia; was imprisoned in Rome a second time; and finally was executed at the Roman emperor’s command (see 2 Tim. 4:6-8).

RECIPIENTS

As mentioned previously, the gospel took root in Ephesus and the surrounding region during Paul’s third missionary journey. The Lord blessed the apostle’s work there, and both Jews and Gentiles were converted. The believers probably met regularly in house churches at that time, although Acts 19:9 reveals that Paul used “the lecture hall of Tyrannus” as a place for outreach and public discussions concerning the kingdom of God. Congregations such as those in Colossae and Laodicea may have grown out of Paul’s ministry in Ephesus.

Because the words “at Ephesus” are absent from Ephesians 1:1 in some of the oldest New Testament manuscripts, some Bible scholars conclude that Paul originally sent Ephesians as an epistle to be circulated among several churches in the area, starting with the church at Ephesus. If correct, then
this proposal could account for the few references to individual believers in the epistle as well as for Paul’s emphasis on the universal church and his comment that he had only heard of the recipients’ Christian faith (Eph. 1:15).

DATE AND OCCASION

Much Christian tradition supports that Paul wrote the Letter to the Ephesians during his first imprisonment in Rome, which probably occurred around AD 61. Some, if not many, of the letter’s first recipients likely had been converted to the Christian faith some eight years earlier—that is, during Paul’s lengthy ministry in Ephesus on the third missionary journey. The epistle reflects that Paul was writing for the most part to mature believers.

Unlike most of Paul’s epistles, the Letter to the Ephesians does not reveal that Paul at the time had urgent concerns about the presence of false teachings or unChristian behavior among the recipients. (Those concerns would appear later, however, in Paul’s two letters to Timothy.) There is little direct or even implied correction offered in Ephesians. What, then, prompted Paul to write Ephesians? One view is that Paul had just previously sent a letter to the church in nearby Colossae in which he confronted and corrected false teachings about Christ. He then concluded that he needed to expand the doctrinal teachings of the Colossians letter (particularly regarding the church as Christ’s body) and send the new epistle (Ephesians) to churches throughout the area, beginning with the church at Ephesus.

MESSAGE AND STRUCTURE

The central message in Ephesians is that the church is the body of Christ; thus, Christ alone is the head (Lord) of the church. Christ provided salvation for believers through His death and resurrection. The risen Lord has therefore spiritually positioned believers “in the heavens” (2:6) as heirs of His eternal blessings. As such, believers are to live while on earth in a manner worthy of their calling (4:1), whether in their church relationships, family relationships, or in their contacts with unbelievers in their communities.

The structure of Ephesians follows a typical four-part organization found in first-century letters: a greeting (1:1-2); a word of thanksgiving (1:3-23); the main body of the letter (2:1–6:20); and a closing salutation (6:21-24). Another way to understand the Letter to the Ephesians, however, is to recognize its two major sections—a doctrinal section followed by an application section. In Ephesians 1–3, Paul focused primarily on communicating mature Christian teachings regarding Christ, the church, and salvation. In chapters 4–6, he expounded the implications of those teachings for Christian living. Christian belief was to inform and guide Christian conduct in all areas of life.
OUTLINE OF EPHESIANS

I. A New Life (Eph. 1:1–3:21)
   A. Greeting (Eph. 1:1-2)
   B. The Purpose of Christ (Eph. 1:3-14)
   C. Paul’s First Prayer (Eph. 1:15-23)
   D. Salvation Through Grace (Eph. 2:1-10)
   E. Unity Restored (Eph. 2:11-22)
   F. Mystery Revealed (Eph. 3:1-13)
   G. Paul’s Second Prayer (Eph. 3:14-21)

II. A New Walk (Eph. 4:1–6:24)
   A. Walk Worthy (Eph. 4:1-16)
   B. A New Self (Eph. 4:17-32)
   C. Imitators of God (Eph. 5:1-21)
   D. Right Relationships (Eph. 5:22–6:9)
   E. Readied for Warfare (Eph. 6:10-20)
   F. Closing (Eph. 6:21-24)
Rejoice

God chose to provide the blessings of salvation through Jesus’ sacrifice.

Both of my parents were devout Christians. I recall from my earliest boyhood memories that we were fully involved in church life as a family. And I loved it. Church was a regular part of life’s rhythm for us. To this day, I cannot imagine my family not gathering together with other Christian families each week to worship the Lord and study the Scriptures.

One aspect of corporate worship that I enjoyed a lot as a boy was congregational singing. As soon as I learned to read, Mom let me hold a hymnal for myself. She opened it to the right song number and pointed with her finger until I learned how to follow the stanzas. It was a great day when I no longer needed her help to join along in singing “Count Your Blessings”—one of my favorite congregational hymns.

In worship, I did my best in a childlike way to thank God for my many blessings. I would bring to mind my family, our house, and our adequate supply of food and clothes. Then I thought about the blessings of church and school. I was also grateful for Jesus, and I offered Him thanks as the source of all my blessings.

I think the apostle Paul might have enjoyed singing this great hymn about counting one’s blessings. I think this because Paul emphasized God’s blessings to believers so vividly in the opening chapter of Ephesians. As we delve into the study of Ephesians 1:3-14 in this session, Paul’s words will lead us to rejoice over the great spiritual blessings we receive from Christ in salvation. Let’s be sure to count those blessings and name them one by one!

Understand the Context

Ephesians 1:1-14

Most of Paul’s New Testament epistles follow a typical letter-writing format of the first century, consisting of four parts: an opening salutation, a word
of thanksgiving, the main body, and a closing salutation or list of greetings. In his opening salutation to Ephesians (1:1-2), Paul identified himself as “an apostle of Christ Jesus by God’s will” (1:1). Establishing his apostolic role and authority would lay an important foundation for calling on the recipients to accept his teachings in the main body of the letter. Next, he identified the recipients as “the faithful saints in Christ Jesus at Ephesus” (1:1). As mentioned in the book introduction, some of the earliest New Testament manuscripts do not have the words “at Ephesus” in this verse. While this fact might suggest the epistle was originally meant to be circulated among several churches in the region, the Ephesian congregation no doubt would have been the foremost among them. Finally, Paul expressed a prayer-wish for the recipients of “grace to you and peace from God ... and the Lord Jesus Christ” (1:2). The phrase “grace and peace” was a common salutation in the Greco-Roman world, but Paul used it with an intentional Christian meaning.

After the opening salutation, Paul launched into an extended message of thanksgiving or blessing (1:3-23). This session focuses only on the first segment of the thanksgiving, verses 3-14. This segment is often described as a doxology in which Paul’s gratitude is centered on God and expressed in words of praise to Him. As such, the doxology serves as an act of worship in which both Paul and his readers participate. From a literary perspective, the doxology is unusual in that verses 3-14 comprise one long, complex sentence in the Greek text. English Bible translations tend to organize the verses into several sentences for ease of reading, but readers should keep in mind that the doxology was a literary diamond with many multicolored facets, all of which fit together seamlessly into one magnificent hymn of praise.

Four themes can be identified that form the doxology’s framework:

- **The Trinity, or Triune Godhead.** From his Judaistic conviction that God is One, Paul had come to understand that the one God existed in three Persons—the Father, the Son (Jesus Christ), and the Holy Spirit. Paul expressed the doxology in verses 3-14 in that conviction. Indeed, one outline of the doxology proceeds in this manner: the Father has blessed us (1:3); the Son has blessed us (1:4-12); and the Spirit has blessed us (1:13-14).
- **The centrality of Jesus Christ.** The bulk of the doxology focuses on who Christ is and what He has accomplished on behalf of believers—whether Jews or Gentiles.
- **God’s eternal plan of salvation throughout past, present, and future.** Salvation from sin through faith in Christ was God’s plan “before the foundation of the world” (1:4), “for the right time” (1:10), and “until the redemption of the possession” (1:14) in the future.
- **Important theological terms and concepts.** Paul expected his recipients to grasp the essential meaning of terms such as predestination, redemption,
adoption, and salvation. We will do well as believers in the twenty-first century to understand these terms and concepts as well.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

CHosen (Eph. 1:3-6)

Paul began his doxology with a statement that believers have received God’s wonderful blessings. One of these blessings is being chosen by the heavenly Father to be adopted as His spiritual children.

verse 3

Blessed is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavens in Christ.

When people say they have been blessed, they often mean they have received a good thing (or things) from someone for which they are glad. The Scriptures emphasize, however, that true blessings ultimately come from God. Interestingly, Paul began his thanksgiving doxology by declaring that God also is blessed. But how can this be if God is the source of blessings? The answer to this question likely is to be resolved by recognizing that in the case of God, the phrase blessed is can also be understood as “praise be to [God]” (see NIV). The Greek term rendered blessed literally means “to be well spoken of” and is the basis of our English word eulogy. In the sense that we as believers can bless God, we do so by praising Him—by saying true and wonderful things about Him.

Paul began his doxology of praise by calling attention to God as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul was calling on believers from both Jewish and Gentile backgrounds to confess and praise God’s true nature. Jewish believers needed to acknowledge that the one true God existed in three Persons—Father, Son, and Spirit. Gentile believers needed to affirm that the three Persons of the Godhead are not separate, multiple gods as they had believed in their pagan backgrounds but are indeed one, and only one, true and living God.

Paul praised the Son by intentionally describing Him as the Lord Jesus Christ. The title Lord emphasized the Son’s deity and sovereignty. The name Jesus, while emphasizing the Son’s humanity, also called to mind His mission as the Savior. The Greek name Jesus is a form of the Hebrew name Joshua, meaning “the Lord saves.” The title Christ is the Greek form of the Hebrew word Messiah, a reference to the divinely anointed Deliverer who was promised through the Old Testament prophets (see Dan. 9:24-27).
Paul explained that it is **in Christ**—that is, by being saved through faith in Him—that God blesses believers with **every spiritual blessing**. Paul likely was emphasizing at this point the blessings of salvation (which he detailed in Eph. 1:4-14), not material blessings such as houses, lands, or possessions. Further, he located these spiritual blessings **in the heavens** (“in heavenly places,” KJV; “in the heavenly realms,” NIV). This turn of phrase, found only in Ephesians and perhaps coined by Paul, may be a reference to God’s sphere of divine reality. At the least it points to God as the source of our best and most important blessings.

**VERSE 4**

**For he chose us in him, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and blameless in love before him.**

The first spiritual blessing Paul mentioned in his doxology is that God **chose** believers in Christ **before the foundation of the world**. God’s plan to create a faithful, holy, redeemed people through the Son was in God’s mind even prior to the creation of the world as described in Genesis 1–2. Paul’s emphasis in Ephesians 1:4 was on God’s sovereignty and initiative. The letter’s recipients who were Jewish Christians would have understood and affirmed the concept of God’s sovereign election, for the Old Testament Scriptures overflow with references to the Israelites as God’s chosen people (see Deut. 7:6-8).

The phrase **to be holy and blameless** is best understood not as a basis of but rather a result of God’s choice. That is, God did not choose as His people those who already were **holy and blameless**. Rather, He determined beforehand that people’s believing in Christ would result in their transformation from being sinful and lost to being set apart and right with God. Apart from Christ, we are unholy, deserving only of God’s wrath. Through faith in Christ, however, we are forgiven and set free from sin’s bondage so that we can live in obedience to the one true and living God, our Creator. Thus, Paul specified that in Christ believers have been made fit to stand **before him**.

In the Greek text, the phrase **in love** appears following, not preceding, the words **before him**. Since the oldest biblical manuscripts did not contain chapter and verse markings or formal punctuation, New Testament scholars have debated whether Paul intended the phrase **in love** to go with verse 4 (KJV; CSB) or to introduce verse 5 (ESV; NIV). If it goes with verse 4, then Paul meant that God’s plan included the believer’s holy living being energized by Christlike love (Greek, *agape* [ah GAH pay]). If the phrase was meant to introduce verse 5, then Paul was emphasizing that love motivated God to sovereignly choose to create a holy people for Himself through Christ.
VERSE 5

He predestined us to be adopted as sons through Jesus Christ for himself, according to the good pleasure of his will,

Few theological concepts have stirred more intense debate among Christians in modern times than that of predestination. The Greek term rendered predestined is the combination of a prefix meaning “before” and a word meaning “to establish boundaries or limits.” (The term also appears in Acts 4:28; Rom. 8:29,30; 1 Cor 2:7; and Eph. 1:11.) Literally, the word rendered predestined means “marked out beforehand.” The question that believers have debated surrounding this concept is whom or what God marked out beforehand in regard to His plan of salvation. At the same time, most evangelical Christians agree on these crucial points: (1) God sovereignly took the initiative in providing the one and only way of salvation for sinners in Christ; (2) All human beings are sinners and can receive salvation only by trusting in Jesus Christ; and (3) All who genuinely believe in Christ become part of God’s redeemed people now and forever.

The third area of agreement points to Paul’s emphasis in Ephesians 1:5 that the divine choice marked out beforehand included believers’ being adopted as sons through Jesus Christ. Adoption is a wonderful aspect of salvation. Both Romans 8:15 and Galatians 4:5-6 emphasize the resulting relationship believers have with God, a relationship by which they receive the right to call Him Abba, an Aramaic term of familial affection similar to the English term Daddy. Jesus used Abba to plead with the heavenly Father in His prayer in Gethsemane (Mark 14:36).

Thus, not only do we as believers enjoy the blessing of being graciously chosen by God in Christ, we also are adopted into His family. His plan was to accomplish this through Jesus Christ, His eternal Son. Further, God’s plan for a family consisting of children from “every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9) was based on what He joyfully desired; it was a matter of the good pleasure of his will. This is what pleased God, so He decided it.

VERSE 6

to the praise of his glorious grace that he lavished on us in the Beloved One.

God’s glorious grace is on full display in His purpose. Spiritual blessings are ultimately not for our praise but God’s. Believers who have received God’s grace, His unmerited favor, will be praising Him eternally. Further, Paul exclaimed that God’s display of grace in saving sinners was not stingy but lavish. In union with Christ, whom God loves perfectly and eternally, believers receive all of these amazing blessings.
Paul’s attention moved from the Father’s sovereign initiative in eternity past to the Son’s work on the cross in human history to secure salvation. Our redemption through Christ grants us the blessings of forgiveness, spiritual enlightenment, and an eternal inheritance.

VERSE 7

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace

Sinners are made fit to belong to God’s family only by redemption through Christ’s shed blood. People in Paul’s day knew about the practice of being redeemed from a life of slavery. Gaining one’s freedom was not easy; neither was it cheap. Redemption usually came through the payment of a costly price—a price that slaves usually could not pay for themselves.

For believers of Jewish heritage, redemption also brought to mind the Israelites’ exodus from Egyptian slavery (Ex. 15:13; Deut. 7:8) and the dramatic annual remembrance of that event in the Passover festival. In the Passover ritual, the sacrifice of an unblemished animal as a sin offering foreshadowed Jesus’ atoning death on the cross as the sinless Lamb of God who “purchased people for God” by His shed blood (Rev. 5:9). Paul’s reference to Christ’s blood was his way of summarizing everything that Christ accomplished in His suffering and violent death on the cross.

From what did Christ’s death set us free as believers? Paul focused on our bondage to sin. Sin was an unbearably heavy debt that we could neither repay nor escape. Jesus Christ freely gave Himself to die—taking the consequences of our sin for us—so that those who trust in His provision gain the forgiveness of our trespasses. The term rendered trespasses (“sins,” KJV; NIV) refers to stepping across (hence, trespassing) God’s moral boundary lines. This is one of several New Testament words for sin, looked at from a variety of angles.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Predestination” on pages 1294–1296 in the Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded. How is the reality of predestination a blessing for believers? How does God’s taking the initiative in saving believers keep us from pride and boasting?
The spiritual blessings of redemption and forgiveness come to believers as a result of God’s wonderful grace. Paul was rightly overwhelmed by God’s generosity—as we all should be. He pointed out that these blessings are based in God’s riches. There is no shortage of undeserved favor with God!

VERSE 8

that he richly poured out on us with all wisdom and understanding.

Paul previously noted God’s overflowing grace in providing for the believer’s adoption as a child of God (Eph. 1:6). Here Paul echoed that theme, emphasizing God’s overflowing grace that he richly poured out on the believer in providing redemption and forgiveness. Further, God has given Christians the spiritual enlightenment they need to continue the journey of living as His redeemed people. He has bestowed on believers the wisdom and understanding they need. This bestowal does not come as a one-time, supernatural knowledge dump. Rather, the gifts of wisdom and understanding come as believers grow spiritually in the life of holiness. As Christians mature in faith, the Spirit increasingly gives us the ability to understand God’s ways and to apply His truth wisely in everyday situations.

VERSE 9

He made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he purposed in Christ

Paul next considered an aspect of divine wisdom that God had not previously revealed fully through the Old Testament prophets or through Scripture. Paul referred to this fresh revelation from God as the mystery of his will. The apostle used the term rendered mystery six times in Ephesians (1:9; 3:3,4,9; 5:32; 6:19). That which formerly was veiled and hidden—God’s plan for saving sinners—was now an open secret. God had revealed it according to his good pleasure that he purposed in Christ. Paul was building up to a big reveal for the recipients of his letter, a reveal that comes in the next verse.

VERSE 10

as a plan for the right time—to bring everything together in Christ, both things in heaven and things on earth in him.

God’s previously undisclosed plan would not be unveiled fully until the right time (“the fullness of time,” ESV; “when the times reach their fulfillment,” NIV). In other words, God was (and is) steering human history toward
a grand goal. Time is neither random nor circular. God’s wonderful goal will be fully accomplished at a time Paul could not specify but could declare with certainty would result in bringing **everything together in Christ, both things in heaven and things on earth.**

God’s plan of redemption is for the creation to one day be restored as a new heaven and earth in right relationship with its Creator and in harmony with one another. This restoration and harmony can only happen **in Christ**—that is, by being united to Him in faith and submitting to His lordship. The Greek verb rendered *bring... together* was a mathematical term that describes finding the sum of a column of numbers. As believers, we might not understand why things happen in life as they do. Some things might not add up to our expectations. One day, however, we will recognize that in Christ life adds up for our good and His glory just as God intended.

**VERSE 11**

**In him we have also received an inheritance, because we were predestined according to the plan of the one who works out everything in agreement with the purpose of his will,**

As Paul reflected on the glorious future when all things will be summed up in Christ, he thought of the future of believers in particular. We have already received an inheritance that is not yet fully realized. As God’s children through faith in Christ, we will one day come into full understanding of the joys of eternity.

Just as God decided before the world began that believers would become holy and blameless in Christ (1:4), even so He **predestined** their receiving an inheritance. Paul emphasized again that God was (and is) working out His plan centered in Christ. He actively works out everything so that His plan most assuredly will be accomplished. The apostle was not denying the reality of evil or the role of human responsibility. Rather, he was stressing that God cannot be stopped from bringing about the ultimate **purpose of his will.**

**EXPLORE FURTHER**

Read the article titled “Redeem, Redemption, Redeemer” on page 1339 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded.* How does understanding redemption in its Old Testament setting enrich our understanding of salvation in Christ? What is the connection for you between being redeemed and the forgiveness of your sins?
VERE 12

so that we who had already put our hope in Christ might bring praise to his glory.

The Gospels are clear that Jesus’ earthly ministry was focused primarily on the Jews (see Matt. 15:24). Just as clear, however, is the fact that the risen Christ commissioned His followers to make disciples of all people groups, Jews and Gentiles (Matt. 28:19). Thus, it was neither snobbery nor boasting that Paul referred to the first (Jewish) Christians as we who had already put our hope in Christ. The Greek verb rendered had already put ... hope can also mean “to be the first to hope.”

Why had God sent prophecies about the coming of the Messiah to the people of Israel? Why had some Jewish people put their hope in Jesus? It was so that His people might bring praise to his glory (see Eph. 1:6). God chose Abraham and worked out His plan for the people of Israel so that the world could recognize God’s great glory when His people praised Him (Isa. 43:21).

EXPLORE FURTHER

God’s glory refers to His fame or splendor on display for His creatures to recognize and honor (see Eph. 1:6,12,14,17,18; 3:16,21.) His glory is displayed in believers as a result of the transformation He accomplishes in us (see Eph. 3:13). In what ways are you now displaying God’s glory?

SEALED (Eph. 1:13-14)

VERSE 13

In him you also were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and when you believed.

Here Paul included Gentile Christians (you also) alongside Jewish believers as recipients of God’s blessings in salvation. These benefits began to unfold at a specific time that Paul could identify: when you heard the word of truth. Paul may have been referring to the years he spent evangelizing in Ephesus and the surrounding region (see Acts 19:8-10). When people heard the gospel message proclaimed and responded by believing in Jesus, they were at that moment sealed with the promised Holy Spirit.

In Paul’s day, a seal was a visible mark of ownership and authenticity. Letters often were sealed with a wax imprint of the sender’s family crest.
Slaves often bore a brand or scar indicating who owned them. While such seals were external, God’s seal on His people is internal, of the heart. The divine seal, in fact, is God’s indwelling presence in the Person of the Holy Spirit. There is no more identifiable mark on the believer’s life than the Spirit.

By way of review, consider the following:

- In Christ, believers receive every spiritual blessing (Eph. 1:3).
- In Christ, believers were chosen before the world began (1:4).
- In Christ, God’s grace has been given freely (1:6).
- In Christ, believers have received redemption and forgiveness (1:7).
- In Christ, God will one day bring all things together in unity (1:10).
- In Christ, believers receive an eternal inheritance (1:11).
- In Christ, believers have hope (1:12).
- In Christ, believers are sealed with the Spirit (1:13).

VERSE 14

The Holy Spirit is the down payment of our inheritance, until the redemption of the possession, to the praise of his glory.

Paul extended his explanation of believers’ being blessed with the Spirit as a seal of our salvation. The Spirit also is the down payment of our inheritance. The Greek term rendered down payment can also be translated as “earnest” (KJV), “guarantee” (ESV), or “deposit” (NIV). In financial terms, the word described an amount put aside to secure a larger, longer-term financial transaction.

Similarly, God’s gift of His ongoing presence in believers’ lives now is merely a foretaste of what we will receive when our inheritance as God’s redeemed children is fully complete. This will occur in the future when the redemption of the possession in Christ is fulfilled. In the meantime, we await Christ’s return with full assurance and hope because we enjoy the Spirit’s indwelling presence daily. In light of that blessing, we can join with Paul in exclaiming the praise of God’s glory in our words and actions.

EXPLORE FURTHER

In the article titled “Holy Spirit” in the Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded, read the section labeled “The Spirit as the One Who Applies the Work of Redemption” on pages 760–761. In addition to becoming the seal and down payment of salvation, what else does the Spirit accomplish in the believer’s life? How can you avoid hindering the Holy Spirit’s work in your life?
Remembered

God helps believers understand the riches and greatness of His calling on their lives.

Roy and Ella Brock, my maternal grandparents, married in 1921. After the wedding, they set off to make a life for themselves on a farm in southeastern Oklahoma, a sparsely populated area of the state. Granddaddy Roy had decided that he wanted to be a dairy farmer, knowing full well that it was hard work with no guarantee of success. Their farm had no electricity. Drinking water had to be drawn daily from a well. The cows had to be milked by hand twice a day every day, including on weekends and holidays. On Sunday mornings, Granddaddy learned to finish the first milking early enough so that the family could drive into town for the eleven o’clock church worship service.

The Brocks were just starting to get ahead financially when the Great Depression struck the nation in 1929. By that time, the couple also had three children to support, including the young girl who would grow up to marry my father and give birth to me. Mom remembers a time of having only one dress and pair of shoes for school days and a second, somewhat nicer, dress and pair of shoes for church. The family managed to survive the depression years and keep the farm in operation. Eventually, Granddaddy was able to buy the pasture land he had been leasing for his cows. Moreover, electricity arrived in southeastern Oklahoma after World War II ended, and my grandparents built a new farm house with indoor plumbing. Things were getting better for them financially, though they still had to live frugally.

When my grandparents passed away in the 1980s, none of their children wanted to operate the farm, so the land was sold. The heirs retained the mineral rights in the sale, however, and by doing so made what turned out to be a brilliant decision. A decade later, a petroleum company struck a rich gas deposit beneath the farmland. My mother and her two siblings started getting monthly royalty checks as heirs of the mineral rights. At family get-togethers through the years, the three of them often wished their parents had been aware of the pool of treasure lying beneath their feet.

The Brocks’ story could serve as a parable that illustrates the truths Paul emphasized in this session’s Bible passage. The apostle knew that the believers
he was addressing already had a deposit of immense spiritual wealth. He also knew that at least some of the Ephesians were unaware of their inheritance. As we study this passage, may we realize that, as believers, we too are heirs of spiritual riches beyond our imagination. Knowing this truth helps strengthen us to live faithfully and with great confidence as Christ’s followers.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

EPHESIANS 1:15-23

When Paul wrote the Letter to the Ephesians, the number of Christians in the region was likely only a fraction of the total population. Nevertheless, the apostle’s preaching ministry there had penetrated every level of society so that it could be said that “all the residents of Asia, both Jews and Greeks, heard the word of the Lord” (Acts 19:10).

Paul’s ministry in Ephesus eventually provoked hostile opposition from pagan priests and merchants who made money selling merchandise associated with the idolatrous religions. When adherents to these pagan religions became followers of Christ, they no longer participated in the temple rituals or purchased the idols and trinkets being sold. Their transformed lives—and resulting lifestyle changes—dramatically affected economic life in the city (see Acts 19:23-27). Moreover, after Paul moved on from Ephesus to work in other places, the Ephesian believers still had to live in a social setting that was increasingly hostile to their Christian faith.

Paul gave little indication in Ephesians that believers were facing severe persecution; however, he knew they were facing the same struggles that all believers do when living in a predominantly pagan culture. Paul therefore began his letter with an extended prayer on their behalf. He prayed especially that the believers might understand and embrace their spiritual benefits. The Bible passage for this session consists of the second part of Paul’s extended prayer-blessing.

When Paul wrote this thanksgiving and prayer for his first audience, he used the standard letter writing format of his time. We can observe other letters Paul wrote in which he used the same format. Some examples include Romans 1:8-10, 1 Corinthians 1:4-9, 1 Thessalonians 1:2-10, and 2 Thessalonians 1:3-12.

As we explore the conclusion of Paul’s prayer-blessing in Ephesians, we will dig deeply into its doctrinal meaning. What did Paul want the Ephesians (and us) to understand about God, salvation, and the greatness of Christ? Moreover, we will seek to apply Paul’s prayer to our lives today as believers.
Explore the Text

Knowledge of God (Eph. 1:15-17)

Paul expressed his sincere prayer for the letter’s recipients. He explained that he was constantly praying for them to know God better in their faith.

Verse 15

This is why, since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints,

In using the phrase this is why (“for this reason,” ESV; NIV), Paul affirmed that his doxology to God concerning the rich spiritual blessings of salvation in Christ (1:3-14) formed the basis of his forthcoming prayer for believers. In particular, the apostle was thinking about the blessing of being sealed with the Spirit as the down payment of the believer’s ultimate spiritual inheritance (1:13-14).

The words since I heard about raise a question concerning Paul’s relationship with the letter’s recipients. Did the apostle not have firsthand knowledge of many Ephesian believers? After all, Paul had spent more than two years proclaiming Christ in Ephesus and the surrounding region (Acts 19). There are three possible explanations for Paul’s language of having heard about the recipients’ spiritual reputation. First, the apostle may have heard that many new converts to the faith were now in the congregation—people who had become believers since his departure some five years earlier. Second, if Paul intended the letter to be read not only in Ephesus but also in churches throughout the surrounding region, then the likelihood was even greater that Paul was addressing numerous believers whom he had never met. Third, the words since I heard about may refer to Paul’s hearing reports of the Ephesian believers’ continuing, demonstrable spiritual growth.

Whatever the precise explanation, Paul was confident that two shining spiritual qualities characterized the letter’s recipients. First, he commended their faith in the Lord Jesus. They had come to Christ for salvation by believing in Him. Paul further developed the relationship between salvation and faith later in the letter (2:8-10). Second, Paul affirmed the recipients’ love for all the saints. Loving those whom God loves is the (super)natural result in a life transformed by God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ. The Greek word for love in this verse (agape [ah GAH pay]) refers to Christlike, self-giving, sacrificial love. It is more than having a good feeling about someone; it involves willingly taking action for someone’s well-being even at a cost to oneself. The Ephesian believers’ reputation for Christlike love was inclusive:
they demonstrated love for all the saints. The title saints refers to all believers, not to an elite group of Christians. All believers are saints in that they are set apart in Christ as God’s holy people in a fallen world.

**VERSE 16**

**I never stop giving thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers.**

The apostle described his prayer life with remarkable language. First, he used two related phrases: giving thanks and my prayers. An important foundation for our petitions to God on behalf of others is to begin by thanking Him for what He has done in our lives. Paul had done that very thing in his extended doxology (1:3-14). The term rendered prayers is a general term for earnest, devout speech directed toward God. It includes both praise and thanksgiving as well as entreaty.

The apostle described his prayers for the letter’s recipients as ongoing (I never stop). He used similar language near the end of the letter: “Pray at all times in the Spirit with every prayer and request” (6:18). Paul was practicing what he had taught the Thessalonians: “Pray constantly” (1 Thess. 5:17). Of course, Paul did other activities besides pray; however, his praying to God on behalf of other believers was a regular—daily—practice. Further, Paul likely maintained an attitude of prayer throughout the day, regularly expressing prayerful thoughts to the heavenly Father.

Consider also that Paul prayed intelligently for believers (as I remember you). To the extent that he was aware of some believers’ actual life circumstances, he brought before God those specific concerns. Moreover, having lived in Ephesus for a time, Paul was aware of certain cultural challenges that all of the letter’s recipients faced.

**VERSE 17**

**I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, would give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him.**

One specific need that believers everywhere and at all times have is the need to keep on growing in their faith-relationship with God. Thus, Paul prayed for the recipients of his Ephesians letter in this regard. He made clear in the wording of his intercession that Christian prayer invokes the presence and work of the Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The Christian doctrine of prayer asserts that ‘every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, who does not change
like shifting shadows” (Jas. 1:17). Paul affirmed this truth by addressing his prayer for the Ephesians to **the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father** (“the Father of glory,” KJV; ESV). All of the spiritual blessings described in Ephesians 1:3-14 have their source in the heavenly Father, and they are made available to believers only in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Jesus is the divine agent who brought the blessings of heaven to earth in sinless human form and who was offered as the perfect sacrifice on the cross for sinners’ forgiveness. It is **the Spirit** of God who then convicts sinners of their sins, draws them to repentance, makes them spiritually alive in Christ as they believe, and then seals believers forever by His indwelling presence in their lives.

Thus, Paul prayed that God in His triune nature would **give** the believers in Ephesus both wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of God. Wisdom, as mentioned in the previous session (see p. 16), generally refers to the capacity to apply God’s revealed truth appropriately in everyday situations. Wisdom is taking the right actions based on knowledge and understanding. Paul knew well that for believers, Christ Himself is “the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:24). Such wisdom is beyond mere human comprehension; apart from the Holy Spirit’s indwelling presence, such wisdom is always beyond us.

Second, Paul wanted believers to grow, with the Spirit’s help, in revelation in the knowledge of God. To know God in Christ refers to more than knowing a set of facts. Without question we need to know the facts about God—hence the crucial role of the Scriptures. However, knowledge in the sense Paul interceded for on behalf of believers goes beyond intellectual facts to relationship. The apostle wanted his letter’s recipients to grow in their faith-relationship with their Creator (Father), Redeemer (Son), and Sustainer (Spirit). We would do well as readers of Paul’s letter today to pray as Paul did for ourselves and for one another in this same manner and to this end.

**EXPLORE FURTHER**

Review Ephesians 1:3-14 alongside this session’s passage and take note of the two forms in Paul’s prayer: praise and petition. How do you keep both forms present and balanced in your daily prayer life?

**HOPE OF GOD** (Eph. 1:18-19)

Paul stated that he prayed for believers to better understand their hope in Christ. He longed for the letter’s recipients to know the value of their inheritance and to recognize the demonstration of God’s power in their lives.
VERSE 18

I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened so that you may know what is the hope of his calling, what is the wealth of his glorious inheritance in the saints,

In the New Testament, the term heart almost never refers to the physical organ that pumps blood throughout the body. Rather, the word is used figuratively to describe the center of a person’s true being—where one’s will and affections reside. Paul was therefore speaking metaphorically when he referred to the eyes of your heart. (The phrase appears only here in the Bible.) When our physical eyes function as intended, they help us become aware of our surroundings. They help us walk without stumbling over obstacles or wandering into dangerous situations. Similarly, when our spiritual eyes function properly, we become aware of spiritual realities.

Further, just as sunlight and other types of light enable our physical eyes to see what is in front of us, the indwelling Spirit of God empowers believers to know the truth about God and His ways. The Greek verb rendered enlightened implies that God provides the necessary spiritual light to enable believers to know (intellectually and by experience) crucial spiritual truths in their everyday experience. Paul identified three areas in which he prayed for the Spirit to enlighten the believers in Ephesus.

The first insight the apostle wanted Christians to experience was the hope of his calling. Biblical hope is not a vague wish; rather, it refers to objective certainty about something still in the future (Rom. 8:25). Hope endures along with faith and love (1 Cor. 13:13). The specific hope that Paul wanted believers to base their lives on was God’s calling in salvation. Paul noted in other writings that believers are called “into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1:9); are called “as saints” (Rom. 1:7); and are called “to be free” from legalism to serve others in love (Gal. 5:13). In other words, when God calls people to repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus, He calls them to a new life filled with enduring hope.

The second insight the apostle prayed that believers would know by experience was the wealth (‘riches,” KJV; ESV; NIV) of his glorious inheritance in the saints. The words his glorious inheritance could describe either an inheritance that God (or Christ) receives (a redeemed, holy family) or an inheritance that God (or Christ) provides to His redeemed family. In light of Paul’s similar expression of this idea in Colossians 1:12, the second description is more likely his meaning. In other words, Paul wanted the Ephesian saints to live confidently in their faith whatever the circumstances, knowing for sure that they would one day receive a spiritual inheritance beyond compare (see Rom. 8:18).
VERSE 19

and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the mighty working of his strength.

The third insight Paul prayed that Christians would know by experience was the immeasurable greatness of God’s (or Christ’s) power. If God’s “calling” (Eph. 1:18) looked back to salvation past—that is, to the moment of a believer’s conversion (justification)—and “glorious inheritance” (1:18) looked forward to salvation future (glorification), then the reality of God’s great power focused on the believer’s salvation in the here and now (sanctification).

God’s sanctifying power in believers is limitless; it cannot be measured. He is the infinitely powerful Creator of the universe. Moreover, God’s power is intentionally and graciously made available to all who believe. Paul described evidence of God’s incomparable power in the subsequent verse, but before that he added another descriptor of God’s power. It is according to the mighty working of his strength—literally, “according to the energy of the might of His strength.” There are two destructive forces before which human beings are powerless: sin and death. We are mortal creatures, and so we die. We are also sinful creatures, and we cannot overcome sin on our own. In Christ, however, God’s power has overcome both sin and death. Through faith in Christ, we as believers can live in victory over sin and death.

As we have seen, Paul prayed for his letter’s recipients to grow in hope and power as they more fully understood and lived out their salvation in Christ. We do well to pray this prayer today for ourselves and for others. Most of us likely have barely scratched the surface in our understanding and experience of all that God has in mind for His redeemed people. May we pray for the Spirit to enlighten us with these glorious truths!

EXPLORE FURTHER

Why do you think Paul frequently combined multiple words meaning “power”? What outcomes did Paul have in mind for the letter’s first recipients? What outcomes might we expect in our own spiritual walk with the Lord Jesus as we utilize the gift of God’s immeasurable power?

POWER OF GOD (Eph. 1:20-23)

The apostle emphasized God’s power as demonstrated in Christ’s resurrection and exaltation. Paul further emphasized that the same divine power secures the believer’s salvation.
VERSE 20

He exercised this power in Christ by raising him from the dead and seating him at his right hand in the heavens—

As believers, we can know the wonderful greatness of God’s power toward us because He has proven His wonderful greatness in Christ, with whom we are united by faith. Paul mentioned three historical events: first, Christ’s resurrection; second, His enthronement; and third, His headship over all things, including the church.

God demonstrated His incomparable power by raising Christ from the dead. We might be able to delay physical death for a time with good health habits or medical breakthroughs, but we cannot escape it. Further, when a human being dies, the process of decay for the flesh is inexorable. When Jesus died on the cross, however, the great reversal began. His body did not decompose, for the Father did not allow the “holy one to see decay” (Acts 2:27). Then God reversed death itself. He raised Jesus to new life—a resurrected life unlike any that had ever been before. Jesus’ resurrection was everlasting and immortal, “the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Cor. 15:20). As believers, we live with the promise that we will receive a resurrection like Christ’s (1 Cor. 15:23).

The proofs of Jesus’ resurrection were the empty tomb and the risen Lord’s appearances to His followers over a period of forty days. Paul himself saw the resurrected Lord, and that experience was pivotal in transforming Paul from a persecutor of Christians to an apostle of Christ (Acts 9).

Second, God demonstrated His immeasurable power by exalting the risen Christ, seating him at the Father’s right hand in the heavens. Rather than mention Christ’s ascension, Paul noted that God had placed Christ in the position of superior honor and authority. This action fulfilled the prophecy in Psalm 110:1: “This is the declaration of the LORD to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.’” To be asked to sit at the right hand of an ancient king was a signal honor. Further, it was a position of royal authority. Christ’s exaltation to the place of supreme authority in the heavens (“in the heavenly realms,” NIV) signaled that the stripping of death’s power was both complete and everlasting.

VERSE 21

far above every ruler and authority, power and dominion, and every title given, not only in this age but also in the one to come.

Many people in Ephesus adhered to pagan religions that deified a host of different idols representing every imaginable force or power. Some of the Christians to whom Paul wrote once worshiped those idols. Paul emphasized
that in Christ, God had clearly demonstrated the empty claims of pagan idols. No idols, no unseen spiritual forces, and no earthly authorities can compare with the power supplied to believers in Christ. He is far above them. Paul piled up references to these forces: ruler and authority, power and dominion, and every title given. Whether Paul had a precise meaning in mind for each of these forces is unclear. It is best to understand them to refer together to any conceivable power—natural or supernatural, good or evil.

Because of His resurrection and exaltation, Jesus is already supreme over all forces in this age, even though many of them have not yet recognized His victory or submitted to His supremacy. Later in Ephesians, Paul urged believers to put on the armor of God as they continued to wrestle against “the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this darkness, against evil, spiritual forces in the heavens” (Eph. 6:12).

Paul went on with his description of God’s power in Christ. Jesus’ exaltation was not temporary, for a limited time. It was (and will be) the reality for God’s people in the age to come as well. In that future age, no power will be exempt from acknowledging Christ’s lordship and bowing before Him: “At the name of Jesus every knee will bow—in heaven and on earth and under the earth—and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:10-11).

VERSE 22

And he subjected everything under his feet and appointed him as head over everything for the church,

Paul continued drawing out the implications of Christ’s resurrection and exaltation. He alluded to Psalm 8:6 in declaring that God had subjected everything under Christ’s feet. At the time of creation, God gave authority to mankind to “rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the livestock, the whole earth, and the creatures that crawl on the earth” (Gen. 1:26). Even after mankind’s fall that responsibility was not entirely lost. Yet because of mankind’s fall into sin, we corrupted our authority and often fail in our responsibility. Only Jesus Christ fully exercises perfect sovereignty over all things. The writer of Hebrews expounded on Psalm 8 in these words: “For in subjecting everything to him [mankind], he [God] left nothing that is not subject to him. As it is, we do not yet see everything subjected to him. But we do see Jesus … crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death” (Heb. 2:8b-9).

Paul’s first proof of God’s power was Christ’s resurrection. His second proof was Christ’s exaltation. The third proof Paul marshaled was that God appointed Christ as head over everything for the church. Jesus is head,
and that headship includes *everything* (mentioned twice in this verse). The whole universe, visible and invisible, material and supernatural, and all creatures in it are subject to Christ as Lord.

Further, Christ is head over all things for the church. This is the apostle’s first use in Ephesians of the Greek term for *church* (*ekklesia* [é kklíh SEE uh]). The word originally referred to people, not to a building. In this context, it referred to God’s people everywhere and throughout all time. Thus, both the created universe (everything) and the church have one head: the Lord Jesus Christ!

**VERSE 23**

*which is his body, the fullness of the one who fills all things in every way.*

The apostle then gave two descriptions of the church. First, the church is Christ’s **body**. Here Paul was using this word as a metaphor that emphasizes the absolute unity of Christ and His people. They are as united (and interconnected) as a human head and the rest of the body.

Not only does the church function as Christ’s body, it is also the **fullness of the one who fills all things in every way**. Bible scholars have offered three possible understandings of this phrase. First, the phrase may refer to Christ (rather than to the church) as the One who fulfills *all things in every way* (see also Col. 1:19; 2:9). Second, the phrase may refer to the church as somehow fulfilling (in the sense of completing) God’s plan of redeeming a people for Himself in Christ. Third, the phrase may refer to the church as the fullness of Christ because He inhabits the church with His presence and continues His mission in the world through the church. I prefer the third view and believe that it is more in line with Paul’s teachings about the church elsewhere (see Eph. 2:21-22).

As we have seen, Christ’s resurrection, exaltation, and lordship over all things are evidences of God’s power that secures our salvation. As believers, we can live with confidence in God’s immeasurable power.

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**EXPLORE FURTHER**

Read the article titled “Body” on pages 229–230 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How does the teaching that the church is the body of Christ help you understand the greatness of His calling? How does this understanding give you confidence in God’s power to guarantee your salvation and empower your faithful living?
God provides salvation by grace through faith apart from our good works.

The hymn “Amazing Grace” stands as one of the most beloved and widely recognized songs in the modern world. Versions of it are publicly played and sung countless times every year. While the song’s original lyrics were written as an ode to the Christian gospel, numerous secular musicians and singers in the modern era have recorded the song because of its message of transforming grace and deliverance for people in times of trouble, fear, and danger.

What is most striking to me about this beloved song is the story behind the hymn text, first published in England in 1779. John Newton, the writer, was an obscure English poet and Anglican pastor. Newton grew up without any religious convictions, however, and was conscripted into the British Royal Navy as a young man. After completing his military service, he became involved in the Atlantic slave trade. Then in 1748, a violent storm battered his ship off the coast of Ireland, threatening to tear the vessel apart and drown everyone aboard. In desperation, Newton called out to God for mercy—an event he later confessed was the moment of his conversion to faith in Christ.

In response to God’s gracious deliverance and his newfound faith, Newton ended his slave trading career and began studying Christian theology. He was ordained as a minister by the Church of England in 1764 and began writing hymn texts alongside another English poet, William Cowper. Newton wrote the original lyrics for “Amazing Grace” to illustrate a sermon for New Year’s Day, 1773. He wanted to convey the message that God’s grace is limitless. Forgiveness of sins and salvation are possible for all who will simply believe.
Session 3: Resurrected (chaps. 1–3), he addressed doctrinal teachings that were especially relevant for the urgent needs and life situations of believers in Ephesus. Then in the second half of the letter’s main body (chaps. 4–6), he focused primarily on helping the recipients integrate right doctrine into their daily life situations.

Beginning in chapter 2, Paul launched into a deep theological dive regarding the doctrine of salvation. He had already seeded the waters with the issue in his doxology and thanksgiving prayer (1:3-23). In 2:1-7, he turned from magnifying Christ the Redeemer to describing the dark reality of what it means to be lost and without hope. He used several descriptions, but perhaps his starkest term to depict spiritual lostness was the word *dead*. Then he contrasted the reality of spiritual deadness with the new life believers receive in Christ. Again, Paul used several terms for this reality, but *alive* is the term that encompasses all of them.

In Ephesians 2:8-10, Paul provided a succinct yet glorious expression of the gospel message, using rich theological terms such as grace, faith, and saved. Many believers who first received Paul’s epistles were neither highly educated or from the upper social or economic classes. Yet Paul knew that the Holy Spirit would help these recipients understand the simple gospel message. They were ordinary people who had experienced an extraordinary transformation.

So it is for many believers today. The same Holy Spirit who enabled the first recipients of Ephesians to grasp and embrace the deep spiritual truths of the letter can also open the eyes of our hearts today.

**EXPLORE THE TEXT**

**ONCE DEAD** (Eph. 2:1-3)

Paul reminded the recipients of his letter that before their salvation in Christ, they were spiritually dead. They were also bound in their sins by Satan.

**VERSE 1**

*And you were dead in your trespasses and sins*

Paul was soberly honest about the status of humanity apart from Christ. He knew the desperate condition of the human heart. Human beings in their sinful nature cannot boast of being basically good people who make occasional mistakes. Paul emphatically declared that without faith in Christ, even so-called good people are **dead in their trespasses and sins**.

By using the second-person plural pronoun *you*, Paul was likely addressing Gentile believers in Ephesus in particular. In 2:3, the apostle switched to the
use of the first-person plural pronoun “we” so as to include Jewish believers (including himself) in the pronouncement against those who were under sin’s curse apart from Christ. Paul wrote a similar inclusive message in Romans 3:23: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

Paul used the term dead in this context to describe people who are spiritually alienated from God and are incapable of having a living relationship with Him. God warned the first humans in the garden that rebelling against Him and disobeying His commands would result in their death (Gen. 2:17). Adam and Eve sinned anyway, and they died spiritually. Further, physical death became inevitable, and eternal separation from God became their destiny unless they received God’s merciful remedy for their disobedience. Scripture often describes the present condition of every human being apart from Christ as dead because of sin (Ezek. 37:1-14; Rom. 7:10; Col. 2:13).

Why are unsaved human beings void of spiritual life? Paul answered the question in terms of trespasses and sins. These two terms are similar, but there are subtle distinctions. To trespass is to cross a known boundary or to willingly deviate from the right path. To sin is to miss an expected mark or fall short of an expected target. Together, these words encompass both active wrongdoing (committing sins) and passive wrongdoing (refusing to do what is right). All human beings apart from Christ stand guilty of both kinds of wrongdoing.

It is important for us to square the biblical teaching that all unforgiven sinners are spiritually dead with our perception that many people—even those who have openly rejected Christ—appear very much alive and are capable of doing commendable activities. Are such people really dead? Yes indeed, in terms of eternal, spiritual matters. They are unable to know God, to love Him, or to relate to Him in any genuine way. In other words, they are as spiritually unresponsive to God as a corpse would be to any other living being. Until sinners recognize and admit the reality of their spiritual deadness to God, they cannot (and will not) embrace the wonderful possibility of new life in Christ.

VERSE 2

in which you previously lived according to the ways of this world, according to the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit now working in the disobedient.

Paul continued describing the condition of people apart from Christ by saying they previously lived (“once walked,” ESV) in a form of slavery they could not escape. Their lifestyle or behavior was opposed to God and His ways. Three influences combined in holding unbelievers captive.
First, they are bound by the ways of this world. Here the term this world was not so much a reference to the physical earth as to fallen humanity organized without submission to God. The values of secular humanism do not take God and His ways into account; such values are, in fact, hostile to God. The widespread presence of political and economic oppression readily illustrate the sinful operation of the world in rebellion against God.

Second, unbelievers are enslaved by the ruler (“prince,” KJV; ESV) of the power of the air. This is a reference to Satan. With the term rendered air, Paul again was speaking figuratively. He had in mind not so much the earth’s atmosphere of oxygen, nitrogen, carbon dioxide, and so forth but rather the invisible, spiritual realm in which Satan and other evil spirits operate (see Eph. 6:12). While unbelievers may not acknowledge the presence and deadly impact of Satan, their unbelief does not negate the reality. In fact, their willing spiritual blindness serves as evidence of Satan’s enslaving power over them (2 Cor. 4:4).

The apostle went on to describe the condition of the unbeliever’s bondage as the spirit now working in the disobedient. Here Paul obviously was not referring to the Holy Spirit. Rather, he was referring either to Satan as an evil spirit or to the general atmosphere or spirit of rebellion against God that permeates the fallen world. The disobedient (“children of disobedience,” KJV) refers to unbelievers, people who defy God and His ways. By way of contrast, believers are described as “children of (moral) light” in passages such as Ephesians 5:8 and 1 Thessalonians 5:5.

VERSE 3

We too all previously lived among them in our fleshly desires, carrying out the inclinations of our flesh and thoughts, and we were by nature children under wrath as the others were also.

The third influence contributing to the bondage of sinful humanity is our fleshly desires (“the cravings of our flesh,” NIV). The apostle did not use the term fleshly here in reference only to natural physical appetites (hunger and thirst, for example) but rather to the unyielding bent toward self-gratification that characterizes humanity’s sinful nature. Of course, natural appetites for food and drink can be distorted by self-gratification to gluttony and drunkenness. In every situation in which self-centeredness prevails, enslavement to fleshly desires is on display.

This enslavement becomes inescapable apart from Christ because of what Paul called the inclinations of our flesh and thoughts (“the desires of the body and the mind,” ESV). The unbeliever’s bent toward self-worship and self-gratification rejects God’s revealed instructions about the right ways to
keep one’s physical appetites and behavior under spiritual control. Instead, the unbeliever adopts thoughts and behaviors that are governed by attitudes such as “If it feels good, do it,” “I did it my way,” and “You only live once, so grab all you can.” All of these attitudes are just modern-day versions of Satan’s ancient lie to Eve in the garden of Eden: “God knows that when you eat [fruit from the forbidden tree] your eyes will be opened and you will be like God” (Gen. 3:5).

Paul moved on from describing unbelievers as spiritually dead and as enslaved to a declaration that they are **by nature children under wrath.** That is, apart from Christ all sinners are justly condemned by God. The term *wrath* refers to God’s righteous opposition to evil and His settled determination to oppose everything contrary to His holiness (see Rom. 1:18-20; 2:5).

The sad truth is that we are all members of a fallen human race. We inherited a sinful nature after Adam and Eve’s fall into sin in the garden of Eden. Further, our own trespasses and sins confirm that we have followed in the first couple’s sinful ways (see Rom. 5:12). Paul painted a dark but honest word picture that, apart from Christ, all persons are separated from God and are destined to experience His wrath in the judgment. It is therefore urgent for believers to share the gospel message with all the world’s peoples.

**EXPLORE FURTHER**

Read the article titled “Wrath, Wrath of God” on pages 1672–1673 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded.* Why does the biblical teaching about God’s wrath matter? How has your understanding of God’s judgment against unbelievers motivated you to share the gospel?

**NOW ALIVE** (Eph. 2:4-7)

Paul declared that those who believe in Christ have been made alive as an act of God’s grace. This salvation is offered based on God’s love for us. Believers receive a position “in the heavens” based on Jesus’ own exalted position.

**VERSE 4**

**But God, who is rich in mercy, because of his great love that he had for us,**

The phrase **but God** marks a radical transition from the plight of sinners to the hope of the saved. The contrast from bondage to salvation could not be more sharply drawn. Paul identified two attributes of God that propelled Him
to provide the way of rescue and freedom for sinners. First, Paul noted God’s **mercy**. This term is parallel to the concept of grace. *Mercy* can be thought of as God’s not giving believers what they deserve—namely, His wrath. Grace can be described as God’s giving believers what they do not deserve—namely, His forgiveness and restoration to life. God’s mercy led Him to seek to save sinful human beings from spiritual death, the wages of their sin (Rom. 6:23). The apostle’s description of the desperate state of unbelievers (dead, enslaved, and condemned) shows that we were helpless and hopeless. God is not only a God of mercy, He is **rich** in mercy. His mercy does not run short; He lavished the riches of His grace on believers (Eph. 1:7; 2:7).

Second, Paul drew attention to God’s **love**. In the Greek text, he used both a noun form and a verb form of this rich biblical term. Literally, the phrase reads “because of the great love with which he loved us” (see ESV). Just as God’s mercy is **rich**, even so His love is **great**. God acted to save us out of His wonderful love, not because we could do anything to deserve salvation.

**VERSE 5**

**made us alive with Christ even though we were dead in trespasses. You are saved by grace!**

In describing the salvation God gives in Christ, Paul affirmed first that God **made** believers **alive with Christ**. Before trusting in Christ, believers were spiritually dead; in Christ they have been given new life, eternal life. Just as Christ died on the cross and was resurrected, even so when the Ephesian believers were joined to Christ by faith, they were made alive spiritually. To emphasize the transformation, Paul again reminded the letter’s recipients that they (and he) once **were dead in trespasses**.

Paul’s language soared into a hymn-like quality with his ringing declaration, **you are saved by grace**. He repeated these exact words in 2:8. Two points are noteworthy. First, the form of the verb translated **are saved** implies that the action was completed in the past yet its effects are ongoing. Compare this to the same verb form that Paul used to refer to Christ’s having been raised with ongoing results (1 Cor. 15:20). Second, Paul declared that salvation is an act of God’s **grace**. Previously in Ephesians 2:4, he had used the related concepts of divine “mercy” and “love.” *Grace* appears to be one of Paul’s favorite terms, for he began most of his epistles with a greeting expressed in terms of grace.

**VERSE 6**

**He also raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavens in Christ Jesus,**
If the first truth about God’s salvation is that believers are made alive in Christ, the second truth is that God **raised believers up with him.** Paul was referring here to the historical events of Christ’s resurrection and ascension into heaven. Christ was exalted from the earthly, visible realm to the heavenly, invisible realm (see Acts 1:9). Even so, when believers are united to Christ by faith, they are made alive forever in the wonderful realm of spiritual existence Christ inhabits.

The third truth about God’s salvation Paul noted was that believers are **seated ... with Christ in the heavens.** Here Paul was referring to the truth that the resurrected and ascended Christ took His rightful place of lordship and authority at the right hand of the Father (see Acts 2:33-35; Eph. 1:20; Heb. 10:12). Because believers are joined to Christ by faith and in essence are His body, they are spiritually seated with Him in the heavenly realm. This is now the third time in the letter that Paul referred to a heavenly, invisible reality (see also 1:3,20). Although the church continues to exist on earth and to experience the challenges that reality presents, in God’s eternal view His redeemed people already have been forgiven, are made spiritually alive, and are seated with Christ on His heavenly throne. Believers will experience the fulness of that reality in the end time in the new heaven and the new earth.

When the apostle wrote about the three truths of salvation believers receive in union with Christ, he probably coined some new words. Literally, the phrases could be translated “we were co-made alive with,” “we were co-raised with,” and “we were co-seated with.” These phrases emphasize that everything to do with salvation flows from what Christ has done for us and then what happens to us when we believe and are united to Him in faith.

**VERSE 7**

**so that in the coming ages he might display the immeasurable riches of his grace through his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.**

After having described what God did in saving believers based on His mercy, love, and grace, Paul went on to describe God’s ultimate reason for saving believers. Why did He act to save sinners? What was His goal? The reason certainly was not that sinful human beings deserved or had earned the right to be saved. Paul explained that God wanted a redeemed people to be the everlasting proof of His grace.

God intends for the proof of His grace to endure throughout **the coming ages**, including during the remainder of the church age as well as during the age to come following Christ’s glorious return and the judgment. God will have His redeemed people on **display** in eternity as evidence of **the immeasurable riches of his grace**. God’s raising of Christ was proof of the
“immeasurable greatness of his power” (1:19-20). His future display of those who are united with Christ by faith will be the proof of immeasurable grace. We can scarcely imagine what these immeasurable riches will be. The New Testament provides delectable hints in the language of a coming messianic banquet (see Matt. 8:11; Rev. 19:7-9).

Thus, in the coming ages we as believers will keep on expressing our love and worship of God for all He has done for us. He, in turn, will display us as evidence of His kindness to us in Christ Jesus. The term rendered kindness is similar in meaning to the terms mercy and grace. It can also mean goodness in reference to consideration for the welfare of another. God’s intent is to express His kindness eternally to those who are in Christ Jesus.

THROUGH GRACE ALONE (Eph. 2:8-10)

Salvation comes only through faith in Jesus Christ. It is an act of God’s grace toward His fallen creation. Salvation cannot be earned; it is received only as a gift. Our salvation sets us free to live a life of good works.

VERSE 8

For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God’s gift—

Paul here repeated his declaration in Ephesians 2:5 that sinners are saved by grace. Thus far, the apostle’s emphasis has been on God’s taking the initiative in providing the way of salvation. Paul now emphasized that salvation by grace nevertheless demands a human response—the response of faith. Saving faith is not a work, an achievement or effort on the part of the sinner. It is simply a humble, grateful, wholehearted acceptance of Christ’s saving work on the sinner’s behalf. In the Greek language of the New Testament, the noun faith and the verb form usually translated “believe in” or “trust in” belong to the same word family. Thus, passages that speak of believing in Christ for salvation (John 3:16, for example) connect directly with Paul’s teaching in Ephesians 2:8 about faith.
Paul went on to clarify that even faith must not be construed as the believer’s doing any work to accomplish his or her salvation: saving faith is **not from yourselves**. The term **this** refers to the entire concept of being **saved by grace through faith**. All of salvation is from God. Sinful human beings could never have come up with salvation, much less achieved it. Paul had already spoken of God’s initiative by using the language of mercy, kindness, and love. Now he added a new term: **gift**. Salvation in its totality, including the sinner’s response of faith, is a **gift** from God.

Of course, saving faith does not mean believing something that is contrary to fact or believing in faith itself. Saving faith is based on evidence of truth. Thus, the first disciples believed Jesus was raised from the dead because His tomb was empty and He appeared to them alive after three days. Further, saving faith is not merely an intellectual assent to a set of facts. For example, a person might assent to the “facts” that a ladder provides access to a rooftop. However, the person hasn’t truly trusted the ladder until his full weight is placed on it. This example must not be pressed too far, but the point is that saving faith is more than merely assenting to historical facts about Jesus. It involves trusting one’s entire life and future to Christ as Savior.

**VERSE 9**

**not from works, so that no one can boast.**

Paul went on to make a second clarification about salvation. It is **not from** one’s own **works**. In other words, there is not a single good deed or act of obedience—or a lifetime of striving on one’s own—that God will reward with salvation. There is nothing that we as sinners can do to deserve or earn the gift of forgiveness, new life, and right standing (justification) before God. There is no room for human merit in salvation.

By the term **works**, Paul was including obedience to God’s laws, as he emphatically stated in Galatians 2:16: “By the works of the law no human being will be justified.” He was also including deeds of kindness or benevolence, as welcome as such actions might be by others. The dangerously mistaken notion that people can stock up enough good deeds to outweigh their sins in God’s
eyes must be jettisoned from our thinking. Paul contended that salvation by God’s grace through faith nullifies any possibility of self-justification (so that no one can boast). The only possible attitude for sinners to take before God is to cling to Him in humility and complete dependence. The only pride anyone can have is in the cross and in the Savior (Gal. 6:14; Phil. 3:3).

VERSE 10

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of time for us to do.

Paul now made a positive assertion: salvation is God’s achievement (we are his workmanship). The Greek term rendered workmanship includes the ideas of “work of art” and “masterpiece.” What God has accomplished both in creation and in salvation are displays of His sovereign and gracious work as the Creator-Redeemer. Believers have been created in Christ Jesus. We have become new creations (2 Cor. 5:17).

We have been made alive. (We were dead.) We have been set free. (We were enslaved.) We have been saved. (We were condemned.) We have been made into new creatures, but we are not to remain passive. We have much to do. We are never saved by good works, yet we are saved for good works. Good deeds can never be the root of salvation, but they are the fruit of salvation.

Indeed, God prepared ahead of time the good works His redeemed people are to accomplish. This way of understanding salvation encompasses life from the moment of conversion to the fulfillment of eternal life in heaven and everything in between. In the original language, the phrase for us to do can be translated literally as “that we should walk.” Thus, Paul had come full circle. In 2:2 he had described the sinful ways in which sinners lived prior to their conversion to Christ. Now the contrast was clear. What makes the difference? Divine intervention “by grace” (2:5,8). The telling contrast between the two destinies is captured in two little words, “but God” (2:4).

EXPLORE FURTHER

Meditate on Ephesians 2:8-9. How would you paraphrase these verses to help someone understand the way of salvation through faith in Christ? With whom could you seek an opportunity to share these verses?

God reconciles us to Himself in Christ, removing barriers of hostility between believers.

In 2012, my wife and I traveled to a country in southeast Asia for a brief teaching assignment at a seminary. In preparation for the trip, we were advised to keep in mind that the country’s government did not generally welcome Christians coming there to evangelize. My wife and I would need to be careful in the way we talked about ourselves and our intentions.

When we arrived at the country’s main airport, we came off the plane and immediately noticed our greeters standing on the opposite side of a thick glass barrier. They were waiting to drive us to the place we would stay during the assignment. I did not know how long they had been standing there, but their wait—and our check-in with customs officials—seemed interminable. We had to show our passports, answer questions, have our luggage checked, and then purchase visas to enter the country as tourists.

Finally we were approved to proceed. Our greeters—they were already our friends—welcomed us warmly and led us through the airport to the parking area. As we walked along, I could not help but notice how different my wife and I looked from everyone else. I stood a head taller than most everyone in the airport, including our friends. Our skin tone marked my wife and me as obvious outsiders, foreigners in the country. Culturally and legally, we were citizens of another country; we did not belong there except as visitors.

We had a very different feeling, however, when my wife and I met with other believers in the country. We could not have felt more welcome. Physical and cultural differences receded in importance; spiritual unity became obvious. My wife and I delighted in teaching our assigned classes and speaking to various Christian gatherings. We could sense the presence of the Spirit among those believers just as surely as we felt God’s presence in our home church.

In the Bible passage for this session, Paul addressed the external and internal barriers that separated Jews and Gentiles in their relation to God. Through Christ’s death on the cross, God tore down the walls of division between these two groups. In Christ, all believers are saved by grace, not by works, and are made into one holy family in the Spirit.
In the first two sessions, we focused on Paul’s prayer for the letter’s recipients (1:3-23). In Session 3, we explored the apostle’s teachings about the nature of salvation (2:1-10). In those verses, Paul declared that believers have been transformed from spiritual death to spiritual life through what Christ accomplished. Salvation is God’s incomparable gift (grace) to sinners and is received only through faith. Paul concluded his initial teaching on the nature of salvation by reminding Christians that they have been redeemed by grace through faith for the purpose of doing the kinds of good works God had always prepared for them to do as His people.

In this session’s Bible passage, Paul focused on the theological implications of new life in Christ in terms of believers’ relationships with one another. Gentiles had previously been “excluded from the citizenship of Israel” (2:12). While people groups have long been divided from one another for multiple reasons (language, culture, territory, and so forth), no division has been as sharp and ugly as the distinction between Jews and Gentiles.

The opening book in the Bible reveals that God chose a man named Abram (later known as Abraham) with whom to establish a covenant. God promised to bless Abraham with innumerable descendants and with a place for them to live. Further, through this covenant nation, God would bless all the peoples of the earth (Gen. 12:1-3). By and large throughout the centuries, however, Abraham’s descendants (known as Israel) largely ignored their God-given mission. They misinterpreted their place as God’s chosen people and harbored a disdainful attitude toward all non-Jewish peoples (Gentiles). The hostility became toxic and mutual. In Jesus’ day, many Jews had such hatred for all Gentiles that they believed God had created Gentiles only for the purpose of having fuel for the fires of hell!

One dramatic symbol of the alienation between Jews and Gentiles in the first century could be found on the temple grounds in Jerusalem. An outer courtyard on which non-Jewish people could congregate was separated from an inner courtyard by a stone wall with gate openings. Inscriptions were posted along the wall that warned Gentiles not to enter the inner courtyard on pain of death. (One such warning sign, the Soreg Inscription, was discovered by archaeologists working in Jerusalem in the late nineteenth century and remains on display in a museum in Istanbul, Turkey.) Paul possibly had this dividing wall in mind when he wrote Ephesians 2:14.

In this session, we will consider what Paul taught about two hostile separations abolished by Christ’s death on the cross. One dividing wall that
Christ’s death abolished was the separation (in terms of salvation) between Jews and Gentiles (2:14). Another (even more significant) dividing wall abolished by Christ’s death on the cross was the separation between sinful humanity and the holy God (2:16). Paul made the case that the end of these hostilities, by God’s design, is experienced in the church (2:21-22).

EXPLORE THE TEXT

Brought Near (Eph. 2:11-13)

Paul reminded Gentile believers that before their salvation in Christ they were without hope and separated from God. They were, however, brought near to God through Christ.

Verse 11

So then, remember that at one time you were Gentiles in the flesh—called “the uncircumcised” by those called “the circumcised,” which is done in the flesh by human hands.

Paul opened this section of his letter with the phrase so then (“wherefore,” KJV; “therefore,” ESV; NIV), recalling the former condition of Gentiles before they had come to faith in Christ. One external difference between Gentiles and Jews could be observed in the flesh of Gentiles. Their males often had not received the visible mark of circumcision, a ritual act that was performed on all Jewish males at infancy—by law on the eighth day after a son’s birth (Lev. 12:3). This physical difference became a rationale for name-calling by many Jews. Jews proudly claimed the name the circumcised for themselves; they used the term the uncircumcised in a derogatory way to refer to Gentiles.

By calling attention to this practice prescribed in the Mosaic law, Paul was highlighting a hostile point of division between Jews and Gentiles. Name-calling based on external differences—think also of skin color, language, facial features, and so forth—raises barriers unnecessarily. After all, circumcision was merely a physical action done in the flesh by human hands. In other passages, Paul referred to a circumcision that truly mattered, spiritual circumcision of the heart (see Rom. 2:28-29; Phil. 3:3; Col. 2:11-13).

Verse 12

At that time you were without Christ, excluded from the citizenship of Israel, and foreigners to the covenants of promise, without hope and without God in the world.
What mattered to Paul more than the name-calling or the physical mark (or lack thereof) of circumcision was the harsh reality that Gentiles truly had been alienated from God and from God’s people. Paul summarized this separation with five succinct descriptors.

First, Gentiles were without Christ. That is, they had no ethnic or religious claims regarding the divine promise of the Messiah to come. The Israelites (Jews) had been hearing of this promise through their prophets for many centuries. The Jews in Jesus’ day certainly did not have all the messianic prophecies figured out, but, as the Gospels show, they maintained an enduring hope for the Messiah’s appearance (see John 1:19-22). Gentiles, however, had been excluded from this hope.

Second, Gentiles were excluded from the citizenship of Israel. The Israelites were a covenant nation that God called into being (Ex. 19:6). Full citizenship in the nation was limited to biological descendants of the patriarch Jacob, whom God renamed Israel (Gen 28:13-15; 32:28; 49:1-2,10). Gentiles were not considered to be citizens of Israel.

Third, Gentiles were foreigners to the covenants of promise. God’s foundational covenant promise to Abraham had included a blessing for all the earth’s peoples. Yet the primary focus had been God’s promise to make of Abraham “a great nation” (Gen. 12:2). Similarly, God’s covenant with King David focused on the promise that his biological descendants would make up an everlasting dynasty of kings: “Your house and kingdom will endure before me forever, and your throne will be established forever” (2 Sam. 7:16).

Fourth, Gentiles were without hope. The world of the first century was filled with many pagan religions. Whatever help and hope people attributed to those false gods was empty. Neither could the power and glory of the Roman empire give people lasting purpose and hope for living—or for dying.

Fifth, Gentiles were without God in the world. Gentiles had no knowledge of the one true God. They had to make their way through life in the world without the possibility of having a right relationship with their true Creator. While God had revealed His majesty and power in the creation, pagans had taken even that revelation and worshiped what was created (idols) rather than the Creator (Rom. 1:18-23).

VERSE 13

But now in Christ Jesus, you who were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

As Paul continued, he described the previous status of Gentiles as being far away from God. With the coming of Christ and the Ephesian believers’ embrace of the good news (but now in Christ Jesus), the situation for
Gentiles had dramatically changed: they had been brought near. This change had not happened automatically for all Gentiles (or for all Jews for that matter). It happened only to those who were in Christ Jesus.

How had this change come about? It came about by the blood of Christ. Jesus’ death on the cross made possible forgiveness of sins for both Jews and Gentiles. This forgiveness brought believers near to God and therefore brought them near to one another. The barriers and divisions were overcome not because each group decided that relationships must improve. Rather, a mediator—Christ—came and made peace possible.

Christ has achieved the way of salvation for sinners, and now salvation is available to all who believe in Christ regardless of their ethnicity, language, skin color, social status, or any other external feature. All who receive salvation are united in Christ. One challenge we face today as believers is to resist erecting our own versions of dividing walls that Jesus tore down.

**EXPLORE FURTHER**

In the article titled “Atonement” in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*, read the section on page 147 titled “Atonement and the Message of the Gospel.” How has Christ’s atoning death on the cross brought you near to God? How has it brought you near to other believers who have noticeable physical differences from you?

**PEACE DECLARED** *(Eph. 2:14-18)*

Paul explained that Christ alone brings reconciliation and peace to all people. Through His sacrificial death, all believers have been reconciled both to the Father and to one another.

**VERSES 14-15**

For he is our peace, who made both groups one and tore down the dividing wall of hostility. In his flesh, he made of no effect the law consisting of commands and expressed in regulations, so that he might create in himself one new man from the two, resulting in peace.

Paul could have written that Christ brings peace; instead, he wrote that Christ is our peace. That is, only through becoming part of Christ’s body through faith in Him can any sinner gain true peace with God and with others. In Christ, the hostile dividing walls between Jews and Gentiles were
removed. By His atoning death on the cross, Christ made both groups one. Jewish believers and Gentile believers have now become fellow citizens in a single new community, the church.

Paul described the effect of Christ’s death as tearing down the dividing wall of hostility. In the background of these words, Paul may have been thinking about the literal wall that separated the courtyard of the Gentiles from the courtyard of Israel in the Jerusalem temple. In AD 70, the Roman army would destroy that wall along with the entire temple edifice. Paul declared that in Christ’s new spiritual kingdom (the church), the hostile wall of separation between Jews and Gentiles had already been torn down.

How was the spiritual wall of separation torn down? Paul explained that it was accomplished when Jesus gave His physical body over to death (in his flesh) on the cross. His sacrificial death was atoning in its effect by fully satisfying the law consisting of commands and expressed in regulations. In other words, what the Mosaic law demanded for having a right relationship with God and with others—think of the Ten Commandments—Christ had fully satisfied through His atoning death. Both Jews and Gentiles now had access to this new citizenship based solely on faith in Christ.

Paul had to address this matter more than once as he confronted situations in churches in which Jewish legalists persisted in demanding that Gentile believers must not only have faith in Christ but also must keep the Mosaic law in its entirety, including ceremonial regulations, dietary restrictions, and festival observances. In Colossians 2:16, Paul urged Gentile believers not to let anyone criticize them “in regard to food and drink or in the matter of a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day.” Keeping such regulations was in no way a requirement for salvation.

On the other hand, while Christ’s atoning death satisfied the law completely on behalf of believers in regard to their forgiveness, the law remains a valid expression of moral guidelines for living as God’s redeemed people. Simply put, people can never save themselves by keeping the Ten Commandments; but once saved by grace through faith in Christ, the Ten Commandments remain a God-given moral and ethical guideline for Christian living.

In His death, Christ abolished something old (the dividing wall) and yet created also something new: one new man from the two, resulting in peace. Here the phrase one new man refers to the church as the body of Christ. Through His death, Christ took the two groups that formerly hated each other—Jews and Gentiles—and brought them together in himself in peace and unity. Notice that Gentiles have not simply been elevated to the status that Jews alone formerly enjoyed. Rather, something brand new was brought into existence. It was as though God took silver (the Jews) and bronze (the Gentiles) and out of them created gold (the church).
VERSE 16

He did this so that he might reconcile both to God in one body through the cross by which he put the hostility to death.

On one hand, God’s purpose in salvation was to bring hostile groups together in peace (the horizontal dimension of salvation). On the other hand, His aim was to reconciliate both groups to Himself (the vertical dimension of salvation). Both groups had been alienated from God in their sins. Now, through the cross, reconciliation was possible.

The Greek word rendered reconcile refers to bringing at least two parties into a peaceful relationship. By their sinfulness, human beings had positioned themselves as God’s enemies. In Christ they would be restored as His friends (see John 15:13-14). Paul was expanding his explanation of peace. When sinners put their faith in Jesus, whatever their status, they are made part of the one body, the church. Jesus paid the price of atonement through the cross so that the previous state of hostility was thereby put ... to death. Paul’s language was dramatic. One death led to another death! The death of Christ on the cross brought about the death of the hostility that had separated the created from the Creator.

VERSE 17

He came and proclaimed the good news of peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near.

When Christ came into the world as God in human form, He proclaimed the good news of peace—both personally and then later through His chosen representatives (the apostles first but also all believers). This gospel message was applicable to the entire world (John 3:16). Some who heard the message of peace with God were Gentiles, who had been far away from God and the hope of salvation (Eph. 2:12). Yet Jews had also been alienated from God, so the gospel was a message of reconciliation to those who were near. Only through Christ’s atoning death could Jews or Gentiles enjoy peace with God. Paul’s language was reminiscent of Isaiah 57:19: “The LORD says, ‘Peace, peace to the one who is far or near, and I will heal him.’”

In Ephesians, Paul was focusing on the new unity that bridges the hostile divide between Jews and Gentiles. In other passages, Paul declared that other barriers have been abolished through the death of Christ as well. He wrote, “In Christ there is not Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all” (Col. 3:11). And in Galatians 3:27-28 he explained, “Those of you who were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ. There is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female; since you are all one in Christ Jesus.”
VERSE 18

For through him we both have access in one spirit to the Father.

When Paul used the Greek term rendered access, he was thinking of a continuing reality. The term referred to an ancient custom in which a trusted official in a king’s court was responsible for introducing and accompanying any visitors into an audience with the king. No one was given access to the king without being accompanied by this royal official. In a similar sense, Jesus Christ was the only One who could provide access to God for believers, Jew or Gentile. We come to God through him.

It is not clear whether Paul used the phrase in one spirit as a reference to the Holy Spirit or to the spiritual unity Jewish believers and Gentile believers experience in the body of Christ, the church. In my judgment both views rightly point to the same reality. The spiritual unity of the church is, in fact, the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit energizing the entire body of Christ throughout time and throughout the world. The Spirit intercedes for believers and helps us pray—approaching the throne of God boldly—even when we are at a loss for words (Rom. 8:26-27).

If Paul had in mind the imagery of access to a king’s court, that image faded into the background. It is no earthly king but rather God the Father to whom we have ongoing access in Christ. Jews and Gentiles alike can approach the heavenly Father together and in the same way.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Peace” on pages 1233–1234 in the Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded. How does an understanding of true peace enrich your understanding of salvation? How have you seen peace in Christ bring reconciliation among different groups?

CITIZENSHIP GRANTED (Eph. 2:19-22)

Paul declared that all who believe in Christ have become citizens in God’s new covenant community. With Christ as the foundation, believers are being built into a single building in which God dwells.

VERSE 19

So then you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with the saints, and members of God’s household,
Paul used five phrases in Ephesians 2:12 to describe the status of Gentiles before salvation in Christ. Here in 2:19, he summarized that pre-salvation status with two terms: **foreigners** and **strangers**. Both terms emphasize a lack of citizenship status. Apart from Christ, Gentiles had no claim to being in God’s covenant community. In Christ, however, the status of believing Gentiles had changed. They received full citizenship.

The apostle used two wonderful phrases to explain this newfound status in Christ. First, Gentiles became **fellow citizens with the saints**. The term rendered *saints* literally means “holy (or set apart) ones.” In the covenant context, it harked back to the divine promise given to the Israelites in Exodus 19:6 (“you will be ... my holy nation”). In 1 Peter 2:9, Scripture shows that the promise of becoming **fellow citizens** in God’s holy nation extends to all who believe in Christ. Second, believing Gentiles become **members of God’s household**. Regardless of ethnicity, believers become full-fledged brothers and sisters in God’s family.

**VERSE 20**

**built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.**

Paul further developed his portrayal of believers’ new status in Christ with an architectural, or construction, analogy. The temple in Jerusalem had long been the central symbol of Israel’s worship of the Lord. Paul declared, however, that in Christ God was in the process of constructing a new kind of temple, one not made with human hands (see Acts 7:47-48).

This new temple already had its solid **foundation** in place. The stability and endurance of the entire structure depended on the **foundation**, which in God’s new temple consisted of living stones: the **apostles and prophets**, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In ancient architecture, the most important stone by far was **the cornerstone**, which was laid with great precision and care because all the other stones in the building must be aligned to it. Perhaps Paul was calling to mind a prophecy concerning the Messiah: “Therefore the Lord God said: ‘Look, I have laid a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation; the one who believes will be unshakable’” (Isa. 28:16).

Completing the solid foundation were **the apostles and prophets** of Jesus Christ. The word **apostles** literally refers to ambassadors, people who are authorized and sent out to act in behalf of a king. The term **prophets** emphasizes vision-receiving and message-bearing roles. Paul likely had in mind the men whom Jesus called as His apostles (including Paul himself). These authorized spokesmen also were the inspired writers of the New Testament Scriptures.
VERSE 21

In him the whole building, being put together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.

In him, that is, in a faith union with Jesus Christ the Cornerstone, the whole building ... grows into a holy temple in the Lord. With the phrase the whole building, Paul was envisioning all believers—Jew and Gentile alike—in all generations until the Lord returns in the end time. (This description includes all of us today who are true Christ-followers!)

The phrase being put together draws attention to God’s work as the heavenly Builder who places each living stone in the structure as He sees fit. The verb’s tense indicates an ongoing activity. Likewise, the verb rendered grows (“rises,” NIV) is in the same tense, reflecting a continuing growth of the church throughout the church age.

The description of God’s redeemed people as a holy temple is instructive. In the Old Testament, God promised Israel that His sovereign name (presence) would dwell in the temple so that the people could worship and pray to Him there (see 1 Kings 8:29). In Christ and through the Spirit, God now promised to dwell not in a stone building but rather in His redeemed people. His law, which had once been written on tablets of stone, would now be written indelibly on the hearts of believers (Jer. 31:33; Heb. 8:10). The temple sacrifices, which once consisted of the blood of slain animals, have now been fulfilled once and for all in Jesus’ atoning death on the cross (Heb. 10:10) and are offered by grateful believers in their holy living (Rom. 12:1) and “the fruit of lips that confess his name” (Heb. 13:15).

VERSE 22

In him you are also being built together for God’s dwelling in the Spirit.

Paul’s concluding words in this section point to the reason God is building the new spiritual temple in the church. His plan is for the worldwide church to serve as His dwelling in the Spirit. God’s living presence can be experienced in believers through the power of the Spirit, who indwells them.

EXPLORE FURTHER

How does Paul’s use of the temple as an analogy of the church help you understand the church’s foundation? Its purpose? Its future? What is your role in helping the church carry out its purpose in the world today?
Revealed

God invites believers to proclaim the revealed mystery of the church.

My wife and I enjoy reading serial mysteries. We even take turns reading the stories aloud to each other. Among our favorite authors are Dorothy Sayers and Agatha Christie, two writers who created unforgettable detective characters such as Lord Peter Wimsey, Hercule Poirot, and Miss Jane Marple. We immerse ourselves in the action, following along as the detectives work to solve a puzzling crime. And our heroes, of course, always figure out the mystery.

Often the mystery's breakthrough solution comes when some piece of evidence comes to light that was not previously known. A suspect’s umbrella shows up in an unusual place. Or a window pane has a smudge that turns out to be dried mud from the murder scene. Or someone remembers the license plate number of an automobile leaving the victim’s house. However, I almost never crack the mystery until the story’s detective hero reveals the solution.

We can think about these kinds of mystery stories in a couple of ways. On one hand, we can approach mysteries as puzzling riddles to be solved. On the other hand, we can think of them as dramatic descriptions of reality in which previously unknown facts are revealed and provide a new understanding of the situation.

In this session's Bible passage, the apostle Paul described a “mystery ... made known to [him] by revelation” (Eph. 3:3). He also described it as “the mystery of Christ” (3:4) and “the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things” (3:9). Paul was not referring to a puzzle to be solved but instead to the reality of divine grace and truth that God revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul and other New Testament writers did not speak of mysteries as riddles to be solved or as something impossible to comprehend. Rather, they spoke of revealed truth that had not been previously known by God’s people. God had chosen not to reveal the full gospel message in Old Testament times. But with the birth, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, fresh truth of a surprising nature was made available. In this session, we will focus on what Paul explained to the Ephesians about the mystery of the church.
In the previous session’s Bible passage, Paul made the case that Jews and Gentiles who believe in Christ have been united in a new entity, the church. He used various images to describe this unity. In Christ, Jews and Gentiles become fellow citizens and members of God’s household. Moreover, all believers are being built into a holy temple, God’s own dwelling place.

In this session’s Bible passage, the apostle reflected on his personal role as one of God’s chosen servants in building the church. He had been called by God to be an apostle to the Gentiles. As such, Paul traveled and proclaimed the gospel of salvation by faith, and many Gentiles believed and were saved.

Paul was also an agent of fresh revelation from God. He was consciously aware that he was commissioned to reveal God’s plan for the inclusion of Gentile believers with Jewish believers in the new entity, the church. He was awed that God had made him a servant of this revelation. He wanted the Gentile recipients of his epistle to welcome joyfully the mystery that he was writing about.

In the New Testament, the term *mystery* generally means “previously unknown spiritual truth now revealed.” It is helpful to note that the term appears in three separate New Testament contexts. First, Jesus spoke of the mystery (or mysteries) of the kingdom of God (Matt. 13:11; Mark 4:11; Luke 8:10). He used this language in the context of His parables about the kingdom. In these stories, Jesus revealed an understanding of the kingdom of God different from what the Jewish people had come to expect.

Second, Paul used the term some twenty times in his various epistles, six times in Ephesians. Third, the Book of Revelation refers to a mystery four times (1:20; 10:7; 17:5,7). As we study this session’s Bible passage, we will discover that three times the apostle referred to a mystery. The invitation is clear. Will we recognize that God is inviting us as believers to proclaim the revealed mystery that is the church? I pray that we will!

**THE MYSTERY (Eph. 3:1-6)**

Paul described himself as a prisoner because of God’s revelation of the gospel. All persons, including Gentiles, may receive God’s salvation through faith in Jesus.
VERSE 1

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

With the words for this reason, the apostle opened a prayer for the first recipients of his letter to gain spiritual strength (see Eph. 3:14-16). Before he got to the actual content of the prayer, however, Paul described his personal calling and role in proclaiming God’s new revelation—the gospel.

First, Paul embraced the fact that he was, in effect, the prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of the Gentiles. On one hand, the apostle used the term prisoner literally. That is, Paul had spent time in jails on more than one occasion during his missionary journeys—always as a consequence of preaching the gospel (see Acts 16:22-24; 24:27). Indeed, Paul was likely confined to house arrest in Rome (awaiting trial before the emperor) when he wrote the Letter to the Ephesians. In another epistle written during that same two-year time period (see Acts 28:30), Paul wrote that “it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard, and to everyone else, that my imprisonment is because I am in Christ” (Phil. 1:13). It was in this sense, then, that the apostle could refer literally to being the prisoner of Christ Jesus.

On the other hand, Paul also spoke at times of being captured by Christ in his calling to salvation and gospel service (Phil. 3:12). From a spiritual point of view, the apostle realized that his life was no longer his but belonged to Christ, who lived in him (Gal. 2:20). Christ’s mission for Paul was to serve as an apostle and preacher especially to Gentiles (1 Tim. 2:7). Thus, Paul viewed his current imprisonment in Rome as also being on behalf of the Gentiles. As aware as he was of his Jewish heritage (see Phil. 3:4-6), Paul the prisoner of Christ fully and happily embraced his gospel ministry to Gentiles.

VERSE 2

you have heard, haven’t you, about the administration of God’s grace that he gave to me for you?

Paul had invested as much as three years establishing churches in Ephesus and throughout the province of Asia (Acts 20:31). Yet several years had passed since he had been in the city. He knew that the church contained new believers whom he had not met personally, much less discipled them in the faith. Thus, the words you have heard, haven’t you were Paul’s way of saying, “Don’t miss what I am about to say.” For Paul, it was important that all the recipients of the letter understood his devotion and service to Christ.

The term translated administration (“dispensation,” KJV; “stewardship,” ESV) essentially had to do with the management of a large household. In such a household, the steward was responsible for carrying out the owner’s
instructions. Paul had become a steward of God’s grace to the Gentiles. He had been entrusted with the responsibility of proclaiming the good news of salvation by grace through faith. Yet, there was also another element to Paul’s administration of God’s grace, as he was about to declare.

**VERSE 3**

*The mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have briefly written above.*

God commissioned Paul to be the steward of a **mystery**, a previously unknown spiritual truth now revealed. Paul did not conceive of this newly revealed truth. Rather, it was **made known** to him by **revelation**. God revealed the truth to Paul in Christ.

God’s revelation about Gentile inclusion in the gospel had come to Paul first on the road to Damascus. The risen Christ informed Paul that He was sending him to the Gentiles “to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a share among those who are sanctified by faith” (Acts 26:17-18). Previously in the Letter to the Ephesians, Paul had **briefly written** about the mystery (see 1:9,17).

**VERSE 4**

*By reading this you are able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ.*

Paul assured the recipients of his letter that he had more to tell them about the revelation he received. The words **by reading this** do not indicate that Paul expected his letter to be passed around among rank and file believers in Ephesus. More likely, the letter would be read aloud by a church leader during a gathering of the congregation. It seems reasonable to conclude that an Ephesian church leader would read and teach from passages in the letter at many subsequent worship gatherings. Thankfully, believers today continue to have opportunities to keep on **reading** and understanding Paul’s words.

Paul’s desire was that believers might truly understand his **insight** (“knowledge,” KJV) into God’s ways. The apostle was neither taking credit for the knowledge nor boasting about his special role as the recipient of revelation. On the contrary, he was taking pains to emphasize that knowledge of the **mystery of Christ** was a divine gift, not a human invention.

The phrase rendered **the mystery of Christ** can be literally translated as “the mystery that is Christ.” In other words, Christ Himself is the revelation of truth. He is the gospel (good news) in whom both Jews and Gentiles can receive everlasting salvation.
VERSE 5

This was not made known to people in other generations as it is now revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit:

The prophets of the Lord during Old Testament times had written about the coming of the Messiah. Yet, the full extent of Gentile inclusion in the Messiah’s redeemed community was never fully revealed in the Old Testament. Paul was now preaching and writing about that inclusion in an epistle that would come to be recognized as having the same inspired authority as the Old Testament Scriptures.

Paul further declared that previous generations—whether Jews or Gentiles—had not received the full revelation of God’s redemptive plan until Jesus the Messiah came into the world. In Christ, however, that destiny-changing spiritual truth had been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. Paul included himself in this group but also acknowledged that others received and faithfully proclaimed the gospel as well. Indeed, Paul affirmed in Ephesians 2:20 that God was building His new spiritual temple (the church) “on the foundation of the apostles and prophets.”

Today, we recognize that fresh revelation by the Spirit is no longer necessary because we have the written Word of God, a complete and perfect source of God’s truth. At the same time, as followers of Jesus, we depend on the same Spirit to illuminate our hearts and minds so that we can understand the message of truth and apply it in our lives each day.

VERSE 6

The Gentiles are coheirs, members of the same body, and partners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

In this verse, Paul spelled out clearly that the previously unknown truth now revealed in Christ was simple yet profound: the Gentiles are included in salvation right alongside Jewish believers. He used three theologically rich descriptors to explain what this truth entails. In the Greek language of the New Testament, each descriptor begins with a preposition that essentially means “together with,” “joint,” or “fellow.” The emphasis is on unity.

- **Coheirs**—Gentile believers, now united to Christ, have become joint heirs with Jewish believers of all the covenant blessings and promises of God.
- **Members of the same body**—Jewish believers and Gentile believers are not two equal but separate entities. All believers from all backgrounds comprise one body—the body of Christ—of which He is the head.
- **Partners in the promise**—Gentile believers and Jewish believers share equally in God’s promise of eternal life and salvation, even though Gentiles were formerly “foreigners to the covenants of promise” (2:12). Further, the
Session 5: Revealed

promise comes to all believers in Christ Jesus through the gospel. Only when the good news is preached and believed will people come to Christ. Ultimately, the gospel is the only effective means of unity between people of diverse backgrounds.

The consequences of Paul’s understanding of the mystery are overwhelming for us in the twenty-first century. God’s salvation is offered to all people everywhere, no matter what external features distinguish them. All who receive salvation in Christ are given a place in His body, the church.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Reflect on the truth that, as a believer, you are a joint heir, a fellow member of the body, and a copartner in eternal life with every other believer around the world. What are the implications for you in terms of your relationships with people who are different from you?

THE PROCLAMATION (Eph. 3:7-9)

The apostle wrote that God had made him a servant of the gospel to proclaim Christ, especially to Gentiles. Paul—and believers today—share the good news with others based on their understanding of the depth of God’s riches and as a response to God’s grace.

VERSE 7

I was made a servant of this gospel by the gift of God’s grace that was given to me by the working of his power.

Paul continued to reflect on his role as an apostle and proclaimer of the mystery of Christ. He described himself as a servant of this gospel. The Greek term rendered servant is not the word that means “bond-slave” but rather is the root word from which we get our English term deacon. In the New Testament, this term was often used for a believer who worked in the service of Christ (2 Cor. 3:6; Eph. 6:21; Col. 1:23). Thus, Paul’s thought moved from the mystery of the church (truth revealed to him) to the ministry of the gospel (truth proclaimed by him).

Just as the mystery was not of human origin, so also the apostle’s preaching ministry was a gift of God’s grace entrusted to Paul. His calling to proclaim the gospel of Christ was all the more a matter of grace in that Paul had once persecuted those who believed the gospel. Further, he emphasized his inability to succeed in such a ministry by reminding the Ephesians that
his success was solely by the working of God’s power. In his own strength, Paul could not accomplish what God had entrusted to him. The terms working and power are synonymous, both carrying the idea of energy or might and stressing God’s provision of strength for ministry. When God entrusts His people with a task, He equips them and enables them to complete it.

VERSE 8

This grace was given to me—the least of all the saints—to proclaim to the Gentiles the incalculable riches of Christ,

Paul celebrated the undeserved privilege he enjoyed by reflecting on an additional factor beyond his own human weakness. He stated again that God’s grace was given to him beyond his ability to quantify it. In Paul’s thinking, he was the least of all the saints. Two points may be noted about this phrase. First, the phrase includes an interesting comparative term that essentially means “least of the lesser” or perhaps “lowest of the low.” Paul admitted that he of all people was undeserving of a holy God’s grace. Second, the phrase may represent a wordplay on the meaning of Paul’s name: “small.” In his own wisdom and strength, Paul was smaller than small; in Christ, however, he was an empowered proclaimer of the life-changing gospel.

The apostle described the substance of his ministry as proclamation to Gentiles. The verb rendered to proclaim is a form closely related to the noun “good news” or “gospel.” Thus, the phrase “announce the good news” expresses the basic meaning. The gospel message centered around the death and resurrection of Jesus and salvation to all who believe (1 Cor. 15:1-8). Here, however, Paul described the good news simply as the incalculable riches of Christ. He had written earlier in the epistle of the riches of Christ’s grace (1:7) and the wealth of His glorious inheritance (1:18). Here, he added an adjective meaning “unfathomable” or “past finding out”—referring to something that can never be measured (see Rom. 11:33). Christ is the infinite gift believers receive in salvation. Indeed, every other spiritual blessing is found in Him and given by Him to those who come to Him in faith.

VERSE 9

and to shed light for all about the administration of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things.

In this verse, the apostle described another aspect of his ministry. Paul had been commissioned to shed light for all concerning the unsearchable riches of Christ. Those who desperately need to hear the good news are in spiritual darkness. In his conversion experience and call to service, Paul had heard the risen Christ tell him that he would be sent to the Gentiles in order that
they might “turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God” (Acts 26:18). Paul never forgot this commission. Similarly, when we as believers engage in evangelism and people respond by believing in Jesus, this is God’s appointed means by which spiritual enlightenment occurs.

Paul then summarized the spiritual content of his message: **the mystery hidden for ages.** Now the time had come for God’s truth about salvation to be fully revealed. This was not a plan that God had recently devised; rather, it had been His purpose since He created all things. Now that God had established a new creation in Christ—the church (2:15), He made a fuller revelation about that new creation. Paul thus connected God’s work as Creator with His work in Christ as Redeemer.

**EXPLORE FURTHER**

Read Ephesians 1:7,18; 2:7; and 3:16. What was Paul’s focus in these verses? How did his teaching about riches differ from worldly views? What changes in your view of riches should you consider making?

**THE PURPOSE** (Eph. 3:10-13)

Paul described the purpose of his ministry in terms of making God’s wisdom known in accordance with His plan for redemption. This gives believers boldness to approach God with confidence.

**VERSE 10**

*This is so that God’s multi-faceted wisdom may now be made known through the church to the rulers and authorities in the heavens.*

God’s purpose for the church as a demonstration of His multi-faceted wisdom (“manifold wisdom,” KJV; ESV; NIV) extends far beyond earthly bounds. Even spiritual beings (the rulers and authorities in the heavens) cannot help but acknowledge the wisdom of God’s plan of redemption. Paul had alluded to such spiritual beings previously in the letter (1:20-21).

Here, Paul indicated that angelic hosts are observing what God is accomplishing in and through the church. This may be compared with Peter’s similar observation in 1 Peter 1:12 that “angels long to catch a glimpse of these things.” Indirectly, Paul was showing the blessed status of believers in God’s kingdom. Believers can experience salvation and then declare the gospel to others. Angels can only observe this grace-filled reality through the church.
The Greek term translated *multi-faceted* literally means “many-colored.” It was used for describing flowers, embroidered cloth, or woven carpets. In other words, the church—made up of Jews and Gentiles, slave and free, educated and uneducated, men and women, young and old—is a diverse community bound together not by nationality, language, or human coercion but by the Holy Spirit of God. The church, adorned by forgiveness and new life, is the purest reflection possible of the *multi-faceted* wisdom of God.

**VERSE 11**

**This is according to his eternal purpose accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

Paul repeated his emphasis that while God’s great wisdom on display through the church was a new revelation, it was not a new plan conceived only after another plan had failed. Full Gentile inclusion in salvation—the mystery that Paul emphasized in this section of his epistle—had always been part of God’s *eternal purpose*. God had a plan for His creation from the moment He spoke it into being. That plan continues to unfold in history through the church.

God the Father’s eternal purpose was *accomplished in Christ Jesus* the Lord. From one perspective, Christ has been the Divine Agent who carried out the original creation (Col. 1:16). Yet here, Paul’s focus was on Christ as the One who accomplished salvation for sinful human beings and created the new entity consisting of redeemed people. He did this through His incarnation and sacrificial death on the cross to provide salvation. Paul’s expansion of Christ’s name shows His greatness: He is the Christ, the promised Messiah. He is Jesus, the name that signifies His work as Savior. He is Lord, the title that reflects His sovereignty.

**VERSE 12**

**In him we have boldness and confident access through faith in him.**

Paul turned from the cosmic perspective of God’s redemptive plan to the personal significance that God’s plan has for Christians. Because believers are in him, that is, they have faith in Christ, they enjoy many wonderful privileges. Paul mentioned two specific blessings that believers enjoy.

First, we as believers have boldness in our relationship with God. The Greek term rendered boldness carries the idea of freedom to speak without fear or shame. (See Eph. 6:20 on being bold before other humans. See Heb. 4:16 and 10:19 on what boldness in God’s presence implies.)

Second, we as believers have confident access to God through Christ. Paul previously used the term rendered access in Ephesians 2:18 to emphasize
that the gospel gives both Jewish and Gentile believers access to God. We may approach God directly and freely through Christ, who has forgiven our sins, enabling us to draw near to a holy God. The term rendered confident emphasizes the assurance we have in Christ that the Father accepts us.

**VERSE 13**

**So then I ask you not to be discouraged over my afflictions on your behalf, for they are your glory.**

Paul was aware that the first recipients of the Letter to the Ephesians might have become discouraged over his afflictions. They likely would have been aware already of Paul’s imprisonment in Rome and the uncertain situation the apostle was in with regard to the Roman emperor. Yet Paul was confident. He was a servant in God’s eternal, cosmic plan, displayed in the heavens. He had enjoyed the privilege and responsibility of preaching the gospel to many people in many places over many years. He had seen the life-changing power of the gospel in his own life and in the lives of those he led to faith in Christ. For Paul, suffering hardships, beatings, and imprisonment for the gospel had simply been part of God’s plan for him.

Paul ended this section by noting that his sufferings also resulted in glory for believers. There are two possible understandings of this statement. First, Paul could have meant that if he had not been willing to suffer, he would never have preached and seen people come to Christ. The salvation of the Ephesians was glorious, and personal suffering by Paul was of little consequence by comparison. Second, the apostle may have meant that by observing his afflictions for the gospel, the Ephesians would see a living example of what it means to glorify the Lord in all circumstances.

Paul was therefore confident that his current imprisonment in Rome was part of God’s purpose and plan for him. Moreover, his situation glorified God even more than if he had continued with his ministry without any problems. While we as believers may not experience the same afflictions Paul did, we can be like him in this regard: We can find purpose in sharing the gospel with others and in understanding that God is glorified when we do so.

**EXPLORE FURTHER**

Read the article titled “Access” on pages 16–17 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. Why is it important for believers to know they have access to God? How can you show during the upcoming week that you understand this wonderful truth?
Residence

God offers believers strength by Christ dwelling in us.

Late in 2017, news media from around the world went into overdrive with the British royal family’s announcement that Prince Harry, sixth in the line of succession to the throne, was engaged to marry Meghan Markle, an American actress. The couple’s wedding date was set for May 19, 2018. Entertainment media representatives were abuzz with speculation about what the big day would include.

Like most Americans, Miss Markle knew few details about the British royal family before she met and began dating the young prince. She acknowledged that she had a steep learning curve when it came to royal traditions and protocols. And while the royal family affirmed Prince Harry’s engagement and sincerely welcomed his bride-to-be, the fact remained that Meghan was neither a British citizen at the time nor a member of any royal family. In at least those two respects, she was an outsider. However, her upcoming marriage to the prince would change everything. She would take on a new life, new citizenship, new responsibilities, a new residence, and a new future. She would become an adopted member of the British royal family.

In a more eternally significant way, followers of Christ experience a similar radical transformation. Apart from Christ, people are truly outsiders to God’s family. Unbelievers are spiritually dead in their sins (Eph. 2:1), are “excluded from the citizenship of Israel … without hope and without God in the world” (2:12). That all changes, however, when sinners come to faith in Christ. Believers become “fellow citizens with the saints, and members of God’s household” (2:19). In Christ—the Prince of peace and King of kings—we receive eternal life, new citizenship in heaven, a new purpose for living in the here and now, and a new royal inheritance reserved in the life to come.

In this session, we will focus on a remarkable prayer that Paul wrote and placed in the middle of Ephesians at the conclusion of his doctrinal section (chaps. 1–3). As such, the prayer guides us into a mountaintop experience with the Triune God. With Paul we can learn to “kneel before the Father” (3:14) in worship, “be strengthened with power … through his Spirit” (3:16), and “know Christ’s love that surpasses knowledge” (3:19).
UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

EPHESIANS 3:14-21

This session marks the final study in passages of Ephesians that focus primarily on theological and doctrinal matters (chaps. 1–3). Paul used the first three chapters of his epistle to lay a solid theological foundation for the subsequent chapters’ emphasis on Christian living (chaps. 4–6). Like most of Paul’s epistles to churches, Ephesians follows a basic two-part outline: right beliefs (good doctrine) provide the basis for right behavior (good works).

Let’s review the theological themes that Paul has emphasized thus far:

• **The blessings of salvation**—Through Jesus’ sacrificial death on the cross, God chose to provide salvation for sinners. Those who believe in Jesus have been chosen, redeemed, and sealed by God (1:1-14).

• **Prayer for enlightenment**—Paul prayed for the recipients of his letter to understand that God helps believers comprehend the riches and greatness of His calling (1:15-23).

• **Made alive in Christ**—Salvation comes by grace through faith apart from good works. We who were once dead have been made alive in Christ by God’s grace (2:1-10).

• **The peace Jesus brings**—Gentile believers were once without hope and separated from God. Now God has brought all believers near Him through Christ. Previous barriers between believers are gone (2:11-22).

• **God’s revealed mystery**—God’s new entity, the church, was a mystery not revealed before but is now made known. Believers are to proclaim the mystery of the church (3:1-13).

In 3:14-21, Paul recorded a second prayer for the recipients of the letter. (The first recorded prayer is in 1:15-23.) Let us take note of a couple of background matters regarding the second prayer. First, it serves as a culmination of Paul’s effort to build a theological case for the church as God’s new covenant people (unifying Jewish and Gentile believers in one body). The apostle’s concluding prayer in the section was meant to capture not only the minds but also the hearts of the Ephesian believers (and us). Paul wanted believers to experience right theology, not just study it.

Second, the prayer in 3:14-21 effectively serves as a template or model for passionate intercessory prayer by believers today. Consider three parts of the prayer. First is the preface (3:14-15), in which Paul expressed his intention to entreat the Father. Second is the petition itself (3:16-19), in which Paul poured out his deepest concerns for the Ephesian believers. Third is the praise Paul offered (3:20-21), a glorious outpouring to God for His glory to be fully on display throughout eternal ages.
PETITIONED (Eph. 3:14-15)

Paul prefaced his prayer by declaring that he was making his petition to the Father, the One from whom all other families receive their name.

VERSE 14

For this reason I kneel before the Father

The words for this reason connect with 3:1 in that Paul actually introduced his prayer in that verse. At 3:2, however, the apostle decided to interject an extended explanation of God’s grace in using him (“the least of all the saints,” 3:8) to reveal the mystery of the church. In Christ, both Jewish and Gentile believers received “boldness and confident access” (3:12) to the Father not only in salvation but also in matters such as worship and prayer. Thus, Paul laid a wonderful foundation for the prayer he was about to record.

Paul’s earnestness in prayer shines through in the Greek verb rendered I kneel. The usual posture of prayer for Jewish men was to stand with their arms raised upward (Matt. 6:5; Luke 18:11,13). To prostrate oneself in prayer was an expression of great humility and intensity—as when Solomon prayed to the Lord at the dedication of the temple and as Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsemane (1 Kings 8:54; Luke 22:41). Some Christians today kneel as a regular posture in their private praying.

The apostle addressed his prayer to the Father. He had already called God “the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” and then later “the Father” to whom believing Jews and Gentiles now have equal access (1:3; 2:18). Here in 3:14, Paul set the stage for a full-fledged trinitarian understanding of prayer.

VERSE 15

from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named.

Paul expanded his declaration of God as Father. He went beyond previous descriptions of God as the loving Father of Jesus and as the heavenly Father of Jewish and Gentile believers united in His new community. Paul declared that God’s fatherhood extends to every family in heaven and on earth. Bible students have struggled to understand exactly what Paul meant.

First, it should be noted that in the original language of the New Testament, the terms for “father” and “family” are more closely related in form than English Bible translations indicate. The Greek term rendered family can be literally translated as “a father-headed group.”
Second, many Bible students have understood Paul to be making a statement about God’s general fatherhood as Creator over all creation. Genesis 1 declares that God created various types (families) of creatures—birds, fish, land animals, humanity. Thus, Paul may have been pointing to God’s inherent sovereignty over all of His creation. If this understanding is correct, then Paul’s reference to families in heaven points to the existence of heavenly beings such as angels and other rulers and authorities “in the heavens” (1:20; 3:10).

An alternate view suggests that Paul’s reference to every family referred to local Christian congregations. Proponents of this view point out that, in Ephesians, Paul consistently used the term church to refer to the worldwide body of believers and probably chose the word family to point to a Christian fellowship in a particular location. If this view is correct, then the Father’s family in heaven could refer to believers who already had died and are in Christ’s care as they await the resurrection in the end time.

In either of these two views, (I lean toward the view that Paul was referring to God’s fatherhood as the Creator of all), there is one further magnificent aspect to God as Father that Paul identified. God is the source and supreme example of the very idea of fatherhood. God the Father conceived of the idea of family. He defined its nature, purpose, and organization. In this regard, He has in effect named every family (“from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name,” NIV).

So then, Paul considered the relationship between God’s fatherhood and father-headed families neither as an analogy nor as a psychological projection. Instead, God’s fatherhood stands first. All other expressions of fatherhood and family are derived from God, because He is eternally “God the Father.” Today, we can strengthen other believers by praying for them to our heavenly Father, just as Paul prayed for the Ephesians.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Kneel” on page 977 in the Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded. How do you react to Paul’s declaration that he literally knelt as he prayed for the Ephesians? At what times or for what situations have you been motivated to kneel in prayer?

INDWELLED (Eph. 3:16-19)

Paul prayed that believers would gain spiritual strength, deeper faith, and abundant love. These qualities come from Christ’s indwelling presence.
VERSE 16

I pray that he may grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with power in your inner being through his Spirit,

The words I pray have been supplied in most English Bible translations to clarify that Paul began to express the substance of his prayer in this verse. His aspirations for the Ephesian believers’ spiritual growth rose higher and higher. Paul offered four petitions, each petition building on the previous one until he boldly asked that his fellow believers might know God fully.

Paul’s first petition was for God to grant believers the strength they needed to thrive in their faith. He used several phrases to expound the gift of strength. First, the strength would be granted according to the riches of God’s glory. Paul had previously described “the riches of [God’s] grace” (2:7), emphasizing that all the priceless blessings of salvation come to believers as a demonstration of grace, not from merit or payment for good works. God’s storehouse of strength for His people is limitless.

Second, God graciously strengthens His people with power. Previously, Paul had told the Ephesians that his ministry as an apostle and gospel herald was given to him “by the working of [God’s] power” (3:7). That same divine power is available to every believer. Thus, Paul prayed that the Christians in Ephesus might likewise receive God’s strengthening power. The verb rendered strengthened means “made capable of achieving something desirable.”

Third, Paul prayed that the Ephesians would be strengthened in their inner being (“inner man,” KJV). Proverbs 4:23 exhorts the people of God to “guard your heart above all else, for it is the source of life.” Paul recognized the truth of that proverb, and it was essentially what he prayed for the believers in Ephesus. Even more than physical strength, Christians need spiritual strength that has been tempered in the crucible of endurance (see 1 Tim. 4:8).

Fourth, Paul knew that for believers to be strengthened spiritually, it would happen through the Spirit. Spiritual strength for faithful Christian living is provided through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit in the believer. Here is Paul’s reference to the third Person of the Trinity. In Romans 8:9, Paul declared that “if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to him.” Thus, the Spirit is present in believers and is ready and willing to empower them to live for God.

VERSE 17

and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. I pray that you, being rooted and firmly established in love,
Next, Paul rephrased his first petition using different terms. Instead of referring to the “inner being” he referred to believers’ hearts. Instead of praying for the Spirit’s power, he prayed that Christ would dwell in believers. Here, Paul was not suggesting a strict separation between Christ’s dwelling in believers and the Spirit’s indwelling. To be precise, Christ dwells in the believer’s heart through the Spirit (Rom. 8:9-10).

What is especially noteworthy is that the Greek verb translated dwell in implies permanent residence, being completely at home rather than temporarily living in a place. Christ begins His residence in believers at the time of conversion, yet there is something more for believers to enjoy: the joyful understanding that He is fully at home in their lives. What is required of believers? Only that they continue to live the Christian life through faith, just as they began the Christian life by faith.

In the second half of Ephesians 3:17, Paul began his second petition. He prayed that God would grant believers the experience of His love. Again, he used several phrases to express more fully what this petition entails. Essentially, the goal of receiving inner strength as believers is for us to become better at loving God and loving one another.

First, Paul prayed that believers might be rooted ... in love. The kind of love Paul mentioned is self-giving, Christlike love (Greek, agape [ah GAH pay]). One supernatural outcome of saving faith is the capacity to express genuine love. Paul drew upon an illustration from plant life. When a tree extends deep roots into good soil, it is more likely to withstand every stormy blast. As Christians grow spiritually in the fertile soil of God’s love, they develop deep roots, empowering the bearing of much fruit—showing genuine love to others in Jesus’ name.

Second, Paul asked that believers might be firmly established (“grounded,” KJV; ESV) in God’s love. The verb rendered established relates not to an agriculture context but to architecture. It depicts the constructing of a house on a strong foundation. In other words, love is the solid ground on which the Christian life must be built in order to withstand the storms of life. Jesus told a parable to this effect, commending the wisdom of a man who built his house on the rock rather than on sand (Matt. 7:24-27).

**EXPLORE FURTHER**

Consider the two verbs (rooted, firmly established) that Paul used to describe building a life on the foundation of God’s love. How can a believer continue to deepen his or her spiritual roots in the soil of God’s love? What evidence shows that a believer’s life is firmly established on God’s love?
may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the length and width, height and depth of God’s love,

Paul’s third petition was for God to grant believers a fully formed, multidimensional comprehension of God’s love. The logic of Paul’s thinking was that once we as believers have been rooted and grounded in the experience of Christlike love, we will better be able to grasp its measureless extent. Again, the apostle used several phrases to express more fully what he meant.

• **May be able to comprehend**—The Greek verb rendered *may be able* refers to the ability or strength to achieve something. The verb translated *comprehend* means “realizing, understanding, or grasping something.” Paul wanted believers to move beyond mere intellectual knowledge to a deep and true spiritual knowledge.

• **With all the saints**—Christians can never grow spiritually as God intends in isolation, as solitary individuals. It is when all kinds of believers—Jew and Gentile, male and female, young and old, rich and poor—live, worship, and serve Christ in community that God’s love is on display at its best. A great diversity of believers in any church congregation provides a fertile ground for the blossoming of Christlike love!

• **Length and width, height and depth**—At the least, mentioning these dimensions points to the truth that God’s love is limitless and beyond measure. Nevertheless, I like to say that God’s love is long enough to last forever, wide enough to include all people groups, high enough to take us to heaven, and deep enough to reach the heart of the vilest sinner.

and to know Christ’s love that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

The apostle continued his third petition by expressing the same idea with different words (just as he had done with the first petition in 3:16-17). In place of the phrase “may be able to comprehend,” Paul used the verb rendered *to know.* This verb represents the common Greek word for knowledge that was used frequently by the writers of the New Testament. However, Paul then expressed a petition for something that in a sense is an impossibility: *to know Christ’s love that surpasses knowledge.*

Christ’s love, in all its dimensions, is infinite and thus can never be completely grasped by our finite human minds. Love in its pure, infinite form has existed throughout eternity in the bond of love that unites the Triune Godhead. It was expressed in the act of creation, when the Son lovingly carried out the Father’s design for the universe (Col. 1:16). It was
on view when the Son took on human flesh in the incarnation. And it was displayed in amazing splendor in the Son’s willing sacrifice on the cross to provide salvation. We as believers can grow in our understanding of (and practice of) such love but we cannot fully comprehend it. Thus, when Paul wrote that such love surpasses knowledge, he did not mean that Christ’s love is unknowable but that it is so measureless that we cannot draw a line around it to contain it. It is limitless.

Paul had used the term translated surpasses on two previous occasions in his epistle. He had written of the “immeasurable greatness of [God’s] power” (1:19) and of the “immeasurable riches of his grace” (2:7). Here, the same term is applied to Christ’s love. God’s power, grace, and love are beyond measure, yet they have all been extended to believers in Christ. Further, just as surely as the riches of Christ are “incalculable” (3:8), so the love of Christ is immeasurably great and beyond full comprehension.

Paul’s fourth petition was for God to grant believers the experience of His fullness. This petition is actually the culmination of his requests for the Ephesian believers (and Christians today). The Greek term rendered fullness means “completeness.” Paul had previously stated that the church, Christ’s body, is “the fullness of the one who fills all things in every way” (1:23). He later declared that believers are to grow to maturity “with a stature measured by Christ’s fullness” (4:13). In 3:19, it is all the fullness of God that Paul noted.

God’s fullness, or perfection, is the goal toward which we as believers pray to be filled. Just as we are called to be holy as God is holy and to be perfect as God is perfect (1 Pet. 1:15-16; Matt. 5:48), so we are called to the fullness of God as He is full. This phrase likely points to the lifelong process of embracing and trusting the presence and power of God in our lives to an ever greater measure. We are to be filled in this way over time, just as it takes time for a large container to be filled. Later in the letter, Paul challenged the recipients of his letter to “be filled by the Spirit” (5:18). As believers, we seek to experience the power and guidance of Christ through the indwelling Spirit. It is through the Spirit’s enabling that we as Christians move toward enjoying all the fullness of God.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Write a paraphrase of Ephesians 3:16-19 and reflect on the implications of Paul’s prayer petitions for your life. How intent are you in praying for a greater grasp of God’s love in your life? What evidence shows that you are being changed from the inside out by the indwelling Christ?
HONORED (Eph. 3:20-21)

Paul concluded his prayer with a doxology in which he declared God’s majesty and noted that God’s majesty is demonstrated in the church and in Christ. Thus, the church brings glory to God forever.

VERSE 20

Now to him who is able to do above and beyond all that we ask or think according to the power that works in us—

Paul was daring and bold in the petitions he had made for believers. Yet Paul had supreme confidence that God could grant his petitions in ways that defied imagination. Further, Paul’s intercession culminated in praise. His petitions had reflected on the greatness of God; now he praised this great God.

Paul’s confidence in God’s response to prayer was expressed in careful steps. First, God is able to do. He is alive and powerful. He is not passive or inactive. This declaration stands in sharp contrast to the worship of lifeless idols previously practiced by the Gentile believers in Ephesus.

Second, God can do all that we ask. He listens to the prayers of His children and is willing to answer our requests.

Third, God can even do everything that we as His people are able to think. In fact, He knows our thoughts better than we do. Sometimes we imagine prayer requests that we never express aloud. He hears them nevertheless.

Fourth, God is able to do things above and beyond our petitions. His answers sometimes (and always can) greatly exceed what we ask for. The Greek word rendered above is the root of our English term hyper. Paul may have coined the word translated beyond. Together the two words imply a measure of “exceeding abundantly” (KJV) or “immeasurably more” (NIV).

Fifth, God answers our prayers according to the power that works in us. Paul was repeating the initial part of his petition that believers might be strengthened with power in their inner being (3:16). God’s power is already working in the believer’s heart through His Spirit.

VERSE 21

to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Bible students rightly call the conclusion to Paul’s prayer a doxology. The Greek word rendered glory is the basis for the first part of the word (Greek, doxa). Thus, the word doxology literally means “praise word” or “word of praise” to God. The first three chapters of Ephesians overflow with references to God’s glory, or magnificence:
• God’s saving of believers brings praise to the glory of His grace (1:6);
• Jewish believers who first put their hope in Jesus as the promised Messiah brought praise to God’s glory (1:12);
• The Spirit is the down payment on believers’ inheritance, bringing praise to God’s glory (1:14);
• God is characterized as the Father of glory (1:17);
• God has provided the riches of the glory of His inheritance for the saints (1:18); and
• God will give spiritual strength according to the riches of His glory (3:16).

Here at the end of the doctrinal section of the letter—and as the conclusion to an earnest prayer—Paul noted that glory is due to God to all generations. While Paul previously implied that glory was an inherent attribute of God, he shifted the emphasis slightly in this doxology. He emphasized God’s worthiness to receive glory (in the sense of praise) from believers. To illustrate: a gorgeous snowcapped mountain range might be inherently magnificent yet at the same time be exulted over by those who stand at its base and view it. Similarly, those throughout history (forever and ever) who come to know God through Christ and stand before Him as His redeemed people cannot help but gush with praise over His inherent majesty.

Paul stated that the glory of God is expressed in two ways. First, it is declared in the church. As Paul explained in the first part of the letter, the church is the special community of faith through which God’s purposes are made evident. Second, Christ Jesus is the One in whom the glory of God is displayed in fullness. Together, the church and the Son—body and Head; bride and Bridegroom; redeemed and Redeemer—display His magnificence. The glory of God is most splendidly displayed in the faith-union of redeemed sinful humanity with the sinless Son.

**EXPLORE FURTHER**

Read the article titled “Glory” on pages 647–648 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How important is it for believers to grasp that our ultimate purpose is to declare the glory of God eternally? What will you do during the coming week to express honor to God for demonstrating His majesty in Christ and through the church?
Walking Together

Believers demonstrate the truth of the gospel by being unified in their actions.

College football season is underway again in the United States. Many fans have renewed hopes for their team’s prospects to have a winning season, secure a postseason bowl invitation, or perhaps even qualify for the national championship game. My wife and I are fans of college football—with an added twist. While we thoroughly enjoy lounging together on the sofa to watch the games on TV, we would much prefer being in the bleachers at the stadium. That is in no small way because when we go to the stadium, we are treated not to one but rather to two great shows. There is the football game, of course; but we also delight in watching the marching band perform during halftime. The music and precision marching is a wonderful thing to behold.

It dawned on me as I reflected about this session’s theme—Christian unity in the church—that a football game and a marching band performance illustrate two potential approaches to understanding what church unity looks like. The marching band, for example, exemplifies what I would refer to as uniformity of action or the unity of overall sameness. Band members wear identical uniforms, step to the same cadence, and perform the same precise moves and turns as the members in front of or beside them.

Players on the football team wear identical uniforms too, although some players may have slightly different equipment (a bigger faceguard, extra padding or braces, different shoe type). More significantly, various players develop different skill sets and perform different functions in the game: the quarterback, offensive line players, receivers, defensive linebackers, and kickers, to name a few. These various kinds of players maintain a unity of purpose—to win the game—but they contribute in different ways. When the apostle Paul urged the Ephesians to “keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3), I believe he had in mind not uniformity but rather unity of purpose. That purpose is to live worthy of the gospel.
When Paul wrote the Letter to the Ephesians, some of the recipients had been followers of Jesus for several years. Paul evangelized and ministered in Ephesus around AD 54 and wrote the epistle some six or seven years later. So he had a reasonable expectation that there would be a certain level of maturity and stability among most believers in the congregation. Indeed, Paul addressed no behavioral or doctrinal crisis situations in the epistle but rather urged the recipients of the letter to keep on growing in their walk with the Lord and their life in the church.

As we explore Ephesians 4:1-10 in this session, several features merit consideration as integral to the background of these verses. First, we need to keep in mind Paul’s personal situation when he wrote the epistle: he was a prisoner being held under house arrest by the Roman government. Paul mentioned this fact again in 4:1 after having mentioned it previously in 3:1. Paul’s willingness to endure suffering on behalf of the gospel (and for the benefit of Gentile believers) added solemnity and urgency to his appeals for faithful Christian living even in difficult circumstances.

Second, we can better appreciate Paul’s exhortations about holy living by keeping in mind the pagan cultural influences in first-century Ephesus. Ephesus was a major cosmopolitan city in the vast Roman Empire, famous in no small way for its Temple of Artemis, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Some of the recipients of Paul’s letter probably had once worshiped at this pagan sanctuary. Paul exhorted them as followers of Christ to reject all pagan worship and allegiance to worldly influences. These believers would face daily pressures and temptations from the dominant culture.

Third, we do well to keep in the forefront of our thinking Paul’s teachings on the church expounded in chapters 1–3. The apostle declared the fresh truth revealed in the gospel that Jewish and Gentile believers alike were one redeemed family in Christ. Christians were called to demonstrate this reality in their attitudes and relationships in the church.

Fourth, Paul continued to urge believers to embrace the centrality and authority of the Scriptures as their guide for Christian living. In time, the Scriptures would consist not only of the Old Testament but also the Gospels and epistles such as the one Paul wrote to the Ephesian believers.

Fifth, we should keep in mind Paul’s central emphasis on the supremacy of Jesus Christ. Christ is the One toward whom all Scripture points and is the One in whom redemption and life eternal come to believers. In Christ alone believers receive both salvation and purpose for living.
EXPLORE THE TEXT

WALKING WORTHY (Eph. 4:1-3)

Paul’s first concern was to call on the recipients of his letter to demonstrate Christlike attitudes and behavior. Having been rescued from sin through Christ, believers are changed forever to glorify God in their daily living.

VERSE 1

Therefore I, the prisoner in the Lord, urge you to live worthy of the calling you have received,

The term therefore marks a transition in the epistle from a theological emphasis to a focus on living in accordance with one’s faith in Christ (see also Rom. 12:1; Col. 3:12). As one whose own destiny and purpose had been transformed by God’s saving grace, Paul spoke from experience and with authority. The first-person pronoun I is emphatic, meaning “I myself.” Further, Paul reminded the Ephesian believers of his situation. He was the prisoner in the Lord, incarcerated not for wrongdoing but for faithfully fulfilling his ministry as an apostle and preacher of the gospel. In fact, his imprisonment validated the genuineness of his obedience to Christ and demonstrated his Christlike love for the believers in Ephesus.

In light of those factors, Paul urged the recipients of his letter to live worthy of the calling they had received as God’s redeemed people. The Greek term rendered live literally means “walk.” Paul (and other New Testament writers) used the term as a word picture for daily living. When a person walks, he or she typically moves forward step by step toward a goal or destination. Thus, walking as a figure of speech for living pictures daily life as active, not passive. Believers live each day with God-given purpose because they have a new destination.

To challenge the Ephesian believers to live in a worthy manner implies that there is an unworthy manner of living. The unworthy life was the way believers had lived before they became followers of Christ. In Christ they were called (and empowered) to live a new life—not just in heaven in the future but also in the present as they faced the daily pressures and temptations of their surrounding culture.

VERSE 2

with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love,
Paul began his description of worthy living not by outlining a list of do’s and don’ts but rather by urging believers to embrace qualities or attitudes that are examples of the fruit of the Spirit’s presence in them (see Gal. 5:22-23).

**Humility** refers to thinking soberly about oneself. It is the opposite of arrogance or haughtiness. It involves refusing to consider oneself better than others or more deserving of honor and material wealth. The ancient Greco-Roman world placed little value on humility as a quality. (Today’s secular-materialist culture is hardly different!) Believers, however, are called to have the same attitude as Jesus Christ, who “humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death—even to death on a cross” (Phil. 2:8).

**Gentleness** (“meekness,” KJV) refers not to weakness but to the quality of being self-disciplined, refusing to assert one’s own importance. Using a different form of the same Greek word, Jesus characterized Himself as being “lowly and humble in heart” (Matt. 11:29). Thus, when we as believers seek to become gentler, we are desiring to be more Christlike.

**Patience** (“longsuffering,” KJV) refers to the willingness to endure aggravation, if not suffering, without lashing out in retaliation (see Jas. 5:10). It is the opposite of being short-tempered. Paul’s emphasis throughout this list was on qualities that are important for good interpersonal relationships.

The phrase **bearing with one another** extends the quality of patience in the sense of not overreacting to the faults or weaknesses of others. We as believers are saved forever in Christ, but we do not become perfect at the moment of conversion. Sanctification is a lifelong work of the Spirit in all of us. Just as Christ was patient with His first disciples, we too are called to bear with one another in the church.

**Love** (Greek, *agape*) is the fruit of the Spirit that energizes all other Christian qualities. Previously, Paul prayed that the recipients of his letter would be “rooted and firmly established in love” (Eph. 3:17). In Colossians 3:14, he stated that love serves as “the perfect bond of unity.” The use of guilt, fear, and coercion has no place in the church. True unity is built on humble, patient, self-giving love for one another.

VERSE 3

**making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.**

Paul affirmed that believers who grow in the preceding spiritual qualities would be better equipped to work toward the theological unity he had expounded in Ephesians 2. The atoning work of Christ on the cross had broken down the barriers between Jews and Gentiles. Still, believers and churches would need to continually embrace that reality in their daily actions.
Thus, Paul urged the Ephesian believers to strive to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. On one hand, Christian unity is strictly a work of the Spirit; it is a gift God gives His people, as is the peace that “surpasses all understanding” (Phil. 4:7). On the other hand, believers must strive to keep God-given unity. The Greek verb rendered making every effort suggests urgency. It means “spare no effort in” or “give diligence to” maintaining Christian unity among families and churches.

Interestingly, Paul used this Greek term rendered unity only twice in all of his writings, both times in Ephesians (see also 4:13). The word literally means “oneness,” a situation in which multiple people relate to one another in the bond of peace. Selfish assertiveness and resentment of others can do severe damage to a church’s unity. However, by consistently demonstrating the qualities mentioned in 4:2, Christians can preserve and even solidify the unity God has given the church.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the articles titled “Humility” (p. 777) and “Meekness” (p. 1075) in the Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded. How do you see these terms as alike and different in meaning? In what ways have you sought to cultivate these qualities in your life?

LIVING UNIFIED (Eph. 4:4-6)

Because every believer shares in the same hope found in Jesus, we are to live in unity. The relationship among the Persons of the Trinity is the standard for how believers are to relate to one another.

VERSE 4

There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope at your calling—

The spiritual realities that unite believers can and should transcend their differences of background and temperament. As Paul developed further the nature and meaning of Christian unity (oneness), he listed seven examples of oneness. He framed the list around the greatest example of true unity—the unity of the Triune Godhead. There is only one God, yet the one God has existed eternally in the perfect bond of unity in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The unity of the Godhead is the primary example that shows believers how they are to live in relationship with God and with one another.
The phrase **one body** is a reference to the church as the body of Christ (1:23). As Paul stated previously, Jewish and Gentile believers are part of one and the same family. All who believe in Christ are, in principle, united in one body, the body of Christ.

The phrase **one Spirit** refers to the Holy Spirit. (Interestingly, Paul referred to the Persons of the Trinity in a reverse order from the typical order of Father, Son, and Spirit.) The church is made alive and energized by one and the same Spirit, the Spirit who indwells each believer at conversion (Rom. 8:9; 1 Cor. 12:13). Thus, the one Spirit is the Divine Agent through whom the one body of believers around the world and throughout time exists.

The phrase **one hope at your calling** points to the one confident expectation that all Christians possess regarding the life to come. When we as believers responded to the gospel call in repentance and faith, we were forgiven of our sins and given a new life. Beyond that, moreover, we were also given the hope of an eternal inheritance. Paul had stated previously in Ephesians that “in [Christ] we have also received an inheritance” (1:11) and that the Spirit “is the down payment of our inheritance” (1:14). Whatever our ethnic or social backgrounds, we will all share the same glorious future!

**VERSE 5**

**one Lord, one faith, one baptism,**

The phrase **one Lord** points to the second Person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ the Son of God. He is the One in whom believers believe. Paul wrote in Romans 10:12, “There is no distinction between Jew and Greek, because the same Lord of all richly blesses all who call on him.” Whether Christians are rich or poor, male or female, famous or unknown, old or young, we are all bound by our loyalty to the same Lord. We bow before Him; neither personal ambition nor partisanship should be allowed to destroy our unity.

The phrase **one faith** can be understood in two ways. Paul may have meant the personal experience of trust in which every true Christian responds in faith to Jesus Christ for salvation. An alternative view is that Paul had in mind the body of objective truths that comprise the gospel message. In my judgment, the first option seems more likely in this context.

The phrase **one baptism** can also be understood in two ways. It can refer to the ritual of water baptism to which Jesus submitted and later instructed His followers to practice as a sign of obedient discipleship (see Matt. 3:15; 28:19). On the other hand, it can refer to the spiritual baptism (immersion) in which the believer is brought into the body of Christ upon conversion (see Rom. 6:3). In this case, Paul may have had both understandings in mind: the new believer is immersed into Christ’s body (His death, burial, and resurrection) and then gives witness to that spiritual reality in the obedient act of water baptism.
VERSE 6

one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

With the phrase one God and Father of all, Paul completed the trinitarian framework of the church’s unity. Christians do not believe in three gods, as critics sometimes charge. The Spirit, the Son, and the Father are three eternal Persons of the one Godhead. To be sure, many of the Ephesian believers were converted from pagan backgrounds in which multiple separate deities were thought to exist and were worshiped in the various pagan temples around the city. When they became followers of Christ, however, they affirmed the reality that only one true God exists. This God is the One whom Jesus taught His followers to address in prayer as “our Father” (Matt. 6:9).

Paul made four affirmations about God, each of which point to Him as the One who called into existence the one family of which He is the Father. The united family made up of God’s redeemed people is God-created, God-controlled, God-sustained, and God-filled, as Paul’s descriptions make clear.

First, this God is the God of all. As the Creator, He is fatherly in His attitude toward all human beings. All people are ultimately accountable to the one God whether or not they acknowledge Him. Moreover, God is Father in truth to those who become His children through faith in Jesus Christ.

Second, God is above all. He is sovereign over all people and all things. In His redeemed people (the church) He continues to reveal His multifaceted wisdom and display His eternal glory (Eph. 3:10,21).

Third, God is through all. He sustains His universe. He holds all things together for His own purposes. Within the family of which He is the Father, God works through believers so that we are empowered to accomplish His purposes.

Fourth, God is in all. The apostle had previously prayed that the recipients of his letter would understand the magnitude of Christ’s dwelling in their hearts through faith (3:17). The more they embraced this truth the more they would be “filled with all the fullness of God” (3:19). The one Father has thus created the one family. He rules it, sustains it, and fills all its members.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Why is it crucial for believers to demonstrate their faith by living in unity with one another? Are there ever any circumstances that justify disunity in a congregation? Why or why not? What actions might you take to help strengthen your church congregation’s unity?
ENJOYING VICTORY (Eph. 4:7-10)

Paul introduced the idea of believers receiving gifts from God with the illustration of a military victory parade. He drew from Psalm 68 to remind believers of a victory parade to Mount Zion, where Christ the conquering King distributes gifts to His followers.

VERSE 7

Now grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift.

As illustrated in the opening paragraphs of this session (see p. 70), unity does not require complete uniformity. To say it another way, believers can experience genuine oneness without everyone being the same in every respect. As followers of Christ, we are called to keep the unity that the Spirit has given us; we do so by continually growing in and showing the unifying qualities mentioned in Ephesians 4:2. Those qualities are given theological moorings in the seven doctrinal “ones” listed in 4:4-6.

Still, this unity of heart (the qualities) and unity of belief (the “ones”) do not blot out our unique personalities, nationalities, abilities, or life situations. Moreover, we as believers receive a variety of spiritual gifts and take on a variety of responsibilities in our church congregations. In fact, to speak of the church as a body is to acknowledge that there is diversity held together by unity. Just as a physical body has a variety of parts joined together into a greater, interconnected whole, so it is with the church (see 1 Cor. 12:12).

In Ephesians 4:7, Paul introduced his teaching on the diversity of gifted leaders God has provided for the church. He began by observing that grace was given to each one of us. Every believer equally experiences God’s amazing grace in salvation. In this verse, Paul likely was referring not to saving grace but to the grace of spiritual giftedness—what we might call serving grace. If spiritual gifts come to us strictly as a demonstration of grace, then there is no place for believers to feel either prideful or deficient. No believer is without at least one spiritual gift, and every believer’s gift is important for the body of Christ to function as God intends.

Gifts are given according to the measure of Christ’s gift. Christ gives spiritual gifts to His people without stinting, but He gives to them based on what He in His wisdom knows to be the best distribution of gifts: “A manifestation of the Spirit is given to each person for the common good” (1 Cor. 12:7). Although Paul did not use the same term for spiritual gift in Ephesians that he used in the discussion contained in 1 Corinthians 12, he clearly had the same reality in mind. We know this based on his use of the Greek term rendered grace (Greek, charis [KAH riss]).
VERSE 8

For it says: When he ascended on high, he took the captives captive; he gave gifts to people.

When Paul wrote about gifts given “according to the measure of Christ’s gift,” his thoughts went to the ascended Lord Jesus. During His ministry on earth, Jesus had promised that His disciples would receive the gift of the Spirit after He had been glorified (see John 7:39). Paul made an additional connection with this promise by drawing from an Old Testament text, Psalm 68:18. He likely drew from this psalm because it foreshadowed Christ’s victorious resurrection and ascension, followed by Christ’s distribution of spiritual gifts to His people. Some Bible students have pointed out that Psalm 68 was read in Jewish synagogues on the Day of Pentecost, which in the Book of Acts was the day on which the Spirit came in power on believers (see Acts 2:1-4).

In its Old Testament context, Psalm 68 depicts the Lord returning in triumph—either to Jerusalem or to heaven—after overthrowing the enemies of God. As the great conqueror, the Lord was portrayed as receiving gifts from those He had conquered and who now were His subjects.

The words when he ascended on high originally pointed to Israel’s God as the great King returning to His home after victory. The Romans also practiced military parades for generals returning victoriously from war (see 2 Cor. 2:14). Thus, the first recipients of Paul’s letter would have understood Paul’s culturally based illustration.

The words he took the captives captive additionally support the idea of a victory parade. Paul had written previously in Ephesians that with Christ’s resurrection and exaltation to the Father’s right hand, the Lord was revealed as “far above every ruler and authority, power and dominion” (Eph. 1:21). In Ephesians 1:22, Paul declared that God has “subjected everything under [Christ’s] feet,” a description of total victory and sovereignty.

Paul’s words he gave gifts to people require careful consideration. In Psalm 68:18, it is the conquering King who received gifts. That description, however, has been upended by God’s grace. Now the victorious King is the One who gave gifts to people. Paul shifted the emphasis from Christ as the Victor receiving gifts to an emphasis on Christ as the Victor distributing gifts.

Two points may be made to help us understand Paul’s shift. First, when ancient victorious kings received gifts (spoils) from conquered peoples, the kings shared the spoils with the troops. A second possible way of understanding Paul’s emphasis is to realize that Christ has become the Agent or Channel of God’s gifts to His redeemed people. That is, Christ received what He then proceeded to give to those who comprise His body, the church. Christ displayed the Spirit’s empowerment at His baptism and then gave the Spirit to believers on the Day of Pentecost. Acts 2:33 states, “Since he has...
been exalted to the right hand of God and has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit, he has poured out what you both see and hear.”

VERSE 9

But what does “he ascended” mean except that he also descended to the lower parts of the earth?

Paul turned his attention to the words he ascended. How did this phrase in the psalm apply to Christ’s saving work? Paul used it to emphasize the conclusion that an ascent implies a previous descent: he … descended to the lower parts of the earth (“the lower regions, the earth,” ESV; “the lower, earthly regions,” NIV). The likely meaning of this statement is that Paul was referring to Christ’s incarnation. In taking on human nature, the Son of God descended to the lowest plane, that is, to the earth (Phil. 2:5-8). In an alternate view, some Bible students contend that Christ’s descent referred broadly to His willing acceptance of the servant life that concluded in His humiliation and death on the cross followed by His literal burial in an earthly tomb.

VERSE 10

The one who descended is also the one who ascended far above all the heavens, to fill all things.

Paul quickly returned his focus to Christ as being the one who ascended. Previously in Ephesians, the apostle had written about Christ’s resurrection and His being seated at the Father’s right hand (2:6), a spiritual reality which believers now share in Him. This is the first (and only) passage in Ephesians, however, to speak directly of Christ’s ascension. His ascension positioned Him far above all the heavens. This phrase referred not so much to a place as to Christ’s being supreme in authority. He is the exalted Lord who has bestowed the Holy Spirit as well as spiritual gifts to His people.

Finally, the ascension of Christ means that He now fills all things. We live in a Christ-filled world. The same Jesus who is the ascended Lord came to earth in human flesh, lived among us, died to atone for our sins, was buried, and then resurrected to ascend in victory to the heavenly throne of God.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read Psalm 68. What connection did Paul make between this psalm and Christ’s victory (of which His ascension was the proof)? How can/will you celebrate Christ’s victory today and throughout the coming week?
Walking Forward

Christ gives the church gifted leaders to help believers mature and minister.

About ten years ago, I had the opportunity to participate in the planting of a new church in an area of our city with little ongoing gospel witness. It was exciting to hear the founding pastor’s vision for a new congregation. He had been commissioned by an established church that pledged to pray for and support the new work as it got started. The new church would reach out intentionally and passionately to residents in the targeted area who either had no former involvement with church or had dropped out of any church involvement years earlier.

“Launch Sunday” for the new church start went great! A large group of volunteers from the established church pitched in to serve that day as greeters, ushers, parking attendants, and instrumentalists. People from the community showed up for the meeting, and the worship service was electric. My wife and I went home afterward as excited as we had ever been about being part of a church congregation.

Then came the second weekend’s services. Most of the volunteers from the established church returned to their usual ministry roles there. Meanwhile, activities at the new church start were chaotic and disorganized to say the least! My wife and I quickly realized that if the new congregation was going to endure and grow, those of us who were mature believers and experienced church members—we were few at that time—would need to step up and serve in ways that perhaps we had never served before. Consequently, my wife and I soon found ourselves sitting on the floor and taking care of toddlers during worship times for two Sundays a month. It was a temporary assignment, but we felt called to serve in this new way until others with passion and training for providing childcare could be enlisted.

Step by step, the new congregation got better organized for ministry. Another church member enlisted and trained a group of greeters and ushers.
Volunteer musicians stepped forward to form a praise team, and a musically inclined young medical student volunteered to serve as our worship leader. By the end of the new congregation’s first year, we had moved from chaos to calm and had grown in weekly attendance. After two years, we had baptized a number of new believers and had become financially self-sustaining. We rejoiced to see clear evidence of God’s power at work in the community, particularly as we saw lives beginning to be transformed by the gospel.

Good church organization means having good leaders in place who sense God’s calling in their lives and exhibit the Spirit’s equipping to carry out gospel ministry. This theme is what Paul focused on in Ephesians 4:11-16. In this session, we will explore the truth that Christ gives His church gifted leaders to help believers grow in faith and serve Him in His mission.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

EPHESIANS 4:11-16

Ephesians 4:11-16 is a single, complex sentence in the Greek text of Ephesians. English Bible translations typically punctuate the passage into several sentences for clarity. But of more importance, this passage is one of only a few in the New Testament that teach directly about spiritual gifts—what spiritual gifts are, what purpose they serve, and who has them.

Here are brief summaries of the primary New Testament passages focused on spiritual gifts:

• 1 Corinthians 12–14—In these three chapters, Paul gave instructions to believers in Corinth who had sorely misunderstood spiritual gifts. He listed a number of examples of spiritual gifts without necessarily defining or describing them (1 Cor. 12:8-10,28). Then Paul gave serious attention to the gifts of prophecy and tongues, which seemed to have been the two most misunderstood or misused gifts among the Corinthians (see 1 Cor. 14). He emphasized that unless all spiritual gifts are energized and guided by Christlike love, they amount to nothing (1 Cor. 12).

• Romans 12:3-8—In Romans, Paul introduced himself and the gospel he proclaimed to a church he hoped to visit soon. In that context, he wrote about seven spiritual gifts, noting that “according to the grace given to us, we have different gifts” (Rom. 12:6). He made a similar emphasis in his introduction to spiritual gifts in Ephesians: “Grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift” (Eph. 4:7).

• Ephesians 4:7-16—Many Bible students have noted that, in this passage, Paul’s emphasis was more on God’s gift to the church of certain types of
leaders rather than the spiritual gifts being given to individual believers. Nevertheless, the types of leaders described clearly possessed and exercised spiritual gifts in their leadership roles.

- 1 Peter 4:10-11—Peter also taught about believers’ receiving spiritual gifts. He called on believers to recognize that they were “stewards of the varied grace of God” (1 Pet. 4:10). He organized spiritual gifts into two broad categories: speaking and serving.

While these four passages represent the broad New Testament context for the understanding of spiritual gifts, this session based on Ephesians 4:11-16 focuses on the theme of gifted church leaders. Let us keep in mind also that the passage falls in the second main section of Ephesians (chaps. 4–6) that emphasizes practical application of the theological truths expounded in Ephesians 1–3. Moreover, 4:11-16 builds on Paul’s teachings regarding church unity and the qualities that promote this unity (4:1-10). Just as there is diversity among believers in general, diversity exists as well among church leaders. However, that which unifies believers in general—the unity of the Spirit—also keeps diversely gifted church leaders working toward the same purposes: glorify Christ, advance the gospel, and equip believers to do the work of Christian ministry.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

EQUIPPERS GIVEN (Eph. 4:11)

Paul identified several types of gifted leaders the risen and exalted Christ gave to His church. Each type of leader plays an important role in the equipping of believers for serving Christ in their daily lives.

VERSE 11

And he himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers,

In Ephesians 4:7, Paul declared that every believer receives grace “according to the measure of Christ’s gift.” In other words, all who are saved by God’s grace through faith in Christ (2:8) are blessed also with at least one spiritual gift by which they can honor and serve Christ. Here in 4:11, Paul returned to the matter of spiritual gifts given by Christ: he himself gave. This declaration is in line with the apostle’s teaching about Christ’s exaltation (ascension). As the victorious King, Christ gave gifts to His subjects.

Rather than speaking of the types of spiritual gifts Christ gave His people, Paul focused instead on the variety of gifted leaders Christ gave the church.
Identified first in the list of church leaders are apostles. The literal meaning of the word *apostle* is “one who is sent out.” It refers to being commissioned, authorized, and sent out by someone to deliver a message or carry out a task. Thus, Jesus used this term in reference to the twelve disciples whom He first sent out to preach, heal, and cast out evil spirits (Mark 3:13-19). One apostle, Judas Iscariot, betrayed Jesus and later hung himself, prompting the others after Jesus’ resurrection and ascension to select a replacement apostle (Acts 1:21-26). The replacement had to be a follower of Christ during Jesus’ earthly ministry and would be an additional witness of the reality of the resurrection.

Of course, Paul testified to his own divine calling as an apostle following his conversion (Rom. 1:1; 1 Cor. 9:1-2; Gal. 1:1; 2:7-8). Thus, the early apostles were authorized and sent out by the risen Lord to preach the gospel and make disciples of all the nations. They established and guided the first churches and had Christ’s authority to speak and to write. In Ephesians 2:20, Paul wrote that the church was being built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. The writings of the apostles eventually were recognized as the inspired Scriptures of the New Testament. While a few Christian groups today continue to use the title *apostle* in reference to a primary church leader, many believers acknowledge that Christ’s gift of *apostles* was no longer necessary after the original apostles died and the biblical canon of Scripture was complete.

**Prophets** in the New Testament were those who—like the Old Testament prophets before them—expounded God’s message to His people. Bible scholars have expressed differing views on the gift of prophets. Some hold that prophets in the early church era were foundational leaders who—although not apostles—also taught and led churches with authority. In this sense, both the apostles and the prophets were foundational. Other scholars contend that prophets were more numerous than apostles and functioned in local Christian congregations as proclaimers of the gospel message (forth-tellers) as well as messages regarding future trends and events (foretellers). A man named Agabus is a New Testament example of such prophets (see Acts 11:27-28).

We can be certain that with the completion of the writings in our New Testament, the work of apostles and prophets in the primary sense is complete. Most conservative, evangelical Bible scholars today agree there are no more prophets who speak (or write) new Scripture that is authoritative for all Christians.

The Greek term rendered *evangelists* literally means “those who tell good news (gospel).” These leaders demonstrated giftedness in proclaiming the gospel in compelling ways especially to unbelievers. Philip and Timothy are New Testament examples of this type of gifted leader (Acts 21:8; 2 Tim. 4:5).
While all believers are called to be ready to testify of their salvation in Christ, evangelists are especially effective in this regard and are called to such a ministry. Perhaps these leaders also served by instructing other believers in ways to share their faith. After all, Paul indicated that all of these gifted leaders were responsible for “equipping the saints for the work of ministry” (4:12). While Paul likely had in mind evangelists who served a single congregation, there were also itinerant evangelists who traveled to new places and people groups, preaching the gospel in various settings. In modern times, evangelists such as the late Billy Graham and others have fulfilled and continue to fulfill this type of ministry leadership to the benefit of many churches in an area.

Bible students debate whether Paul had in mind one type or two types of leaders in the phrase some pastors and teachers. The Greek term rendered pastors literally means “shepherds,” those who tend and protect a flock of sheep. Because Christ referred to Himself as “the good shepherd” (John 10:14), the term easily became applied to those who were given the responsibility of leading, caring for, and protecting Christ’s followers in the church (see Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2-3). The English term pastor derives from the ancient Latin word that means “shepherd.” Some scholars conclude that in Ephesians 4:11, Paul was referring to the same kind of congregational leaders he called “overseers” or “elders” in other passages (1 Tim. 3:1-2; Titus 1:6-7). Among Baptists in the modern era, the title pastor continues to be used in reference to the leader (or leaders) entrusted with the care of a local church congregation.

The title teachers referred to church leaders who were responsible for instructing a congregation concerning the Scriptures as well as the gospel message and its related doctrinal truths. (We can imagine that such a church leader in the Ephesian church was responsible for teaching the contents of Paul’s letter to the congregation on a regular basis—much like we today explore the Letter to the Ephesians again and again in sermons and Bible study sessions.) Thus, whether Paul was referring to one type of leader with dual responsibilities (teaching pastors) or to two types of church leaders, his point was that Christ gave churches the types of gifted leaders they need for spiritual growth.

**EXPLORE FURTHER**

How are pastors and evangelists alike and different? In what ways are all believers responsible to participate in evangelism? In caring for the church? In studying and teaching God’s Word? What do you consider to be your primary spiritual gift? How are you using it?
TO MOVE BELIEVERS FORWARD (Eph. 4:12-14)

The purpose of gifted leaders is for equipping and building up the church. The goal is for believers to reach maturity in doing the work of ministry.

VERSE 12

equipping the saints for the work of ministry, to build up the body of Christ,

Why did Christ give gifted leaders to the church? Paul described the intermediate purpose as that of equipping the saints. The Greek term translated equipping suggests being made fit for carrying out an important responsibility. The term saints refers to all believers as being set apart for salvation in Christ and service to Him (see Eph. 1:1).

For what service are believers to be equipped? Paul’s answer was clear: for the work of ministry. The Greek word rendered work is a general term meaning “intentional effort.” The word rendered ministry refers to serving others for their benefit. In the context of the church, ministry involves helping others come to know and believe in Christ and helping others in ways that Christ Himself served—tending to the sick, caring for the destitute and vulnerable (widows and orphans, for example), and pushing back against entrenched evil spirits, to name a few.

Paul had previously referred to himself as a “servant” (3:7). But here he made it clear that all believers have been entrusted with ministry responsibilities. While Christ gave the church gifted leaders to equip the saints, all of God’s people have work they can do in the life of the church. Church members are not spectators in the work of ministry; they are participants.

The ultimate purpose of gifted leaders, Paul concluded, was to build up the body of Christ—that is, the church (see 1:23; 2:16; 4:4). The apostle had previously declared that the one body of Christ, the church, was an established reality. Yet that body can grow and be strengthened as it is built up. Here, Paul began referring to practical ways in which the church develops over time. He used the idea of a child’s growing over time into mature adulthood as an illustration. However, as mentioned previously, the Greek term rendered build up was primarily an architectural term. (See 2:20-22 for Paul’s architectural analogy of the church as an edifice being built stone by stone on a solid foundation.) In 4:12, Paul probably used the term more in the sense of being strengthened or edified. Each congregation—therefore the worldwide body of Christ—develops and grows stronger as individual believers (including church leaders) use their spiritual gifts in service to their fellow believers, their communities, and indeed to the nations of the world. Paul clearly taught an “every member is a minister” approach to the church.
VERSE 13

until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of God’s Son, growing into maturity with a stature measured by Christ’s fullness.

Paul went on to explain the ultimate aims of Christ’s giving the church gifted leaders, of all the saints participating in the church’s ministry, and of the church’s being built up. The first aim is that all believers would reach unity in the faith. In one sense, unity in the faith has been achieved already through the death of Christ. Paul had been at pains to explain that the previous barriers separating people—Jews and Gentiles, for example—from one another had been demolished (2:11-22). In another sense, church unity remains an ongoing work of the Spirit. The goal for all believers is to enjoy consistently the unity or oneness with one another that Paul urged in 4:3. He believed that this goal could and would be achieved. By the term the faith, Paul was referring to the body of truths that Christians affirm (4:3,5).

To make it clear that unity is not achieved merely when people agree to a set of truths, the apostle went on to state a second aim for all believers: the knowledge of God’s Son. Knowledge of a person is deeper than knowledge of facts. The knowledge of Christ requires the help of the Spirit. Paul had prayed in 1:17 that believers might experience “the Spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him.” He spoke here about knowing God’s Son (literally, “the Son of God”). Paul rarely used the phrase Son of God about Christ, so some Bible students have concluded that Paul used the phrase here to emphasize the almost unbelievable privilege believers have of having a personal relationship with God through faith in the Son.

Returning to the analogy of a human body (4:12), Paul phrased the final goal as growing into maturity. The fact of a human being’s growing from childhood to maturity is easily observed. Paul’s words about maturity were in terms of reaching the stature measured by Christ’s fullness. The apostle was speaking of believers’ moving toward Christlikeness, not physical growth. In Paul’s view, believers not only grow in knowing God’s Son personally but also move toward being completely like the Son of God in our character.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Unity” on page 1621 in the Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded. What does it mean for believers to keep the unity of the Spirit and to reach unity in the faith? How are you contributing to your church’s keeping the unity of the Spirit?
VERSE 14

Then we will no longer be little children, tossed by the waves and blown around by every wind of teaching, by human cunning with cleverness in the techniques of deceit.

In contrast to mature adulthood is the immaturity of little children. In this setting, the apostle used childhood in a negative sense to refer to the instability and ignorance of children. There are other New Testament passages in which being childlike is commended as a positive virtue. For example, Jesus said that receiving His kingdom must be done like a child (Luke 18:17). Further, Peter wrote that believers should crave the milk of the word like infants (1 Pet. 2:2). Childlike qualities such as dependence and humility are quite distinct from childishness.

Paul then moved to another analogy—boats being tossed on a stormy sea. He described the experience of being tossed by the waves and blown around. By the time Paul wrote Ephesians, he had personally endured a shipwreck at sea, as described in Acts 27. He knew of what he spoke when he compared that experience with a believer’s being in grave spiritual danger of false teaching.

The phrase every wind of teaching suggests the latest religious fads or popular preachers who are intent on gaining a following. They were around in Paul’s day as well as in our day.

The phrase human cunning with cleverness points to those who intentionally manipulate people, tricking them for dishonest gain. Sadly, television has greatly magnified the opportunities for this.

The phrase techniques of deceit points to the demonic or devilish inspiration of those who go about unsettling immature believers. Paul developed this idea further in 1 Timothy 4:1-2.

EXPLORE FURTHER

How does the illustration of a stormy sea help you understand spiritual immaturity? How can you guard against being manipulated spiritually? Reflect on whether there are others whom you could assist in their spiritual journeys so as to be stable and not blown about in their faith.

AS A BODY (Eph. 4:15-16)

Paul reminded the recipients of his letter that maturity is demonstrated by confident faith in Christ as well as by all believers growing in service.
VERSE 15

But speaking the truth in love, let us grow in every way into him who is the head—Christ.

Having warned believers against being led astray by false teachers, Paul encouraged them to be known for speaking the truth in love. The single Greek word rendered by the phrase speaking the truth literally means “truthing.” The concept refers not only to truth in speech but also to integrity in actions—in other words, “doing the truth” both in words and deeds.

All of the gifted leaders Paul listed in 4:11 carried out their varied ministries by means of speech and actions. Such leaders needed to be committed to the truths of the gospel and were expected to communicate those truths to other believers. The apostle was thinking beyond just expectations for church leaders, however. In this context he was addressing all believers regarding Christ’s expectations that they would speak and live in Christlike integrity.

The phrase in love is a crucial descriptor for believers. It is possible to speak the truth in such a tone or in such a setting so that the truth is used more like a hammer than a healing agent. Paul urged that believers’ unequivocal commitment to the truth be always motivated and guided by Christlike love.

In the church—then and now—truth and love work best when they work together. Sadly, some believers seem to thrive on getting the truth out no matter what collateral damage their crusade might cause. Other believers sometimes confuse genuine love with a mushy, live-and-let-live attitude of permissiveness. Neither of these extremes describes the true nature of Christlike love. Christ boldly called out the hypocrisy of the temple leadership when He overturned the moneychangers’ tables and drove out those who had turned God’s house of prayer into a den of thieves (Matt. 21:12-13). Only days later, however, Christ prayed while on the cross that the Father might forgive those who crucified Him, a group that included some of the same temple officials He had previously confronted. Christlike love stands for the truth; Christ’s truth is motivated and energized by genuine love.

In 4:13, Paul stated that the ultimate aim of gifted teachers who equip the saints to minister and to build up the church is for all to be “growing into maturity.” Here in 4:15 he restated that aim with a slightly different emphasis. Growth, Paul insisted, happens only when the body of Christ (the church) remains in close relationship to the head—Christ. Paul’s words let us grow exhorted all believers to keep on growing toward full Christlikeness. This imagery is a stark contrast to the analogy of a storm-tossed boat on a roiling sea. Rather than instability, true Christian growth brings stability. Rather than immaturity, it aims for spiritual maturity in every way. All aspects of our lives as believers grow and thrive in our ongoing faith-relationship with Christ.
VERSE 16

From him the whole body, fitted and knit together by every supporting ligament, promotes the growth of the body for building up itself in love by the proper working of each individual part.

Paul expanded the application of his physical growth analogy to the spiritual growth of believers individually and churches collectively. Just as a properly functioning and growing physical body depends vitally on the head, even so the body of Christ (the church) can function and grow properly only when believers are vitally connected to Christ. We get our spiritual nourishment and direction from him (Christ).

Then Paul addressed the reality that the body of Christ is fitted and knit together by every supporting ligament. The root of the Greek term rendered fitted is the basis of our English word harmony. The term rendered knit together (“compacted,” KJV; “held together,” ESV; NIV) can refer to the reconciliation of people who were previously quarreling. Both terms point to a situation of harmonious cooperation under the direction of another, who in the church’s case is Christ.

All parts of the human body are important to its proper functioning and growth. Even so, in the church every believer—leaders and followers alike—are important parts of the body of Christ and contribute to its proper functioning and spiritual growth. Christ the Lord provides direction, but the members of His body are expected to respond to His direction and participate in the church’s ministry.

In the same way that every believer plays a role in Christ’s body, even so each church congregation is expected to participate in the church’s God-given mission under Christ’s lordship and with the Spirit’s power. No outside hierarchy or agency is necessary for a local church to grow and be healthy, although supporting organizations can provide additional resources and help. Each congregation is to build itself up in love. Unity and maturity succeed only by the proper working of each individual part. Let us be committed as individual believers and as churches to this ultimate aim!

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Body” on pages 229–230 in the Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded. What steps can you take to promote your church’s submission to Christ’s headship? To do your part as an individual believer to strengthen your church’s spiritual maturity?
Walking Differently

Believers are to live a life that is different from those who reject Christ.

As a teenager, I longed to blend in as part of the crowd. I wanted to be liked by the popular kids. While I grew up in a devout Christian home environment, I had the same desire as any teen to be accepted among my peers at school and in the neighborhood. We all knew what the temptations were that often accompanied the desire for acceptance—temptations to drink alcoholic beverages or to flirt around with sexual temptation. As I think back on that time in my life, I am grateful that my parents provided great guidelines for my behavior. “Remember,” they would say, “Christians are supposed to behave differently than other people. It doesn’t work to say that all your friends act in a certain way. They could all be wrong!”

Sadly, the temptation to follow along with the crowd does not automatically stop at twenty years of age. Adult Christians as well can be swayed by the allure of popular culture so that they give in to self-destructive and sinful behavior. They see others seemingly get by without consequences or they try to justify such behavior with the old arguments that everyone is doing it or that one’s Christian confession somehow immunizes the believer from God’s disciplinary judgment.

The situation was no different for the generation of Jesus’ followers who lived in Ephesus and to whom Paul addressed his epistle. Most of these Christians had been converted as adults, many coming from pagan or secular lifestyles. They knew that as believers they were now expected to behave differently than worldly people, but it was not always easy to go against the crowd. The apostle Paul was certainly aware that believers are not immune from the temptations of secular culture. Therefore, it is no surprise that he provided the Christians in Ephesus with strong encouragement about the urgency of living in ways that are different from those who reject Christ.
UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

EPHESIANS 4:17-32
Paul laid a strong theological foundation in chapters 1–3 for understanding the blessings of salvation in Christ, the gospel, and the church as the body of Christ united to glorify God and carry on Christ's mission in the world. Beginning in 4:1, the apostle marked a clear transition with the word therefore. This transition word expressed a new (yet related) emphasis on fleshing out the theological truths of chapters 1–3 in terms of practical living. Chapters 4–6 thus focus on the “what now” factor of salvation in Christ. Paul addressed the question: “I’m saved; how should I now live in light of that reality?”

Paul began the practical section with a call for believers to live in unity with one another and use their God-given spiritual gifts to build up the church (4:1-16). We delved into these verses in the previous two sessions. Now in 4:17, we find a second instance of Paul’s using the word therefore to signal yet another way that Christians can (and should) live out their salvation. In 4:17-32, Paul turned to the issue of Christlike behavior as demonstrated in the ways Christians relate to others. He reminded the Ephesian believers of the sinful types of behavior that characterized them before salvation. He described their turning to Christ with an analogy of taking off old, soiled clothes and putting on new, clean garments.

Salvation is a transformation from death to life, from the old to the new. Thus, Paul urged believers to shed their former ways of promiscuity, deceitfulness, bitterness, and vengefulness. In place of such sinful practices, Christians needed to be characterized by practices such as truthfulness, honest labor, encouraging speech, kindness, and a willingness to forgive.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

THE OLD (Eph. 4:17-19)
Paul reminded the recipients of his letter of their former lifestyle before believing in Christ. They searched for fulfillment through sinful activities, but those practices resulted only in futility and ever-worsening behavior.

VERSE 17
Therefore, I say this and testify in the Lord: You should no longer live as the Gentiles live, in the futility of their thoughts.
Paul reminded the recipients of his letter of the grounds on which he exhorted them: **I say this and testify in the Lord.** The apostle was not merely giving his opinion; he was speaking out of his calling and authority as an apostle of Christ. The phrase *in the Lord* had the effect of declaring, “God’s own character and purpose in Christ underscore what I am about to say.” The Greek word rendered *testify* signaled that a serious, substantive matter was about to be stated (see Acts 20:26; Gal. 5:3).

Paul’s message to the Ephesian believers was direct: **you should no longer live as the Gentiles live.** While there may have been a number of Jewish believers in the Ephesian church, the congregation by this time probably was comprised predominantly of converted Gentiles. In any case, the church was undoubtedly surrounded by a pagan Gentile culture often characterized by excess, idolatry, immorality, dishonesty, and humanistic philosophy. The apostle outlined the emptiness of this pagan culture—the believers’ former way of life—with a series of five devastating criticisms.

First, Paul condemned **the futility of their thoughts.** This phrase refers to a life of thinking—intellectual pursuit—without knowledge of the true God. In the end, such knowledge is frustrating and meaningless. In Romans 1:21, Paul spoke of those whose “thinking became worthless, and their senseless hearts were darkened.”

**VERSE 18**

**They are darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them and because of the hardness of their hearts.**

Second, the phrase **darkened in their understanding** points to the result of an empty pursuit of intellectual knowledge without knowledge of God. The pagan culture of ancient Ephesus had forfeited the moral light of true wisdom. Many Gentiles craved wisdom (1 Cor. 1:18), but apart from a relationship with Christ they could not attain the wisdom that is eternally valuable. Jesus affirmed that God hid His true wisdom from the worldly wise and revealed it to believers who responded to Him in childlike faith (see Matt. 11:25).

The third criticism, **excluded from the life of God,** echoes what Paul wrote previously about the Gentiles’ hopeless condition before their salvation in Christ. The unbelieving Gentiles were “without hope and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12).

Fourth, Paul spoke of the **ignorance that is in** those who were trapped in a pagan, Gentile culture. He was not suggesting that all Gentiles were incapable of learning. Some were, in fact, highly educated. Sadly, however, they were ignorant of life’s most vital knowledge—knowledge of the one true God.
Fifth, Paul condemned the hardness of their hearts. The Greek word translated hardness could be used to describe the hardening of a soft substance over time or the building up of calloused skin. It was used figuratively to describe becoming spiritually insensitive or stubborn. The heart was considered to be the center of a person’s moral decision-making. Living in willful ignorance of the one true God over time produces a calloused heart that rejects His wisdom and, worse, becomes insensitive to the Spirit’s convicting work. In such a condition, all kinds of immoral behavior seem acceptable.

VERSE 19
They became callous and gave themselves over to promiscuity for the practice of every kind of impurity with a desire for more and more.

If the hearts and minds of unbelieving Gentiles were so deeply malformed (or as Paul described it, they became callous), their futile thoughts and darkened understanding led directly to all types of immoral behavior. First, they gained a reputation for promiscuity (“lasciviousness,” KJV; “sensuality,” ESV; NIV). This term referred not only to base sexual sins but also to immoral conduct of any kind, including violence. The phrase rendered gave themselves over points to a willing participation in sinful actions.

Second, by saying that unbelieving Gentiles willingly chose to engage in every kind of impurity, Paul contended that such types of behavior had developed into a lifestyle. Unbelievers showed no sense of decency; they simply had a desire for more and more sensuous, self-gratifying activities.

EXPLORE FURTHER
Read the article titled “Hardness of Heart” on page 705 in the Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded. What evidence shows that a person’s heart is hard toward the things of God? How did the Lord soften your heart concerning Christ and the gospel?

THE CHANGE (Eph. 4:20-24)
Paul reminded the Ephesian believers that believing in Christ results in transformation. He used an analogy of changing from dirty to clean clothes.

VERSE 20
But that is not how you came to know Christ,
Paul contrasted (but is emphatic) the way Gentiles had formerly lived to the transformation Christ brought to them in salvation. First, the recipients of the letter had come to know Christ. Unbelieving Gentiles had grown dark in their understanding and basically were ignorant (unknowing) of God. That state of ignorance changed radically for those Gentiles who heard the gospel and responded with faith in Christ. They did not just know the facts about God’s Son; they came to know Him as their Savior and Lord!

VERSE 21

assuming you heard about him and were taught by him, as the truth is in Jesus,

In this verse, Paul expanded briefly on the transformation that happens when someone comes to truly know Christ. Salvation isn’t just listening to a sermon or Bible study about Jesus. Genuine conversion moves beyond hearing about him to being taught by Christ and receiving Him by faith. Unbelievers can find the truth about sin, repentance, forgiveness, and new life only through a faith-relationship because the truth is in Jesus.

On one hand, Paul probably did not intend to call into question the salvation of the Ephesian believers. On the other hand, he never wanted to presume that the recipients of his epistles—many of whom he had neither met nor discipled—fully understood the gospel and its implications for Christian living. To the Christians in Corinth Paul wrote, “Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith” (2 Cor. 13:5). The proof of genuine salvation in Christ is a transformed heart and mind that leads to a Christlike lifestyle. The believers in Ephesus would do well to examine their values and behaviors to make sure they were different from their former way of life.

VERSE 22

to take off your former way of life, the old self that is corrupted by deceitful desires,

Paul used a compelling analogy to express the transformation that happens in the believer’s heart and life. The old life—the life of unbelief—can be compared with wearing old, dirty, tattered clothes. Through faith in Christ, however, believers are empowered (and commanded) to take off their former way of life. To make sure the letter’s recipients did not misapply the analogy, Paul clarified that conversion was not just making an external change. Salvation is not a matter of cleaning up one’s actions or turning over a new leaf. Rather, believers have been made new inside and out; they are empowered to take off the old self (“the old man,” KJV) that is corrupted by deceitful desires.
The self-centered demands of our old way of living as unbelievers deceived us; they led us astray into a darker and darker lifestyle, as Paul explained in 4:17-19. As a result, our old self was corrupted through and through. In the same way that a filthy, torn, decayed garment cannot reform or restore itself, even so we cannot as unbelievers reform ourselves into a right relationship with God. The Spirit must do that miraculous work as we trust in Christ for forgiveness and then open our hearts and lives to His transforming power.

VERSE 23
to be renewed in the spirit of your minds,

In this verse, Paul highlighted the contrast between unbelievers’ futile thinking (4:17) and believers’ being renewed in the spirit of their minds. The apostle was referring to the daily process of choosing to live according to the truth found in Jesus. The Greek verb rendered renewed is in a tense that expresses ongoing activity. In other words, believers are to keep on being renewed in their minds each day by depending on and following the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The phrase spirit of your minds probably refers in this context to the human spirit. Further, New Testament writers thought of the mind as the center of one’s thought life. Nevertheless, renewed thinking comes to the believer only through the Holy Spirit’s indwelling presence and power. Paul emphasized this truth in 1 Corinthians 2:12-13 when he wrote, “Now we have not received the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who comes from God, so that we may understand what has been freely given to us by God. We also speak these things, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual things to spiritual people.”

VERSE 24
and to put on the new self, the one created according to God’s likeness in righteousness and purity of the truth.

Paul returned to the analogy of taking off old clothing and putting on new garments. To put on the new self emphasizes the radical new look on the outside (one’s lifestyle) that results from transformation on the inside (salvation). This new self is thus not of the believer’s own making but is created by the Spirit’s powerful working in the believer’s heart and mind.

The apostle noted three characteristics of the believer’s new self. First, the new life of the believer is according to God’s likeness. That is, salvation restores the image of God in believers that had been corrupted by sin. The new self empowers believers to live Christlike lives, to stand courageously against the world’s sinful culture.
Second, the new self is characterized by righteousness. The new life we as believers receive at conversion—and which we are to display daily just as we might wear a new set of clothes each day—displays the attitudes and actions of moral uprightness: honesty, humility, love, godliness, compassion, and so forth.

Third, the new self is characterized by purity of the truth ("true holiness," KJV). The Greek term rendered purity can also be translated “holiness.” It points to believers’ being set apart in their relationship with God. They belong to Him and count it their life’s purpose to glorify Him and make Him known to a lost, sinful world.

**EXPLORE FURTHER**

Read Romans 6:6-7, 2 Corinthians 5:17, and Colossians 3:9-10. How do these passages contribute to a better understanding of Paul’s “old self-new self” teaching in Ephesians 4:22-24? How would you explain to a new believer the importance of showing “the new self” every day?

**THE NEW (Eph. 4:25-32)**

Over the course of these eight verses, Paul identified five specific behaviors that are to adorn the believer’s lifestyle. For each behavior he began with a negative command, gave the positive counterpart, and then identified the underlying spiritual principle for his teaching.

**VERSE 25**

Therefore, putting away lying, speak the truth, each one to his neighbor, because we are members of one another.

The word therefore signals that Paul was continuing to expound on the matter of putting the truths of the gospel (theology) into action (application). Having been transformed by Christ and given new life, Christians are now empowered to live differently. They are to shed their former pagan lifestyles and put on the new ways of living that testify of Christ and the gospel.

First, believers are empowered to put away lying ("falsehood," ESV; NIV). This was not a new expectation for God’s people; the ninth commandment states “Do not give false testimony against your neighbor” (Ex. 20:16). In Christ, who fulfilled the law (Matt. 5:17), believers now understand the positive statement of that command. That is, we are to speak the truth, each one to his neighbor. In Christ, God revealed the truth to His creation.
We as believers therefore exhibit Christlike character when we speak the truth to one another—not forgetting that we are to do so “in love” (Eph. 4:15).

Whereas lying destroys trust and damages relationships, truth-telling builds unity. Thus, Paul reminded the Ephesian believers of the Christian principle of unity: we are members of one another (see 4:4–6). We as believers are to display the truth daily in our words and actions.

VERSÉS 26-27

Be angry and do not sin. Don’t let the sun go down on your anger, and don’t give the devil an opportunity.

Second, believers in their new life are empowered by the Spirit to keep their emotions—particularly anger—under control. The words be angry and do not sin appear to be a quotation of Psalm 4:4, a psalm of David that has the earmarks of a good nighttime prayer. That said, we need to carefully examine the way Paul used the quotation in the context of the believer’s new lifestyle in Christ. The apostle was not exhorting believers to get angry. No one has to be commanded to feel anger. Anger is an emotional response to a given situation that can spur us into action. And it is for that reason that anger must be kept under control and properly directed. We as believers must not allow even “righteous” anger to spur us to commit sinful actions.

An explosive, uncontrolled temper wreaks horrible damage in relationships. Thus, Paul taught that believers must not bottle up their anger and allow it to boil beneath the surface without defusing it. He counseled in practical terms that believers must not let the sun go down on their anger. In other words, anger that gets bottled up and secretly held on to soon turns to rage. And like the boiling magma of a volcano, rage can explode into a burning, sinful force that destroys everything in its path.

The principle of Christian holiness undergirding Paul’s teaching about anger is simple: don’t give the devil an opportunity. Since the garden of Eden, Satan has demonstrated that he knows our most temptation-prone areas are our emotions and our God-given desires. Emotions such as fear and anger prove the point time and time again. When we as Christians feel anger welling up within us, we should utter a quick prayer for spiritual protection, because the devil is surely prowling nearby “like a roaring lion, looking for anyone he can devour” (1 Pet. 5:8).

VERSE 28

Let the thief no longer steal. Instead, he is to do honest work with his own hands, so that he has something to share with anyone in need.
Third, believers demonstrate new life in Christ by acting with integrity, especially in regard to their daily work. As with truthfulness, the expectation that God’s people will be honest harks back to the Ten Commandments. The eighth commandment forbids stealing (Ex. 20:15). The way that Paul expressed this command, let the thief no longer steal, suggests that some of the Ephesian believers may have been guilty of this sin in the past. Whatever the case, they were believers now. Believers were empowered by the Spirit to follow a different path—the path of doing honest work.

The Greek term rendered work usually referred to manual labor, that is, working with one’s own hands. Manual laborers in Paul’s day often received meager wages for their work. James 5:4-6 levels a devastating warning against wealthy business owners who refused to pay honest wages to their workers. Nevertheless, no believer should fall for the temptation to gain by stealing what he or she has not earned with honest work. Certainly this command applies as well to Christian office workers, professionals, or any other occupation.

Yet, another Christian principle is involved here as well—the principle of being willing (and able) to share with anyone in need. As the body of Christ, Christians are to value and care about all the members of the body. God’s people must remember that when God blesses them with material things, they honor Him by being a channel of His blessings to others.

VERSES 29-30

No foul language should come from your mouth, but only what is good for building up someone in need, so that it gives grace to those who hear. And don’t grieve God’s Holy Spirit. You were sealed by him for the day of redemption.

Fourth, the new life Christians receive from Christ empowers them to build up others rather than tear them down. In a command that is surely as relevant today as in Paul’s day, the apostle directed that believers should let no foul language escape from their mouths. The Greek term rendered foul can also mean “corrupt,” “unwholesome,” or “rotten.” It was used, for example, to refer to rotten, stinking fruit. Spoiled fruit easily contaminates other fruit that it touches. So it is as well with rotten talk, whether it is vulgarity or swearing or cruelty. It hurts those who are targeted by it.

As believers, we are to use wholesome, uplifting speech—words that are good for building up someone in need. Paul may have had in mind Proverbs 12:18: “There is one who speaks rashly, like a piercing sword; but the tongue of the wise brings healing.” As recipients of God’s grace, Christians have the power to give grace to those who hear by speaking words of encouragement.
The Christian principle underlying the command to speak words that build up others concerns our relationship with the Holy Spirit. When we let foul, hurtful language spew from our mouths about others, we 

*grieve God’s Holy Spirit*. To be sure, all sins grieve the Spirit within us. However, Paul was emphasizing that hurting others with foul, demeaning words is completely opposed to the new life the Spirit seeks to develop in the believer. Paul reminded believers that they 

*were sealed by* the Spirit 

*for the day of redemption*. When we remember that fact, we are motivated to please Him rather than grieve Him in the way that we talk to (and about) others.

**VERSES 31-32**

*Let all bitterness, anger and wrath, shouting and slander be removed from you, along with all malice. And be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as God also forgave you in Christ.*

Fifth, the new life Christians receive in their salvation equips them to relate to one another with the same grace they received from Christ. This means allowing the Spirit of God to remove negative attitudes and actions such as 

**bitterness, anger and wrath, shouting and slander**, as well as 

**all malice**. 

*Bitterness* is sourness or resentment. *Anger* and *wrath* refer to seething emotions that easily explode into sinful, hurtful actions. *Shouting* and *slander* point to loud quarreling and abusive speech. *Malice* refers to ill will, wishing bad things to happen to another person.

With believers’ willing spiritual cooperation, the Spirit removes those attitudes and empowers them to 

*be kind and compassionate* and to be 

*forgiving* of those who offend them in some way. The Greek word rendered *kind* is similar in sound to the word for Christ. Thus, Paul may have been using a play on words to emphasize that believers are to be Christlike. To be *compassionate* literally means “to feel with, to suffer alongside.” The word implies a deep sense of unity with others. Forgiveness is the divine remedy for letting go of the negative attitudes and actions mentioned in 4:31. The motive and model of Christian forgiveness can be no less than the reality that 

*God forgave us in Christ.*

**EXPLORE FURTHER**

Which of the negative behaviors in Ephesians 4:25-32 do you most need to be intentional about removing? Which positive behaviors are the most demanding for you to allow the Spirit to develop more in you? Why?
Walking in Love

Believers are to imitate Christ by demonstrating His love and character.

One of my earliest boyhood memories is that of standing beside my dad in the morning as he shaved. He performed this task the old-fashioned way, using a shaving brush, a mug of shaving soap, and a safety razor. On Saturdays, because he wasn’t in a rush to leave for work, Dad would let me practice shaving. He would dab a little shaving cream on both my cheeks, hand me the razor (after secretly removing the sharp blade), and then pantomime in the mirror the first one or two strokes—which I then mimicked.

Perhaps you’ve had similar experiences of either imitating a grownup or giving an example for a youngster to follow. Now that I am a grandfather, I get a delight from watching my kindergarten-aged granddaughter trying to walk in her grandmother’s high heels or put on some of her makeup. These antics make an already adorable little girl that much cuter.

When we become adults, however, the question of imitating others gets trickier. In some ways, imitation can be a good thing. Mentors can help us form good work habits and avoid pitfalls. We can develop spiritually by watching mature believers and following their lead. From its earliest days, however, Christianity has emphasized that we as believers are to seek most of all to follow Christ’s example. The very word Christlike embodies this theme and is the goal toward which all believers ultimately strive.

In this session’s Bible passage, Paul urged the believers in Ephesus to live out their salvation by imitating the Lord in their lifestyles. They could do so by demonstrating His love and character in their words, attitudes, and actions.

Understand the Context

Ephesians 5:1-14

In this session, we continue to examine Paul’s instructions in the Letter to the Ephesians about how to live as believers. In the previous session’s
Bible passage (4:17-32), Paul contrasted the old ways believers lived before their conversion with the new ways of Christlike living as God’s people. The apostle used the striking image of taking off old, soiled garments (“the old self”) and putting on fresh, clean garments (“the new self”). Paul concluded that passage with a series of practical don’ts and do’s for Spirit-empowered believers (4:25-32). He noted a number of self-centered attitudes and actions to let go and then replace with Christlike attitudes and actions.

As the apostle continued to address the theme of holy living in 5:1-14, he began by summarizing the entire matter as a command to imitate God. Above all, doing this means allowing our lifestyles to be energized and guided by self-giving, godly (Christlike) love. Practically speaking, it also involves turning away from ungodly behaviors—sexual immorality and obscene talk, to name two examples.

The analogy Paul utilized in this session’s Bible passage is the contrast between light and darkness. Christ is the Light of the world. Thus, Christians are to live as children of the light. The old, pre-Christian way of life is the way of spiritual darkness. By using the light-darkness analogy, Paul urged believers to let Christ’s light—through them—humbly but effectively expose sin and spiritual darkness in the world.

**EXPLORE THE TEXT**

**IMITATE** *(Eph. 5:1-2)*

Paul challenged the recipients of his letter to be imitators of God, just as children learn by imitating their parents. Paul specifically defined such divine imitation in terms of expressing God’s love to others.

**VERSE 1**

*Therefore, be imitators of God, as dearly loved children,*

The Greek term rendered *imitators* describes those who intentionally mimic someone or follow the example of someone. In fact, the English word *mimic* is basically a transliteration of the Greek term. In almost all of the instances in which the term appears in the New Testament, it refers to mimicking or following the example of another human being (see 1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1; 1 Thess. 1:6). Ephesians 5:1 is the only New Testament text in which believers are exhorted specifically to be *imitators of God*. Other passages imply the same command without using the term, including “Be holy, because I am holy” (1 Pet. 1:16, quoting Lev. 19:2) and “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:48). In any case, the expectation is astounding!
Paul introduced this challenge with the word *therefore*, pointing back to his exhortations for believers to be kind, compassionate, and forgiving just as God forgave Christians (Eph. 4:32). Thus, these are some particulars of what Paul meant by imitating God. He went on to use a familiar human analogy to illuminate his point further. Believers are to be *imitators of God as dearly loved children*. Previously in the letter, Paul had made the theological case that God as the heavenly Father adopts believers into His redeemed family (1:5). Now the apostle made a practical case concerning the implications of God’s fatherhood for believers’ daily living.

**VERSE 2**

and walk in love, as Christ also loved us and gave himself for us, a sacrificial and fragrant offering to God.

Above all, imitating God means to *walk in love* (“walk in the way of love,” NIV). Paul used the term *walk* figuratively to refer to people’s daily progress on the journey of life. That journey for believers involves progress toward the destination of being Christlike. Indeed, Christ gave believers the supreme example of walking *in love* when He gave himself for us, a sacrificial and fragrant offering (“sweet-smelling savour,” KJV) to God. The Greek verb rendered *gave* implies that Christ willingly delivered Himself over (see Rom. 4:25). Put another way, Christ submitted to God’s plan for Him to experience suffering and death as the only sufficient atonement sacrifice for sinners.

The apostle further described the effective nature of Christ’s love by using the language of the Old Testament sacrificial system (see Ex. 29:18,25,41). In His death, Christ Jesus became a sacrificial and fragrant offering to God. The idea is that God was pleased with the Son’s sacrifice. We should not take from this discussion, however, that the Father is somehow a sadistic Deity. Rather, Jesus’ death on the cross completely satisfied God’s righteous wrath against human sin. The cross provided the only possible path for the redeeming of sinners and restoring believers to right relationship with God. This is why the Father was pleased with Christ’s sacrificial and fragrant offering. It is also the reason Christ is the believer’s supreme example of what it means to love.

**EXPLORE FURTHER**

Read the article titled “Imitate” on page 792 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How would you express in your words what it means to imitate God? What are some ways that you are intentionally trying to follow Christ’s example of living in love?
Paul exhorted believers to cease activities and remove themselves from groups that display behavior contrary to God’s character. He emphasized the Christian’s responsibility to turn from the sins of sexual immorality, greed, and filthy, demeaning speech.

**VERSE 3**

**But sexual immorality and any impurity or greed should not even be heard of among you, as is proper for saints.**

Paul turned from encouraging loving self-sacrifice to condemning its opposite: self-indulgent immorality. Here Paul was dealing with the sinful corruption of God-given human desires and emotions. In creating us as physical beings, God gave humans a set of desires (hunger and thirst, love and companionship, procreation, and so forth) that equip us to survive and thrive as His stewards of the creation. However, from the time of Adam and Eve’s fall into sin in the garden of Eden until now, we have selfishly corrupted those God-given desires in myriads of ways.

One way that we are sorely and persistently tempted to corrupt a God-given desire is through **sexual immorality** (“fornication,” KJV). The first-century term (Greek, *porneia* [pohr NIGH uh]) was broad in meaning. (Think of the related English term *pornography*.) It could refer to lustfulness, prostitution, adultery, and any other type of illicit sexual behavior. The term translated **impurity** (“uncleanness,” KJV) characterizes the shameful, sordid, demeaning nature of **sexual immorality** in all of its forms.

The Greek term rendered **greed** (“covetousness,” KJV; ESV) refers to a corrupt and aggressive desire to own more, even far beyond what one needs for survival. The translators of the Septuagint [sep TOO uh jint] (an ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament) used a form of this word in the tenth commandment prohibiting coveting anything that belongs to one’s neighbor, including that neighbor’s spouse.

Paul was adamant that believers in Ephesus must shine brightly for Christ against the dark backdrop of that pagan-dominated city. He declared that whispers of sexual immorality and **greed should not even be heard of among** the believers. Believers must not compromise the scriptural, holy behavior God expects of them. Christians have been forgiven of their sins and delivered from sin’s bondage. They have been given the indwelling presence and power of the Holy Spirit to guide them into a life of truth and holiness. They are a new community (the church) being built into a temple of the Lord. Christ has given His church gifted leaders to equip the saints to live in love and carry out His ongoing mission in the world.
Paul passionately urged the recipients of his letter—including we who read the letter today as Holy Scripture—to realize that it is altogether proper for saints to flee from every type of association with the sexually immoral attitudes and behaviors that characterize paganism. We should not consider such behavior an OK lifestyle. We should not joke approvingly about it. And for sure we as believers should not practice it. Sadly, whenever sexual sin of any kind occurs in a church congregation and becomes public knowledge, then the congregation’s reputation suffers severely. Further, we dishonor God’s name!

VERSE 4

Obscene and foolish talking or crude joking are not suitable, but rather giving thanks.

The kinds of immoral speech Paul mentioned in this verse have a connection to sexual sins in that they refer to sexually explicit talk—in other words, a dirty mind expressing filthy conversation. Obscene speech refers to vulgar, indecent talk. The phrase foolish talking points to senseless talk, perhaps the talk of drunkards or those who exhibit no control over what they say. Crude joking may include clever verbal put-downs of others. Consider the increased coarsening of public discourse in our society. We have generally become insensitive to the use of vulgar expletives on television. For followers of Jesus, however, this kind of speech is not suitable ("out of place," ESV; NIV). Coarse speech is to be driven out by gracious, thankful speech.

VERSE 5

For know and recognize this: Every sexually immoral or impure or greedy person, who is an idolater, does not have an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.

Paul returned to the topic of sinful sexual and greedy activities, emphasizing the negative consequences of such sins. In verses 5-7, Paul went on to talk about an important motivation for receiving new life in Christ and subsequently living holy lifestyles: God’s judgment against sin is certain. He urged believers to know and recognize this reality. He wasn’t giving the Ephesian believers a new teaching; rather, he was reminding them of a truth that can sometimes be forgotten in the day-by-day routines of life.

Whereas in Ephesians 5:3 Paul named the three sins of “sexual immorality,” “impurity,” and “greed,” here in this verse he spoke of people for whom those sins had become a lifestyle trait. The sexually immoral person, the impure person, and the greedy person had practiced these sins to the extent that the people were characterized by their sins. Paul’s shift reminds
us as believers that sin is not an abstract idea; it is a personal, human reality. Sin is what makes us sinners; and since Adam and Eve’s sin in the garden of Eden, human nature is a sinful nature. Only the atoning sacrifice of Christ (who did not sin) on the cross broke the dominion of sin over human nature. Only the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit empowers us as believers to replace sinful lifestyles with holy lifestyles.

As he did in Colossians 3:5, Paul identified greed as a form of idolatry. Thus, the consistently greedy person has essentially become an idolater. In other words, the person who lets greed enter the door of his or her heart soon finds it cannot be satisfied. It wants more. The more it gets, the more it wants until the greedy person soon worships at the throne of self rather than at the throne of the one true God.

Paul warned that those whose lives are characterized by sin rather than faith in Christ do not have an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. The kingdom is only for those in whose hearts Christ reigns as King, who worship the one true God and not any kind of idol. Those who persist in sexual sin, greed, and idolatry demonstrate that they have rejected God from their lives; He has therefore excluded them from His kingdom. Interestingly, this verse is the only reference Paul made to the kingdom of God in his letter to the believers in Ephesus.

VERSE 6

Let no one deceive you with empty arguments, for God’s wrath is coming on the disobedient because of these things.

The apostle continued with another solemn word about the consequences of living in sin rather than living in love. He warned believers not to be deceived with empty arguments. The implication is that some Christians were hearing (and perhaps falling for) the kinds of debates that suggested believers, once saved, had no fear of divine consequences for sexual sins. Or perhaps the empty arguments suggested that God gave people their physical desires so there should be no shame—in satisfying those desires in whatever way a person has the opportunity to do so.

Paul warned that such arguments were baseless and, worse, dangerous. Sin always pays consequences and always provokes God’s wrath. Believers rightly emphasize such attributes of God as His grace and His love. But the Scriptures equally teach the reality that God’s judgment is coming on the disobedient. In truth, believers do not have to worry about eternal condemnation at the final judgment; in Christ, believers have been delivered from God’s wrath. Still, there are temporal consequences to sinful behavior that can severely impact believers’ daily lives. Just ask King David (2 Sam. 12:13-14)!
VERSE 7

Therefore, do not become their partners.

Paul concluded with a warning for believers not to entangle themselves in close relationships with those whose lifestyles are ungodly. The injunction do not become their partners is similar to the command Paul gave to the Christians in Corinth, a city that, like Ephesus, was known for its pagan and sexually immoral culture. The danger was that believers who entered into relationships (business partnerships, marriages, close friendships) with pagans could falter in faith and join in their ungodly behavior. In fact, in the Corinthian church the believers were tolerating a situation in which a man was “sleeping with his father’s wife” (1 Cor. 5:1). Paul commanded that church “not to associate with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister and is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or verbally abusive, a drunkard or a swindler” (5:11). Here in Ephesians 5:7, the apostle felt the need to deliver a similar warning (and directive) to the Christians in Ephesus. The stakes were too high for believers to willingly compromise their Christian morals.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read 2 Corinthians 6:14-18 and John 17:15-17. How does Paul’s directive for believers not to be partners with the ungodly fit with Christ’s prayer that believers be in the world but not of the world? What are ways that believers today might be tempted to compromise their Christian morals?

ILLUMINATE (Eph. 5:8-14)

Paul went on to challenge believers to live as lights in a dark world. Believers are to produce acts that are pleasing to God and that expose ungodly actions.

VERSES 8-9

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light—for the fruit of the light consists of all goodness, righteousness, and truth—

In Ephesians 5:5-7, Paul warned about the certainty of God’s judgment against sinful living. Beginning in verse 8, he added a positive rationale for living a holy life. He reminded the recipients of the letter that in Christ their past sinful lifestyles were just that—in the past: you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. The change in what used to be and what
presently existed could not be starker. Paul pointed to the one-hundred-and-eighty-degree difference between darkness and light.

It is instructive to notice that Paul did not say that believers once lived (and still lived) in a dominant culture characterized by darkness. In other words, we as believers can never excuse or seek to justify immoral behavior—before or after believing in Christ—by blaming our cultural environment. Before conversion to Christ we were not just in a dark culture, we were an integral part of that culture. We were spiritual darkness!

Faith in Christ radically transformed the former darkness: now you are light. Christ referred to Himself as “the light of the world” (John 8:12). He also taught His followers that, by virtue of their faith-relationship to Him (in the Lord), they too were “the light of the world” (Matt. 5:14). Consequently, as Christians we must live up to who we are. We must daily live as children of light. Our lifestyles are to be consistent with our new character.

The phrase fruit of the light is an unusual analogy that appears only here in Scripture. A few ancient manuscripts of the New Testament have “fruit of the Spirit” (see KJV) in place of fruit of the light. On one hand, the phrase fruit of the light is consistent with the imagery of light and darkness Paul introduced in Ephesians 5:8. On the other hand, “fruit of the Spirit” is a phrase the apostle used also in Galatians 5:22 to introduce a series of character qualities in believers. The bottom line seems to be that whatever wording Paul used in the original manuscript of his letter, he was talking about the resulting lifestyle (fruit) produced by genuine Christian faith.

Here are three spiritual qualities that people can expect to see being demonstrated in the believer’s lifestyle:

- **Goodness**—The Greek term rendered goodness can also mean “kindness.” It refers to that which God deems as satisfactory or fitting. Goodness is the opposite of evil. People can therefore rightly expect the believer’s actions to be appropriate and kind, not evil.

- **Righteousness**—This Greek term refers to that which is right, just, and fair. In terms of salvation, it refers to being put in right standing with God through faith in Christ. Thus, people can expect the Christian’s lifestyle to reflect a right relationship with God. The believer’s actions ought to be consistently Christlike.

- **Truth**—The Greek term rendered truth can refer to honest speech, reality, sincerity, or moral genuineness. It is the opposite of falsehood and deceit. Thus, people can expect Christians to tell the truth and act with Christlike integrity. They are not to act hypocritically but are to be authentic.

**VERSE 10**

testing what is pleasing to the Lord.
Living as children of light does not mean merely following a code of abstract virtues. (Even the ancient Greeks held philosophical views about goodness, truth, and beauty as human virtues.) For the believer, these qualities have their origin in God. The believer receives them in a faith-relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Spirit nurtures the qualities in the believer, producing the fruit of Christlike attitudes and actions. When a believer exhibits such spiritual fruit, especially in a dominant culture of pagan darkness, he or she effectively proves what is pleasing to the Lord. The Greek root word behind testing means “to prove, examine, put to the test.”

VERSE 11

Don’t participate in the fruitless works of darkness, but instead expose them.

Spiritual darkness cannot produce Christlike behavior. Living in moral darkness can never lead to a life of Christlike goodness, righteousness, and truth. Paul therefore had two words of counsel for the children of light (believers) as they encounter those who remain in spiritual darkness and therefore practice all types of immoral behavior.

On one hand, believers must scrupulously avoid participating in the fruitless works of darkness. The Greek verb rendered don’t participate in (“have no fellowship with,” KJV; “take no part in,” ESV; “have nothing to do with,” NIV) literally means “do not share with or be an accomplice with” someone or some activity. Christians have an obligation to flee from activities that God’s Word has revealed to be sinful.

On the other hand, Christians are called to expose (“reprove,” KJV) the deeds of darkness for what they are. In one sense, believers do this by example when they live Christlike lives. The darkness of immorality cannot help but stand out against a backdrop of Christian people who consistently demonstrate purity and holiness in their relationships. Yet, on the other hand, sometimes believers must boldly speak up, taking a public stand to shine Christ’s moral light on the entrenched evils of an immoral culture.

VERSE 12

For it is shameful even to mention what is done by them in secret.

Paul continued with his counsel to the children of light. He explained the reason they were to be involved in exposing evil deeds. Too often those who live in the darkness practice their wicked behavior in secret. Paul felt a degree of embarrassment about even mentioning in a letter to believers some of the immoral activities that were being practiced. Yet, the only way to confront and hopefully end such activities was to expose them.
VERSES 13-14

Everything exposed by the light is made visible, for what makes everything visible is light. Therefore it is said: Get up, sleeper, and rise up from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.

Most of us likely have had the experience of turning over a stone in the grass only to see insects or worms squirm for cover. In a similar way, when believers shine the light of Christlike morals on the secret places of moral darkness, the practitioners of wickedness often squirm for cover as well. But when the lights are turned on—whether it be literal lights or the exposure of evil in other ways—everything exposed … is made visible. Evil is seen for what it is and does to people.

Paul extended the analogy of what occurs when Christians shine the light of Christ into the places of darkness. Evil deeds are made visible and are recognized as evil. Moreover, the exposure gives an opportunity for the practitioners of evil to be transformed from workers of evil to workers of light. This is a possible understanding of the words what makes everything visible is light (“everything that is illuminated becomes a light,” NIV).

Paul concluded this section with a poetic quotation. Some Bible students suggest that the apostle was paraphrasing an Old Testament text such as Isaiah 60:1 or was reciting a line from an early Christian hymn. Whatever the case, the quotation can be understood to emphasize three truths:

• First, when we were living sinful lives before conversion, it was as though we were asleep. Now that we have believed in Christ, we have awakened.

• Second, we were not just asleep before believing in Christ; in fact, we were spiritually dead. Now that we have believed, we have arisen from the dead.

• Third, before believing in Christ we lived in spiritual darkness. But now that we have believed, the light of Christ has shined on us and we have become light. If this is what has happened to us, then we have been called to live a new kind of life. Baptism was a dramatic, symbolic portrayal of our awakening from sleep, rising from death, and being filled with Christ’s light. By demonstrating His love and character in our daily lives, we function as spiritual lighthouses to all of those around us—both believers and unbelievers.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Light, Light of the World” on pages 1017–1018 in the Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded. In what ways do you think of yourself as a child of light? How are you demonstrating that you are a child of the Light of the world?
Walking Wisely

Believers are to walk wisely, depending on the Holy Spirit for direction.

Ancient Israel’s King Solomon was renowned for having God−given wisdom. He composed some three thousand proverbs and more than a thousand songs (1 Kings 4:29−34). His name is associated with three Old Testament books known as wisdom literature—Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs. Wisdom in biblical terms refers to having insight and judgment to make good, godly decisions on a consistent basis. Wisdom focuses on the application of experience and knowledge so that the results are beneficial.

The Book of Proverbs stands the test of time in this regard. Ecclesiastes, on the other hand, reveals that human wisdom has its limits. The writer of Ecclesiastes complained about the seeming meaninglessness of life “under the sun”—that is, from a worldly perspective. The end of Ecclesiastes states that “the conclusion of the matter is this: fear God and keep his commands, because this is for all humanity” (Eccl. 12:13). In other words, while human wisdom can be beneficial, it cannot substitute for God’s revealed wisdom.

In Ephesians 5:15−21, the apostle Paul urged New Testament believers to live as wise people. Paul knew that the Lord is the source of all true wisdom. The vocabulary of wisdom is sprinkled throughout Paul’s letters. In Ephesians, for example, he mentioned wisdom three times, and all of the instances refer to God as the Author of wisdom:

- God poured out the riches of His grace along “with all wisdom and understanding” (1:8).
- Paul prayed for the Father to give believers “the Spirit of wisdom and revelation” (1:17).
- God’s “multi-faceted wisdom” is made known even in the heavens through the church (3:10).

Paul realized as well that true wisdom must be applied properly. That is why he urged the Ephesians to live as wise people, a central theme of this session. Paul knew that it was one thing to know all about wisdom (as Solomon did), but it is another thing entirely to apply wisdom consistently, to live day by day in the Spirit as a spiritually wise person.
UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

EPHESIANS 5:15-21

This is the fifth session in which we have considered Paul’s practical application of the doctrinal teaching he wrote about in Ephesians 1–3. In those first three chapters, Paul emphasized God’s initiative in providing the way of salvation through faith in Christ for both Jews and Gentiles. God established the church as Christ’s body, the redeemed people of God.

The implications of these doctrinal truths, as the titles of recent sessions indicate, focus on how we “walk”—that is, carry out our daily lives—as believers. The following is a brief review of the titles and emphases.

• Walking Together (4:1-10)—As believers, we are to be unified with other believers in our actions.
• Walking Forward (4:11-16)—God-given (and gifted) leaders help us mature as Christians and minister in and through the church.
• Walking Differently (4:17-32)—As believers, we are empowered and expected to live unlike we lived before conversion; we are to put off the old self.
• Walking in Love (5:1-14)—As believers, we are to be Christlike (imitating God) and live as children of light in a sin-darkened world.

In this session’s Bible passage (5:15-21), Paul focused on the expectation that believers will live wisely. As he had stated previously in his letter, Paul asserted that true wisdom comes from God. God freely gives His wisdom to believers in their relationship with Christ. Still, they must utilize godly wisdom each day in the power and guidance of the indwelling Spirit.

Paul’s consistent use of plural verbs in these verses is worth noting. The apostle understood that Christians do better at living wisely when they do so in community with other believers. As you and your study group explore these verses in the Letter to the Ephesians, pray that the Spirit will guide all of you to perceive what it means not only to live wisely as an individual believer but also to live wisely together as God’s redeemed, holy people.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

BE WISE (Eph. 5:15-17)

Paul warned the recipients of his letter about the need to be wise and careful in all things, including in their use of time. Believers are responsible to seek to live each day according to God’s will.
VERSE 15

Pay careful attention, then, to how you live—not as unwise people but as wise—

To highlight his upcoming focus on important life application, Paul inserted the word then (sometimes translated as “therefore”). The Greek verb rendered pay ... attention can be literally understood as an exhortation to see, examine closely, or study carefully. In some cases, the term promotes an even stronger reaction, that of watching out for (and thus avoiding) something that is dangerous or destructive (see Phil. 3:2).

Here in Ephesians 5:15, Paul used the verb in the sense of attending to an important matter that might otherwise be neglected. He emphasized this meaning by adding the word rendered careful. In some areas of life—family, job, education, appearance—most people take care to attend to them, because these things matter. Believers must take the same approach to their spiritual growth and Christian living; these matters do not happen automatically. Carelessness is never an acceptable option for believers.

The verb rendered you live could carry both a literal and a figurative meaning. Literally, the verb referred to walking about on one’s feet (Matt. 4:18). Paul and other New Testament writers began to use the verb as an analogy for daily life—in other words, the believer’s lifestyle. In Ephesians, Paul consistently used the verb in this sense of “to live” (see 2:2,10; 4:1,17; 5:2,8). Ephesians 5:15 is the final time the apostle used the term in this epistle. To Paul, the way believers carried out their daily lives mattered greatly.

The apostle went on to give a general guideline about the way in which believers are to live: not as unwise people but as wise. Just because persons know about wisdom does not necessarily mean they are living wisely. Even though believers might understand that God is the Author of true wisdom, they might—through carelessness—get drawn into living unwisely.

VERSE 16

making the most of the time, because the days are evil.

Paul pointed out that the first mark of living wisely as believers was to make wise use of time. The apostle recognized that time ultimately belongs to God alone. He graciously gives each person who lives a brief slice of it—brief, that is, relative to the entirety of time. Thus, we as believers in particular should realize that God regards us as stewards of the time we receive. And as stewards (or managers), we are accountable to God for how we use our time. The Greek root word rendered making the most of literally means “to buy back, to redeem.” It could also have the sense of using something to the fullest extent.
In New Testament Greek, there were two commonly used words that referred to two aspects of time. One of the terms (Greek, *chronos* [KROH nahs]) referred to chronological time, the passing of time increments that are measured on a clock or calendar. The second word for time (Greek *kairos* [KIGH rahs], referred to a season, a right (or wrong) time for something, or a timely set of circumstances (that is, an opportune time). Paul used the latter term in Ephesians 5:16. Thus, he urged Christians to think of their daily lives not just in terms of days and years but also as their opportunity to live for God and make a gospel impact on the world around them. The right time for Christian living is now. Believers must not wish for or wait for a more opportune time.

The apostle provided a strong incentive for the believer’s making use of every opportunity: the days are evil. It isn’t difficult to understand why Paul considered his time as evil. He was unjustly confined as a prisoner in Rome. Further, he was fully aware of the immoral pagan excesses that plagued not only Rome but also other cities of the empire such as Ephesus.

Today, most—if not all—believers would admit that our time is no less plagued by evil as Paul’s time was. In addition to the same immoral excesses of the first century, we grapple with a whole host of possible “time thieves” the world puts in front of us: everything from technology-driven pastimes (social media and gaming come to mind) to idle chatter. If we as believers do not discipline our minds for godliness in these evil days, then this evil time will keep us from godliness. Paul may very well have been thinking about Psalm 90:12 in his exhortation to believers: “Teach us to number our days carefully so that we may develop wisdom in our hearts.”

**VERSE 17**

So don’t be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is.

In Ephesians 5:15, Paul contrasted the positive term “wise” to the negative term “unwise.” In verse 17, he interjected a term synonymous with “unwise”—foolish. Readers of the Book of Proverbs will recall how often Solomon and other writers of proverbs contrasted the ways of the wise to the ways of the foolish. (See the personification of wisdom and folly in Prov. 9.)
In the New Testament, the concept of foolishness referred to being without good moral sense. Thus, Paul introduced the second mark of living wisely with the words don't be foolish. Then he went on to issue a positive challenge for believers: understand what the Lord's will is. Fools choose their own will; wisdom is found in doing the will of God, just as Jesus prayed (Mark 14:36). Further, Jesus taught His followers to approach God in prayer with “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10b-11a). Can anything be more important to a believer than discovering and doing God’s will? Paul said no.

Christian theologians refer to two aspects of God’s will that are taught in Scripture. First, there is the aspect of God’s general will. Many parts of God’s will are the same for all of His people regardless of their time in history, location, background, and so forth. Today the primary source for discerning His general will is Scripture. His Word reveals His will for His people. In this vein, Paul wrote such admonitions as “This is God’s will, your sanctification: that you keep away from sexual immorality” (1 Thess. 4:3) and “Give thanks in everything; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thess. 5:18).

A second aspect of God’s will is what theologians refer to as His “particular will” for individuals. For example, an individual believer might seek God’s will concerning whether and whom to marry, what career or occupation to pursue, where to live, and many other personal matters. While Scripture provides some general principles that guide us in making such decisions, wise believers also pursue specific guidance into God’s will through prayer and the counsel of mature believers. On one hand, Paul knew that God’s will included the plan for all people groups to be evangelized and discipled in the gospel (Matt. 28:18-20). On the other hand, he prayed about God’s specific timing for him to travel to Rome and preach (Rom. 1:10; 15:32).

EXPLORE FURTHER
Read the article titled “Will of God” on page 1654 in the Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded. Are there decisions regarding God’s will for your future for which you need guidance right now? In what ways are you praying, thinking carefully, and seeking godly counsel from others?

BE FILLED (Eph. 5:18)
Paul urged all believers to be controlled by the Spirit, not by foolish influences that lead to reckless living.
VERSE 18

And don’t get drunk with wine, which leads to reckless living, but be filled by the Spirit:

As we study Paul’s teaching in this verse about the Christian’s relationship to the Holy Spirit, we need to keep in mind several facets of the overall biblical teaching on this matter. First, so far in his Letter to the Ephesians, Paul had assured believers they were “sealed ... with the promised Holy Spirit” (1:13) and yet were to be careful not to “grieve God’s Holy Spirit” (4:30). Being sealed by the Spirit assures believers not only of the Spirit’s indwelling presence but also of their eternal hope of heaven. Being warned about grieving the Spirit reminds believers that sanctification (spiritual growth) is a process, a day-by-day, situation-by-situation work of the Spirit in each believer’s life.

Second, biblical writers used phrases such as “full of the Spirit” and “filled with the Spirit” to refer to believers who consistently submit their whole lives to the Spirit and obey His guidance. The fullness of the Spirit is not a dramatic “second blessing” type of experience needed for a deeper spiritual walk; rather—as Paul affirmed in this verse—it is something that all Christians may (and should) experience simply by yielding to the Spirit on a daily basis.

Third, other than Paul’s command in this verse, the only other specific references to the filling or fullness of the Holy Spirit are found in Luke’s two writings, Luke’s Gospel and the Book of Acts. Here are some samples:

- John the Baptist’s parents were both filled with the Spirit (Luke 1:41,67);
- John the Baptist and Jesus were full of the Spirit (Luke 1:15; 4:1);
- The early church as a group received a fresh filling with the Spirit (Acts 2:4; 4:31; 13:52);
- The first seven deacons in the church—Stephen in particular, were described as being full of the Spirit (Acts 6:3,5; 7:55).

With these three observations as a background, let us turn now to consider Paul’s teaching in Ephesians 5:18. Paul began with a negative command: don’t get drunk with wine. He referred to wine because it was one of the most commonly available fermented drinks available to first-century people. Perhaps some of the Ephesian believers had problems with drunkenness before their conversions to faith in Christ.

By extension, we can also apply Paul’s prohibition regarding drunkenness to numerous other types of addictive substances today. The underlying problem Paul addressed was the loss of control over one’s thinking and acting. A person who is drunk (or under the influence of illicit drugs) is controlled by that substance. Believers are to be under the Spirit’s control.

Drunkenness easily leads to reckless living (“excess,” KJV; “debauchery,” ESV; NIV). The Greek term rendered reckless living could refer to uncontrolled...
actions as well as wastefulness. When strong drink takes over, good judgment and propriety usually fly away.

Several truths arising from Paul’s command for believers to be filled by the Spirit deserve attention:

• First, this is a command for all believers, not a suggestion for some. The only way for us successfully to pay attention to how we live (5:15) is by following the Spirit’s control daily.

• Second, the verb rendered be filled is in a Greek tense (present tense) that emphasizes ongoing action. Thus, the command can be understood as “keep on being filled.” Living in the fullness of the Spirit is meant to be the Christian’s regular pattern of living.

• Third, the verb not only is in the present tense but also is in the passive voice. This means that the One actually doing the filling is not the believer but the Holy Spirit. As believers, we can yield to the Spirit and obey His control, but only He can fill us. He does so as we keep on yielding and obeying.

• Fourth, Paul did not say that when we are filled that we somehow get more of the Spirit. The Spirit is a Person, and we either have His indwelling presence (believers) or we do not (unbelievers). To be filled by the Spirit actually means that the Spirit gets more of the believer’s heart and will. We submit more of our lives to His daily control.

EXPLORE FURTHER
Read the verses from Luke and Acts mentioned on page 115. What evidence showed that a believer was filled with the Spirit? How was the individual’s behavior affected? In what areas do you need to submit more of yourself to the Spirit’s daily control?

BE GENUINE (Eph. 5:19-21)
Paul identified actions that result from the believer’s being filled with the Spirit. Results include singing and speaking God’s Word, having an attitude of thanksgiving, and submitting to other believers.

VERSE 19
speaking to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making music with your heart to the Lord,

Many Bible students have noticed a number of similar passages in the two epistles Paul sent to the believers in Ephesus and Colossae. This session’s
Bible passage is one such example. When we compare Ephesians 5:19-21 with Colossians 3:16-17, the parallels are striking. However, in the Colossians passage, Paul pointed to results that come when Christians “let the word of Christ dwell richly” in them (Col. 3:16). As we have seen in Ephesians 5:18, those results come as believers live in the fullness of the Spirit. Thus, we can conclude that Paul saw little distinction between keeping oneself saturated in God’s Word and seeking to live by the Spirit. These two spiritual realities go hand in hand.

As noted in the final paragraph of the “Understand the Context” feature in this session, Paul used numerous plural verbs in Ephesians 5:15-21. This fact strongly suggests Paul understood that believers do better at living the Spirit-filled life when they do so in community with other believers. Thus, when the apostle noted the first such result, speaking to one another, he probably had in mind the speaking opportunities that occurred at the church’s worship gatherings. One of the hallmarks of the Spirit’s unifying work is genuine fellowship being practiced among believers.

What speaking opportunities did Paul have in mind? He mentioned psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. By psalms, Paul likely was referring to the Book of Psalms in the Old Testament. Such Scripture texts could be read aloud, chanted, or sung. The term rendered hymns probably describes Christian songs of praise directed to God or Christ. (See Phil. 2:6-11; Rev. 4:11; 5:9-10,12-13 for possible examples of Christian hymns.) The term spiritual songs may refer to other kinds of Christian songs that describe the experiences of God’s people.

If the first result of Spirit-filled living is fellowship (speaking to one another), the second result is genuine worship. Paul next spoke of utterances addressed to the Lord. Singing and making music have been features of Christian worship gatherings from the beginning (Mark 14:26; Acts 16:25; 1 Cor. 14:26; Col. 3:16; Jas. 5:13). While the styles of singing and making music have certainly changed through the generations, the worship practices themselves continue unabated. Paul wanted Christian singing to be done with the heart. Singing from the heart is an expression of Christian joy.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Hymn” on page 782 in the Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded. As you think about singing in a Christian worship gathering, to what extent do you value singing from the heart as more important than the style of singing? What has shaped your personal preferences in worship music? Are you able to appreciate other styles?
VERSE 20
giving thanks always for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,

To this point, Paul noted that fellowship and worship are marks of Spirit-filled believers. Now he added a third result: gratitude. Numerous times in his epistles Paul challenged believers to be known for giving thanks ... to God (see also Col. 3:15,17; 1 Thess. 5:18). The Ephesian believers knew that Paul had experienced much that might give most Christians an excuse to grumble and complain. They also knew that Paul refused to take that route. To Paul, a grumbling spirit and the Holy Spirit did not belong together.

Paul developed an amazing doctrine of thanksgiving with just a few words. When should believers be grateful? Always, at all times. We can cultivate an attitude of gratitude in two ways. First, we can develop the practice of grateful prayer at various times each day—for example, upon awaking, at meals, and at bedtime (see Ps. 55:17; Dan. 6:10). Second, we can seek to project an attitude of thanksgiving daily, even when irritating things happen.

For what should believers be grateful? For everything. Paul wrote this very instruction in 1 Thessalonians 5:18: “Give thanks in everything.” There is no circumstance in life that God cannot use for good in His people’s lives (Rom. 8:28). Of course, Paul’s encouragement about being grateful for everything should not be applied inappropriately. That is, we are not expected to be thankful for disease epidemics, natural disasters, mass shootings, and the like. God can certainly bring (and has brought) good out of such catastrophes, and for that we should rightfully be grateful. But we are not expected to be grateful for evil and death.

To whom should we be grateful? To the Father. Paul had previously referred to God as believers’ loving Father several times in the letter (1:2,3,17; 2:18; 3:14; 4:6). Our prayers as believers are directed to Him, and our gratitude to Him in all of life’s circumstances shows that we trust Him. His actions are always good, even when evil and suffering are present.

How should we be grateful? We should express our gratitude in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. This means more than just repeating those exact words as closing to our prayers. It means that we acknowledge Christ as our Lord and look to Him in confidence as our Savior. Notice that Paul used the plural pronoun our in referring to the community of believers. Only those who are Christ’s followers can genuinely pray in such a way. Jesus invited His followers to pray confidently in His name (John 14:13-14).

Notice also that even our prayers of thanksgiving are to reflect the Triune Godhead. That is, those who are filled with the Holy Spirit always give thanks to the Father in the name of the Son, Jesus Christ.
VERSE 21

submitting to one another in the fear of Christ.

The fourth result of Christians’ being filled with the Spirit is demonstrated in their mutual submission within the body of believers. Grammatically, the Greek verb rendered submitting is parallel to the previous verbs translated “speaking,” “singing,” “making music,” and “giving thanks.” Together the verbs represent the kinds of actions to be expected from believers who are living by the Spirit.

At the same time, many Bible students also recognize that 5:21 is a bridge verse leading into Paul’s teachings about Christian family members (see Session 12). Submission is a relationship principle that is reflected both in the Christian community at large and more specifically in the way Christian wives are to relate to their own husbands in their marriages.

The Spirit-filled life is expressed not in isolation but in sharing life with one another in the body of Christ, the church. The verb rendered submitting can also mean “be subject to” or “be under the authority of.” Paul used the verb in a variety of contexts: submission to government (Rom. 13:1); the final submission of the Son to the Father (1 Cor. 15:28); and slaves’ submission to their masters (Titus 2:9). In the church and the home, submission is to be voluntary and joyful as a way of pleasing the Lord.

The phrase in the fear of Christ appears only here in the New Testament. It is related to the Old Testament teaching about “the fear of the Lord” (see Deut. 10:12, 20-21; Prov. 1:7). Here Paul applied this Old Testament truth to reverence and respect for the Lord Jesus, an indirect statement about the Son’s deity. When we as believers are reverently subject to Christ, we find that submitting to others in the body of Christ is not difficult.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Use the spaces below to reflect on the results of being filled with the Holy Spirit. Express Paul’s meaning in your words, then consider ways the results are evident in your life.

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<tr>
<th>RESULT</th>
<th>What Did Paul Mean?</th>
<th>How Is It Evident in My Life?</th>
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Walking as Family

Believers are to demonstrate God’s love in their family relationships.

I have written in previous session introductions about the importance of Christian family life. I count it as one of God’s greatest blessings to me that I grew up in a Christian home. Mom and Dad loved the Lord, loved each other, and loved their three children. We weren’t only spiritually focused at church; we were spiritually focused at home too. My parents led us in Bible reading and prayer together every evening. Even after I started dating, they stayed awake until I came home so that we could read Scripture and pray together. (My knowing this ensured that I always arrived home by curfew!)

Nancy, my wife, also grew up in a Christian family. Her parents served in their church’s deacon ministry, so it was not unusual that Nancy made a profession of faith in Christ and was baptized as a preteen. She was active throughout her teenage years in the church’s youth group.

Nancy and I met and began dating while I was a seminary student in Fort Worth, Texas. We learned quickly that we shared the same biblical values about dating and marriage. We soon fell in love, married, and began our family life together as husband and wife. Like all married couples, we’ve had to work at making our marriage stronger, but our similar backgrounds helped. We’ve enjoyed a rich journey through life together. Recent health challenges for both of us have not pushed us apart but have pulled us together as a family.

The biggest joy of our marriage came with the birth of our only child, a son. Our own experiences growing up as children in Christian families gave us valuable wisdom for parenting. Today our son also is married, and he and his wife have a daughter—our first grandchild. My son’s family is following the Lord, and Nancy and I are delighting in the grandparent adventure.

I am aware that not every Christian family has the same background in faith that I had. In the Bible passage for this session, Ephesians 5:22–6:4, Paul addressed the issues of marriage and parenting, while knowing that most
Ephesian believers had grown up in non-Christian families. His counsel was valuable for believers then and remains beneficial for believers today.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

EPHESIANS 5:22–6:9

As Paul continued his focus on applying the doctrinal truths he had expounded in the first three chapters of the epistle, he turned to the theme of believers’ exhibiting Christian grace and love in their homes. Paul realized that churches can be no stronger, spiritually speaking, than the families that comprise the churches. He later wrote to his coworker Timothy in Ephesus in regard to the necessary character qualities of church overseers that a potential overseer must be a proven family leader. Paul’s reasoning was that “if anyone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of God’s church” (1 Tim. 3:5). Strong Christian families help make for strong gospel churches!

In Ephesians 5:22–6:9, Paul addressed three typical pairs of relationships within Christian families: wives and husbands, children and parents (fathers in particular), and servants and masters. (The apostle addressed these same relationships also in Colossians 3:18–4:1.) In first-century Greco-Roman culture, servants were considered members of a household for those families who could afford to have them. Today, we can helpfully apply the principles Paul expounded concerning this pair to the relationship of employees and employers. In this session, we will focus primarily on instructions for the two pairs of relationships that we often refer to as immediate family members.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

WIVES (Eph. 5:22-24)

Paul instructed Christian wives about how they could strengthen family unity. He called on them to submit to their own husbands. He pointed to the church’s relationship to Christ as the model.

VERSE 22

Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord,

This text is fascinating and has been the subject of much discussion. To begin with, the verb submit does not actually appear in this verse in the Greek text.
It does appear in 5:21, however, and 5:22 is rightly understood as extending the principle of mutual submission introduced in 5:21. Thus, most English Bible translations supply the verb *submit* in 5:22 to clarify Paul’s instruction as to how Christian wives can put the submission principle into action. The Greek verb rendered *submit* literally means “to place under.” In the context of Christian relationships, it takes on the meanings of “being subject to,” or “accepting the authoritative leadership of” someone. With these points in mind, Paul’s instruction for Christian wives to submit to their husbands can be further expounded.

First, the submission of Christian wives to their husbands is one example (among other possible examples) of believers’ “submitting to one another in the fear of Christ” (5:21). Willing mutual submission in the body of Christ is a clear demonstration of the Spirit-filled life. Likewise, for a Christian wife to willingly submit to her husband’s spiritual leadership is a result of that wife’s obeying the Spirit’s guidance in her daily living.

Second, in the family context each Christian wife is expected to accept the authoritative leadership of only her own husband. Paul did not instruct all wives—or all women for that matter—to willingly submit to the directives of all men. The apostle was concerned with establishing good order and unity in the home, just as he was concerned with good order and unity in the church.

Third, the submission of Christian wives is *as to the Lord*. This statement does not mean that every Christian husband is equivalent to the Lord. Rather, it means that the Christian wife submits to her husband as an act of obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ. She realizes that her willing submission to her husband pleases Christ because her humble action is Christlike.

**VERSE 23**

*because the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church. He is the Savior of the body.*

Paul next provided a theological rationale for a Christian wife’s willing submission to her husband. In God’s design for marriage, *the husband is the head of the wife*. The apostle was affirming that husbands and wives have different roles in marriage. He was not saying that wives have less worth or dignity than their husbands. The Greek term translated *head* can refer to anything from a literal head (on a body) to a building’s cornerstone. Figuratively, it can refer to a ruler, a chieftain, or someone having leadership responsibility and authority.

Paul clarified the Christian husband’s headship in the family by comparing it directly with Christ’s being *the head of the church* and *the Savior of the body*. Paul had previously declared Christ’s headship over the body of Christ.
(the church) in Ephesians 4:15: “Let us grow in every way into him who is the head—Christ.” The Lord Jesus is in authority over the church, a truth that is basic to our understanding of the Son of God. Christ is the perfect head because of the work that He accomplished on the cross as the Savior. The importance of the Christian wife’s submission in the marriage relationship can thus be expressed in this way: Jesus took on responsibility for saving and leading the church; the church has the responsibility of believing in and submitting to Him. Paul then drew out the implications for Christian marriages.

VERSE 24

Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives are to submit to their husbands in everything.

There should be no hesitation for the believer to affirm Paul’s statement that the church submits to Christ. Can a local congregation that refuses to come under the authority of Christ even be called a church any longer? Paul would say no. The apostle took for granted that Christ’s lordship over the church is always perfect.

Next, however, Paul reasserted the principle that Christian wives are to submit to their husbands in everything. Just as a congregation wholeheartedly commits itself to Christ, so the wife is to commit herself wholeheartedly to fulfilling her God-given role in her marriage. On the other hand, throughout history too many husbands (including some Christian husbands) have used Paul’s teaching as a club to force their wives into an almost subservient status—to be a slave rather than a helpmate. Forced subservience and willing submission are radically different realities. Further, Paul was not denying that women could participate in meaningful work outside the home. He would only have expected that the wife function in the workplace (including political life) in a way that did not hinder her from fulfilling her crucial responsibilities as a Christian wife and mother.

Paul’s previous statement in 5:22 that a Christian wife is to submit to her husband “as to the Lord” implies that she should never be pressured to behave in a way that is sinful. Further, the Christian wife’s submission to her husband’s leadership in the family does not mean that she cannot contribute to family decisions, plans, and finances. In Proverbs 31:10-31, the Old Testament picture of an ideal, God-fearing wife, the wife “works with willing hands” outside the home (31:13), “speaks wisdom” (31:26), and “watches over the activities of her household” (31:27), leading her children to “rise up and call her blessed” (31:28) and her husband to praise her. Paul was surely familiar with this biblical portrait of a faithful, believing wife.
HUSBANDS (Eph. 5:25-33)

Paul instructed Christian husbands about how they could strengthen family unity. He called on husbands to love their wives, giving themselves sacrificially for their well-being. Christ’s love for the church is the model.

VERSE 25

**Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself for her**

Paul’s command for Christian husbands to love their wives is in a grammatical form that emphasizes continuing action. In other words, Christian husbands are to keep on loving their wives. The term that Paul chose to describe spousal love (Greek, *agape* [ah GAH pay]) refers to sacrificial, self-giving, Christlike love. It is the type of love that the apostle described in 1 Corinthians 13:4-8 as “patient,” “kind,” “not rude,” “not self-seeking,” “does not keep a record of wrongs,” “rejoices in the truth,” “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things,” and “never ends.” Christian husbands who consistently demonstrated this kind of love for their wives in Paul’s day would have stood out against their cultural context as starkly as such loving husbands today would stand out against the modern marital landscape.

Paul looked no further for a perfect model of husbandly love than the example of how Christ loved the church. Christ’s love for His church was not just an emotion, a feeling. Christ defined the nature of *agape*-love when He gave himself for her. Here Paul was referring to the demonstration of love revealed in the sinless Christ’s willingness to be beaten, ridiculed, falsely condemned, crucified, and buried on behalf of sinners. As Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:14-15: “For the love of Christ compels us, since we have reached this conclusion: If one died for all, then all died. And he died for all so that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for the one who died for them and was raised.”

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read Colossians 3:18 and 1 Peter 3:1-6. In the Christian marriages you know best (your parents, your own, or someone else’s), how have you seen the wives practicing godly submission to the leadership of their husbands? How do the wives contribute to their families’ well-being?
VERSE 26
to make her holy, cleansing her with the washing of water by the word.

In this verse, Paul explained further that Christ’s willing sacrificial death on the cross had a loving purpose. He died so that believers (the church as the bride of Christ) might be made holy. The word rendered holy literally means “set apart.” Yet, to be set apart for God has a moral, spiritual impact in people’s lives. The phrase cleansing her with the washing of water by the word points to the atoning result of Christ’s sacrificial death. In Christ, believers are cleansed from their sins. Just as a bride bathes on her wedding day to present herself clean, even so believers’ faith in the crucified and risen Christ makes them pure and holy for the Lord. The words washing of water by the word can refer either to Christian baptism as a dramatic picture of the believer’s being cleansed or to the powerful attraction of the gospel message in drawing the unbeliever to forgiveness (cleansing) in Christ.

There is an implication here for Christian husbands. While no husband can atone for his wife’s sins or carry the full responsibility for his wife’s spiritual life, the Christian husband can love his wife in such a way that she longs to become more holy or Christlike in her daily life.

VERSE 27
He did this to present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or anything like that, but holy and blameless.

Christ had an even longer range purpose for giving Himself in sacrifice on the cross. That purpose is to present the church to himself in splendor in the end time. Revelation 19 develops a similar image of the bride of the Lamb being presented to Christ: “She was given fine linen to wear, bright and pure. For the fine linen represents the righteous acts of the saints” (Rev. 19:8).

In Paul’s theological understanding, the present church age represented a period of betrothal and preparation. The age to come will be the period of marriage. Now (in this present life) is the time for believers to shed all features of the old life (without spot or wrinkle or anything like that) and to put on garments (attitudes and actions) that are holy and blameless.

VERSES 28-30
In the same way, husbands are to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hates his own flesh but provides and cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, since we are members of his body.
Having described the splendor and purpose of Christ’s love for the church, Paul applied the divine model in his instructions to Christian husbands. He repeated the command that husbands are to love their wives. In this instance, however, he gave an additional point of comparison. Not only should Christian husbands love their wives as Christ loves the church but also as their own bodies. In the previous analogy, Christ is the head of the church and the church is His body. Similarly, if the husband is the spiritual head of the family (see Eph. 5:23), then the wife, in effect, represents the couple’s “body” just as the church represents Christ’s body. For the husband to mistreat or hurt his wife makes no more sense than if he were to attack his own body. Conversely, the faithful, loving Christian husband cares for his wife just as he knows he must care for his own body in order to survive and thrive (he who loves his wife loves himself).

Paul was speaking from general human observation when he said that no one ever hates his own flesh. Generally speaking, an individual provides and cares for his physical well-being. By extension, then, it is only right that a husband would keep on providing and caring for his wife. To not do so was utterly foolish. Once again, however, Paul strengthened the analogy by connecting it to Christ’s relationship with His body, the church. The Lord continually provides and cares for the church. Since all of us who are believers are members of His body, we can be certain that He will always provide and care for us. What a powerful model for Christian husbands to follow!

VERSES 31-32

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This mystery is profound, but I am talking about Christ and the church.

To further bolster his teaching concerning Christian husbands and wives, Paul pointed to Genesis 2:24 as the basis for describing the mystery of husband-wife unity. At the dawn of human relationships in the garden of Eden, God established a principle designed to unite the husband and wife in a sacred bond. To this day, many couples have this principle declared openly as part of their wedding vows: For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.

Every wedding is the creation of a new and separate family. Both the husband and the wife must give priority to their new relationship. The words the two will become one flesh describe the mysterious and sacred nature of this relationship. As the new “head,” the husband must put behind his former life in which he was dependent on his parents’ provision and care. Likewise,
the wife as the new “body” must also transfer her supreme love and devotion
to her husband. The husband and wife thus become, as it were, one flesh—that is, one united, mutually devoted new family. This sacred union not only refers to sexual intimacy but also involves the couple’s unity in their spiritual, mental, and emotional capacities. A man and a woman are made truly one only in the bond of marriage.

Paul again took an opportunity to declare that the supreme model for
and explanation of the mystery of Christian marriage was Christ and the
church. As Christian families practice and grow in spiritual unity, they
thereby help strengthen the unity of the churches in which they worship and
serve. At the same time, every church that experiences and demonstrates
a growing unity among the members provides a powerful example to its
families of the unity that Christian husbands and wives can (and should)
experience in their homes.

VERSE 33

To sum up, each one of you is to love his wife as himself, and the
wife is to respect her husband.

Paul emphasized a final time his basic instructions for each Christian
husband to love his wife as himself and for each Christian wife to respect
her husband. These are the practical results that Spirit-filled husbands and
wives can expect in their marriages.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Marriage” on pages 1059–1061 in the Holman
Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded. Why is it important for
both wives and husbands to have a proper understanding of the nature
and purposes of marriage?

CHILDREN (Eph. 6:1-3)

Paul gave instructions to the children. He called on them to honor their parents.
He reminded the recipients of the epistle about the fifth commandment,
noting that God promises to bless those who honor their parents.

VERSE 1

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, because this is right.
Paul probably assumed that his epistle would be read aloud in one or more of the Ephesian church’s worship gatherings. Further, he likely knew that some, if not many, of the church’s families had dependent children. Paul’s command for children to obey their parents was clear and simple. Paul urged the children to do what their parents told them to do. This was the best way they could fulfill the fifth commandment to honor their fathers and mothers. The apostle then went on to give other important motivations for children to obey their parents.

First, the phrase in the Lord indicates that obeying one’s parents was a way that even children could exhibit Christlikeness. Second, Paul stated that for children to obey their parents is right. The Greek term rendered right also means “just” and “correct.” It is not only common sense but also the logic of human experience that children need their parents’ wisdom and guidance during their childhood years. If children consistently disobey their parents, how could there ever be a stable family? A stable society? How could the new generations ever grow and survive?

VERSE 2
Honor your father and mother, which is the first commandment with a promise,
In the fifth commandment, God directed children to honor their parents. The concept of honor surely included obedience, particularly in the relationship of dependent children with their parents. Even when children have become adults, they are still responsible to honor their parents in the sense of treating them with respect and seeing to their care when that becomes necessary.

For the children of Ephesus, Paul pointed to still another motivation for obeying their parents. The fifth commandment was, in fact, the first commandment (of the ten) with a promise. Obeying one’s parents brought a blessing for the keeper of the command.

VERSE 3
so that it may go well with you and that you may have a long life in the land.
Keeping God’s commandment to obey one’s parents generally will have good results. First, doing so makes it much more likely that the remainder of one’s life will go well. That is, children who follow their Christian parents’ guidance are less likely to make the terrible mistakes or wander into the dangerous situations that childhood inexperience and recklessness do not take into consideration. Second, obedience to parents increases the probability that children will go on to experience long life in the land. This blessing refers to
more than just a long lifespan. It also refers to the stability and endurance of the society as a whole. A nation characterized by rebellion, chaos, and family disintegration will not endure long.

PARENTS (Eph. 6:4)

Paul addressed parents—fathers in particular. He called on them to demonstrate godly discipline and to train their children in God’s ways.

VERSE 4

Fathers, don’t stir up anger in your children, but bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

Growing up in a Christian family should be a joyful experience for both parents and children. Paul directed his instructions to fathers in particular as the spiritual leaders of the family. Certainly Christian mothers share in the responsibilities with the fathers to guide and train their children. In our day, there are undoubtedly numbers of Christian families in which one of the parents is absent and the remaining parent must carry on.

Paul began his instructions by exhorting parents not to stir up anger (“do not provoke,” ESV; “do not exasperate,” NIV) in their children. If discipline is used unfairly or in a heavy-handed manner, it will not accomplish the desired result. It will only build up resentment and anger in children.

Then Paul expressed a positive alternative: bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord. The term rendered bring ... up originally referred to providing nurture and nourishment. Paul used the term here, however, in a broader sense—that of caring for the children physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually.

Children need both training (hands-on practice) and instruction (teaching and guidance). Paul specified that Christian parents are to give their children training and instruction on what it means to love, trust, and obey the Lord. This includes helping one’s children come to know Christ as Savior and Lord.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Walking to Battle

God provides believers with all the resources needed to live Christlike lives.

The 2014 movie *American Sniper* depicted the heroic and tragic story of Chris Kyle, a U.S. Navy Seal, sharpshooter, and Iraqi War veteran with multiple tours. The film highlighted Kyle’s military success but also showed the awful toll the war took on his personal and family life—even after his active service ended. His life was cut short when he was shot and killed by a fellow soldier with severe post-traumatic stress disorder whom Kyle was trying to help.

Since I never served in the armed forces, the movie’s realistic and brutal depictions of combat left me dumbstruck. I was intrigued, however, by the American soldier’s battle uniform, equipment, and technological resources. Can you imagine what a battle-tested, first-century Roman soldier might have thought on seeing a modern soldier’s equipment? In reality, although weaponry and technology have changed, the primary purpose of a first-century soldier’s armor was the same as today’s equipment: to protect the soldier’s body as much as possible while also giving the soldier flexibility to take the fight to the enemy.

When the apostle Paul wrote his Letter to the Ephesians, he likely saw each morning a fully uniformed Roman soldier standing guard in his rented house (Acts 28:30). As Paul came to the conclusion of his letter, the soldier’s armor reminded him of every Christian’s daily battles against the “evil, spiritual forces in the heavens” (Eph. 6:12). God has provided His people with the most effective spiritual armor they will ever need. The only question is whether the believer will take advantage of this armor or try to fight the enemy without using it.

In this session’s Bible passage, Ephesians 6:10-20, we will explore Paul’s analogy of the Roman soldier’s equipment to prepare believers for the inevitable spiritual warfare they must fight. Paul emphasized that God provides all the resources needed for believers to live victorious, Christlike lives.
We have come to the final session in our study of Paul's Letter to the Ephesians. To briefly recap the letter thus far, in the first three chapters of the epistle Paul scaled spiritual and theological heights by expounding the glory of God in Christ and the magnificent transformation believers receive in Him.

Beginning in chapter four and running through this session's focal passage, Paul challenged Christians to “walk the walk”—that is, live the kind of lifestyle—that is consistent with their new life in Christ. Such a lifestyle includes displaying unity of the Spirit with other believers in the church (4:1-10); growing in faith and service as God-given leaders equip the saints for ministry (4:11-16); shedding old habits and practices such as lying, angrily taking revenge, stealing, and using foul speech (4:17-32); replacing old habits and practices—especially all forms of sexual immorality—with actions that demonstrate Christlike love, goodness, righteousness, and truth (5:1-14); living wise and Spirit-filled lives in stark contrast to the wicked worldly culture surrounding them (5:15-21); and managing their families in the same Spirit-filled unity and power that characterizes the relationship of Christ and His church (5:22–6:4).

We can imagine that as Paul reflected on what he had written thus far in the letter and contemplated what he needed to say in closing that he glanced across the room at his assigned guard, a Roman soldier decked out in full uniform and bearing both a shield and sword. Perhaps God used that scene to inspire Paul to close his letter with an emphasis on spiritual warfare. The apostle could attest from his own Christian life experience that believers must be clear-eyed and serious about daily living as followers of Christ. It is truly a new life of love, hope, unity, and victory in the Lord. But until Christ’s return, the Christian life also is a daily battle against dark, entrenched forces of spiritual wickedness that never take a day off and never give any follower of Christ a free pass. Believers must be—and can be—prepared for the devil’s daily assaults by putting on the armor of God and utilizing it every day.

By ending his letter with an appeal to beware of the devil’s schemes, Paul was emphasizing the reality of the devil as an evil spiritual being. He is at work in the world. Nevertheless, the devil has already been defeated by Jesus through His death on the cross. Jesus has already been seated “far above every ruler and authority, power and dominion” (1:21). In the passage for this session, we will learn not only about God’s provision of all the resources we need to prevail in spiritual battles but also about our need to be prepared for daily spiritual battles, depending on our sovereign Lord for victory.
EXPLORE THE TEXT

AWARE (Eph. 6:10-13)

Paul asked the recipients of his letter to take a stand against the devil, realizing that believers battle daily against spiritual forces of wickedness. Paul explained that in salvation God provides spiritual armor for believers to wear.

VERSE 10

Finally, be strengthened by the Lord and by his vast strength.

The apostle indicated that he was about to conclude his letter with the word finally. Lest the believers of Ephesus think that they could live the victorious Christian life in their own strength, Paul urged (or commanded) them to be strengthened by the Lord. Like Paul’s previous exhortation for believers to “be filled by the Spirit” (5:18), the verb be strengthened (“be strong,” KJV; ESV; NIV) is in the present tense (ongoing action) and the passive voice (the subject is acted on). Thus, Paul was urging believers to keep on being strengthened (empowered) by the One who is all powerful and who freely grants His people power through the indwelling Spirit.

The phrase rendered by his vast strength (“mighty power,” NIV) literally reads “in the strength of His might.” The phrase highlights the combination of two Greek words. The effect of combining these terms has a similar purpose in English when we refer to something’s being a superpower. The Lord’s power is vastly greater than any other type of power.

VERSE 11

Put on the full armor of God so that you can stand against the schemes of the devil.

God’s power is vastly greater than human strength. Paul urged the recipients of his letter to realize that another type of power stronger than human strength was constantly at work in the world. He described this malevolent power in terms of the schemes of the devil. Paul had already referred to this spiritual enemy in Ephesians 2:2 as “the ruler of the power of the air” and in 4:27 as “the devil.” Indeed, Revelation 12:9 makes clear that the devil is one and the same as Satan (a name that means “adversary”) and “the ancient serpent”—the one that appeared in the garden of Eden and successfully tempted the first man and woman to sin against God. From the beginning of human history until now, the devil has been active in the world, “prowling around like a roaring lion, looking for anyone he can devour” (1 Pet. 5:8).
Moreover, he will continue his attacks on God’s people until Christ’s return, at which time he will be thrown into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:10).

In the meantime, how can believers hope to stand against such a strong, evil power? We must put on the full armor of God. The Greek root word rendered armor often referred to a weapon or an instrument of battle. The related form of the word Paul used in Ephesians 6:11 is akin to our modern English word panoply. That is, Paul was referring not to just a single piece of weaponry but to the entire battle uniform, both defensive and offensive resources. God gives His people the full spiritual resources not only to defend themselves from attacks but also to take the battle to the enemy by carrying the gospel message to all the nations (see Matt. 28:18-20; 2 Cor. 10:3-5).

VERSE 12

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this darkness, against evil, spiritual forces in the heavens.

If believers are to be spiritually prepared for Christlike living, they must know the truth about their real enemy and employ the right strategy for defeating him. Paul minced no words: the effective, growing Christian life is a daily struggle, an ongoing series of battles. The power of the enemy might be manifested through the agency of wicked people or pagan government officials (flesh and blood). Nevertheless, Paul understood—and all believers need to realize—that the ultimate battle for believers is spiritual in nature.

Paul identified several types of spiritual forces that are at work in the world to trip up, harass, tempt, and defeat Christians. First, the terms rendered rulers (“principalities,” KJV) and authorities (“powers,” KJV) evidently describe two types of evil spirits that work in and through opponents of the gospel who are in positions of political power. Herod the Great was an example of such a political leader. His wicked animosity toward the newborn Christ could only be explained as the work of an evil spirit (or spirits) residing in this human ruler’s heart (see Matt. 2:16-18).

Second, the phrases cosmic powers of this darkness and evil, spiritual forces in the heavens warn believers that these satanic spiritual forces and beings use their power to destroy lives. Christ, through His sinless life, atoning death, and victorious resurrection, defeated the devil and his demonic minions. One day Christ will return in glory and will banish His enemies forever to the abyss of hell. The devil’s only present power is to harass and fight against the followers of Christ. Yet, we do not have to battle the enemy alone or unprepared. We have the Lord’s armor that is more than sufficient to protect us and equip us for the battles we face.
VERSE 13

For this reason take up the full armor of God, so that you may be able to resist in the evil day, and having prepared everything, to take your stand.

Having learned about the nature and goals of our real enemy, we as believers now can better understand the urgency of Paul’s command to take up the full armor of God. The Greek verb rendered take up (“put on,” NIV) can also mean “pick up” or “raise up.” The idea is that the armor is there; the Christian is already in possession of it. However, we must not fail to put on the armor each day, to actually utilize the resources God has given us by the indwelling Spirit. Utilizing the full armor of God requires intentionality.

What result may be expected by those who are thus spiritually prepared? First, believers will be able to resist in the evil day. The verb translated resist implies standing strong against great opposition. Second, believers who have prepared everything in their spiritual arsenal will indeed take their stand successfully against the spiritual forces at work against them. If we have prepared well, we can be sure that in the end we will stand.

VERSE 14

Stand, therefore, with truth like a belt around your waist, righteousness like armor on your chest,

Paul again exhorted his readers to stand. He followed this with a vivid description of various parts of the “full armor.” There were five components of defensive equipment and one offensive weapon. As mentioned previously, Paul’s use of armor as an analogy may well have been prompted by the presence in his rented house of a Roman guard in full uniform. Possibly, though, the apostle may also have been informed by Old Testament passages.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Arms and Armor” on pages 118–121 in the Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded. How does the analogy of spiritual armor encourage you in your Christian living?

PREPARED (Eph. 6:14-17)

Paul identified parts of the spiritual armor God gives His people. These parts include His Word and the truth of the gospel.
Session 13: Walking to Battle

such as Isaiah 59:17, which describes God as a divine warrior fighting for His people: “He put on righteousness as body armor, and a helmet of salvation on his head.”

Paul may have identified the various parts of armor in the order that a Roman soldier dressed for battle. Thus, he began by urging believers to put on **truth like a belt around your waist.** The soldier’s belt was typically a leather strap worn around the midsection. The soldier’s tunic undergarment could be gathered under the belt for quick movement, and the belt could also hold a scabbard or serve as a holder for a dagger. As such, the belt was a source of hidden strength and confidence. In spiritual terms, the Christian soldier’s belt is **truth.** In one sense, Paul may have been referring to the Scriptures as the believer’s belt of truth. Yet, he was explicit in Ephesians 6:17 that God’s Word is the believer’s offensive weapon (sword) against the devil’s schemes. Thus, it is likely that in verse 14 Paul had in mind **truth** as a general spiritual quality—that of sincerity, honesty, integrity, and so forth.

Second, Paul urged believers to depend on their God-given **righteousness like armor on your chest** (“the breastplate,” KJV). An ancient soldier’s chest protector might be made of either thick leather or hammered bronze. It was worn to protect the soldier’s vital organs (heart, lungs, stomach) from being pierced. Such a wound could end the soldier’s life. Paul thus compared this vital piece of armor with the believer’s **righteousness,** or right-standing with God. We receive righteousness only by believing in Jesus Christ; indeed, He is our righteousness (1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor. 5:21). Moreover, we demonstrate our righteousness through righteous living. Paul may have had both of these spiritual realities in mind.

VERSE 15

and your feet sandaled with readiness for the gospel of peace.

Next, Paul exhorted believers to always have their **feet sandaled with readiness for the gospel of peace.** The apostle had in mind the Roman soldier’s sandals that could be described more precisely as a type of boot. The bottoms of the sandals were equipped with thick leather soles and often were embedded with studs, or cleats, for traction. On the top side, the sandals were often open-toed, and leather straps attached to the ankle area could be wound around the soldier’s lower legs to avoid losing his footwear when marching, running, or fighting.

In spiritual terms, Paul identified the Christian’s “sandals” as being ready for the gospel of peace. Three applications of this piece of armor come to mind. One, as believers we are to be constantly ready to share the gospel with others, especially with the lost. Two, the gospel of peace is an unshakable spiritual foundation for Christians as they navigate the challenges and

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difficulties of life on this side of Christ’s return. And three, the gospel of peace is the believer’s guarantee that one day the battles will be over and God’s peace will reign on earth. We will have peace with God, and we will enjoy daily the peace of God that “surpasses all understanding” (Phil. 4:7).

VERSE 16

In every situation take up the shield of faith with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.

Paul then urged believers to take up the shield of faith. A Roman soldier’s battle shield was not typically a short half-shield wielded in hand-to-hand combat. Rather, it was a full-length shield that protected the soldier’s body even in a standing position. A line of foot soldiers with shields could create an effective wall of defense against hordes of flying enemy arrows.

Not surprisingly, then, Paul recognized the shield as a vivid analogy of the Christian’s faith. In this context, the apostle no doubt was referring to the believer’s wholehearted trust in—confident, unswerving reliance on—God. Surrounded by their faith, believers are able to extinguish all the flaming arrows (“fiery darts,” KJV) of the evil one. What are the devil’s flaming arrows? They can be doubts, discouragements, temptations, selfish and impure thoughts, or fears. As believers, we can avoid these arrows with faith.

VERSE 17

Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit—which is the word of God.

The Roman soldier’s helmet was typically made of bronze or iron. Its purpose was self-evident—to protect the soldier’s head from crushing blows. Thus, Paul identified the believer’s helmet as salvation. He may have been thinking about salvation from sin through faith in Christ. An alternate view is that Paul was referring to salvation in the general sense of rescue from danger. In either case, salvation comes from God, whose power to save is vastly greater than the power of sin, death, or the devil.

Similarly, the believer’s sword is an instrument of God’s power that can be used both defensively and offensively. In his analogy, Paul likely had in mind the Roman soldier’s short sword that was used in hand-to-hand combat. In spiritual terms, the believer’s weapon is the sword of the Spirit. Grammatically, this phrase can mean either “the sword that the Spirit provides” or “the sword that is the Spirit.” Either meaning emphasizes the active measures the Holy Spirit takes in protecting and empowering believers. However, the first meaning seems more likely in light of Paul’s further description of the sword as the word of God. This is almost certainly
a reference to the Scriptures, which are inspired by God and are able to give “wisdom for salvation” (2 Tim. 3:15). Further, the Scriptures are “profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (3:16-17).

EXPLORE FURTHER
Think about Paul’s spiritual applications for the believer of each piece of God’s armor. In what areas do you need to better prepare for spiritual battles? How does the fact that God has provided armor for His people encourage you in living the Christian life?

FIELD SUPPORT (Eph. 6:18-20)
The apostle emphasized the importance of prayer for the person going into spiritual battle and for those already in the battle. Prayer is how the armor is deployed and victories are won.

VERSE 18
Pray at all times in the Spirit with every prayer and request, and stay alert with all perseverance and intercession for all the saints.

Having described the Christian’s armor, Paul now addressed the believer’s best strategy for gaining spiritual victories. That strategy includes prayer—Spirit-filled, comprehensive, persistent prayer for oneself, for other believers, and for the gospel mission. Further, the Greek verb rendered pray is in the present tense, indicating that believers are to keep on praying.

When do we pray? At all times. There is never a bad time or a wrong time to pray. Further, every situation we face is worthy of our praying about it.

In what attitude do we pray? We are to pray in the Spirit—that is, motivated by and helped along by Him. He intercedes on our behalf when we do not know what to pray for (Rom. 8:26).

What kinds of prayers should we offer? Every prayer and request. Prayers may include declarations of praise and reverence to God. The term rendered request includes petitions and entreaties. The word intercession refers to praying for and on behalf of others.

What is the manner of our praying? We should be alert—that is, aware of the urgency of prayer and alert to the people and needs to be prayed for. Further, we should persist in prayer (with all perseverance). May we never lose confidence in the effectiveness of prayer!
For whom are we to pray? For all the saints, including ourselves. All believers are engaged in spiritual warfare, and therefore we are to pray for one another.

VERSE 19

Pray also for me, that the message may be given to me when I open my mouth to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel.

Paul then asked for the Ephesian believers to pray for him in some specific ways. First, he asked them to pray that he might know exactly what God wanted him to say when he had an opportunity to preach the gospel message. Paul knew well the truths of the gospel and never wavered from them. He might—and often did—vary his approaches and emphases in presenting the gospel truths to better communicate with different audiences. Second, Paul asked the Ephesians to pray that he would be bold in proclaiming the mystery of the gospel. Even someone such as Paul had to battle with fear.

VERSE 20

For this I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I might be bold enough to speak about it as I should.

One reason that Paul had to battle with fear likely had to do with his being a prisoner in Rome—an ambassador in chains. He was not free to travel; he could not even move about in Rome. On any given day, the emperor might decide that he could use Paul as a political pawn, perhaps even executing the apostle to pacify Paul’s enemies. Yet, Paul was an ambassador of the King of kings. Therefore, he pleaded with the Ephesians to intercede for him to be bold enough to speak about the gospel as he was called to do. May we pray for one another to have the same boldness in our lives as gospel witnesses!

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Prayer” on page 1291–1293 in the Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded. How is prayer both a resource and a strategy in facing spiritual battles? In what ways do you need to strengthen your readiness for spiritual battles by strengthening your prayer life? How can you begin now?
Ephesians

A basic saying of the Christian life is “become who you are.” Because we have been brought to life in Christ, we can live new and distinctive lives through the power of God’s grace. “Become who you are” actually captures the theme of Ephesians; Paul wove it into the very fabric of the book. Chapters 1–3 are about the new life given to us in Christ; chapters 4–6 are about the new lifestyle that is based on this new life. The hinge of the entire letter is found in one word: therefore (4:1). It reminds us that because we have been made alive in Christ, we are now to live and walk in a way that is worthy of the gospel. As you engage in this study of Ephesians, prepare to be challenged with this key question: “How can I become in daily life who I am already in Christ?”