

Prayers

Opening prayer

In the midst of this wonderful day, Lord Jesus, breathe new life into every part of my life; what I do, how I live, and what I feel and think. May Your presence inspire me, Your power enthral me, Your love amaze me, and Your vision excite me; and may Your peace at the end of this day encourage me that everything that happens to me is but a part of Your greater plan for me, for those I love and for all Creation. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: WATER

1. For yourself

Thank God for water, and for the many forms in which you use it.

2. For your friends and family

Thank God for the availability of water where you live, and the social benefits of being able to use water for washing and drinking, without hindrance

3. For the church and its work

God for the blessing of the Biblical picture of Jesus as the 'water of life', and everything this means for God's people

4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)

Pray for the management of water resources in your country and region. Pray that God will use the idea of water distribution for good, and more and more people will benefit from a clean supply of water throughout the world.

Meditation

By Your gracious love, Lord God, You continue to speak to us.

You are firm when we need to be guided;

You are gentle when we need to be loved.

You are direct when we need to hear instructions;

You are silent when we need to make our decisions.

You are challenging when we need to be confronted;

You are encouraging when we need to be affirmed.

You are heartening when we need to be courageous and act.

You are cautious when we need to take care of ourselves.

You are critical when we need to know our mistakes;

You are accepting when we need to know You care.

By Your gracious love, Lord God, You continue to speak to us.

Bible Study

Bible passage – Ephesians 3:1-6

¹ *This is the reason why I, Paul, am a prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles. ² Now you surely know about the special responsibility of God's grace that was given to me for you, ³ and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation. I have already written a summary of this, ⁴ and reading it will enable you to discern my understanding of the mystery of Christ.*

⁵ This was not disclosed to people of other generations in the way that it has now been revealed to God's holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit, ⁶ and it means that through the Gospel, the Gentiles have shared blessings, a shared body and a shared participation in the promise through Christ Jesus.

Review

Paul defends his ministry, but urges his readers to accept his testimony of the truth of the Gospel. They, the Ephesians, are amongst the first people in the Gentile world to hear the Gospel and know of the benefits of God's grace!

The first two chapters of Ephesians form a magnificent prayer of praise to God for His work in salvation and redemption. The letter continues now with a chapter that is almost wholly a description of Paul's commission to preach the Gospel. As we read on, it becomes clear that much of this chapter was written by Paul to defend himself against the accusation that he was neither an apostle nor one of the original 'Twelve'. But just as in his other letters, he comes alive when defending himself and his ministry, and the whole chapter is full of inspiring verses and phrases. Here, for example, he writes famously about being a '*prisoner of Christ Jesus*' (3:1), and he speaks of the '*mystery*' of the Gospel '*made known to me by revelation*' (3:3). Then, as if to summarise all we have read previously, Paul also insists that the Gospel is for all people; he says, '*the Gentiles have shared blessings ... through Jesus Christ*' (3:6).

Paul begins the defence of his ministry by pointing out that his letter is written in prison, and he regards his imprisonment as part of what he must suffer in order to proclaim the Gospel (3:1,2). He does not start by writing for help, as we might think natural. To be incarcerated in a Roman prison was a cruel act of barbarism; people were put into little more than barred caves, with no amenities. A primitive bucket might be available for waste and food was minimal unless it was provided by someone outside the prison.

Yet despite these conditions, Paul had the spiritual courage to write pastorally to the Ephesians, and give the impression that he bore this treatment gladly, as a '*prisoner of Jesus Christ for the sake of you Gentiles*' (3:1). For Paul, these conditions served as a tool to illustrate his being bound to Christ and the Gospel, a call that he gladly pursued for the benefit of those to whom he wrote. He appealed to his readers; did they not already know that God had set him apart to bring the Gospel to them whatever the cost (3:2)? And did they not already know the story of his special revelation from Jesus Himself, of the '*mysteries*' of the Gospel, and His '*special responsibility*' to take the Gospel to the Gentiles (3:2,3)? Paul seems to be appealing to his readers to remember sermons he had preached encompassing all these things.

But for a moment, we must look further into Paul's imprisonment. Where and when was Paul held? I have already offered some opinions about this in the first few studies of this series. Nevertheless, despite the many different opinions about this put forward in recent times, I remain convinced that Ephesians was written by Paul in his more mature years. I reckon that he wrote as a prisoner in Rome, held pending his trial before the Emperor, and at a point in his life just after we leave his story in the book of Acts. Such a scenario is the best explanation of Paul's words here. He appears content, as he seems at the end of Acts, that he is doing the right thing for Christ and for the Gospel, and he asks those who have known his ministry to recall his efforts on their behalf and agree that the Gospel he has preached is true.

Yet despite his circumstances, Paul does not want his first readers, let alone us, to spend time thinking about his imprisonment; he wants us to perceive that all things serve God's purposes for those who are committed, like himself, to God's work. He asks the Ephesians to read again what he has written about the Gospel in the earlier part of his letter, and he believes that the glorious prayer of chapter 1 will '*enable you to discern my understanding of the mystery of Christ*' (3:3,4). Paul's conviction is also an appeal to us to read this letter now, and allow the Spirit to reveal the mysteries of Christ.

In verses 5 and 6, Paul continues to emphasise to the Ephesians the immense privileges they enjoy. They were some of the first people ever to hear the Gospel and hear the preaching of apostles! God had worked through previous generations amongst His people, the Jews, but remained almost completely unknown to others, to Gentiles. If the people in Ephesus who first read this letter had lived in previous generations, they would not be the recipients of this extraordinary revelation of the Gospel, something that was bursting with unbridled energy on the Roman world. To them, it had '*now been revealed*' through the ministry of Paul, the other apostles, and prophets of God (3:5), and God's 'Good News' in Christ Jesus had broken out of Judaism and was now freely available to all, '*through the Gospel, the Gentiles have shared blessings ...*' (3:6). Subsequently, through Jesus Christ, all God's people were a '*shared body and a shared participation in the promise*' (3:6). Paul was unashamed of the Gospel and unrepentant of any charge against him that he had preached Christ!

The sheer energy and conviction of Paul's writing here is a witness to us, centuries later, and the power of the Gospel message has not dimmed. As we read this great letter, we cannot but be challenged to take hold

of ourselves, our faith, and accept the challenges ahead. If Paul could keep his head high for the proclamation of the Gospel while imprisoned in Rome, then surely, so should we.

Going Deeper

- Notes on the translation of the passage
- What does Paul mean by the 'special responsibility of God's grace' (3:2)?
- What is Paul referring to when he speak of a revelation he 'earlier wrote briefly' (3:3)?
- Why has God revealed His plan to 'holy apostles and prophets' (3:5)?
- What does Paul mean by using the word 'shared' three times in verse 6 (3:6)?

Notes on the translation of the passage

V2 'the special responsibility of God's grace' *'Special responsibility' is the way I have chosen to translate a Greek word ('oikonomian') that usually refers to someone's personal task or responsibility within the running of a household. Paul uses this phrase to describe his 'call' from God.*

V5 'in the way that it has now been revealed ...' *In most Bible versions, you will read this; 'as it has now been revealed ...' If you read the whole sentence, however, it is easy to lose track of what Paul is saying. I have used the phrase 'in the way that' instead of 'as' (a simple expansion of the Greek words used here) to bring out the meaning of the sentence, which is that God has revealed something now that was not evident before.*

V6 'the Gentiles have shared blessings, shared body and shared participation of the promise' *This phrase reads quite differently in the various Bible versions, because it is hard to put the clear meaning of the Greek into English. I have attempted to capture what it says by the threefold use of the word 'shared', which is a distinctive feature of the original Greek of this sentence.*

What does Paul mean by the 'special responsibility of God's grace' (3:2)?

Of course, Paul's 'special responsibility' was his well documented call to take the message of the Gospel to the Gentiles, as explained above. When Paul wrote to the Ephesians, he wrote to a church he had founded and some of his readers knew him. Now if this letter was written years later in Rome, as many suggest, then he would have assumed that a number of those who read his letter would not have known him personally, hence his cautious comment in verse 2; 'now you surely know about ...'. He hoped that those who knew him in Ephesus would have told newer Christians about him, but he could not be sure.

Whilst reading for this study, I found that a number of books on Ephesians assume that if Paul wrote the letter, he was writing only to people he knew (and not also to the Christians who had been converted since his presence there). The authors of these books go on to suggest that Paul's cautious comment here at the beginning of verse 2 is evidence that Paul was not the real author of Ephesians; for they cannot understand why he would write in such a way to people he knew. Their assumption is wrong because it does not account for the growth of the church, and it is very sad that such a conclusion could be drawn!

If you read the 'translation notes' above, you will find that the phrase describing Paul's call, the 'special responsibility of God's grace' comes from a Greek word with a distinct meaning. In normal Greek it is used mostly to describe household duties or chores, and two things are worth noting. Firstly, every responsibility in the running of a household is 'special', for every task needs to be done for the house to run smoothly. Secondly, the word was used at times for the general management of a household, and whichever meaning you choose, it adds meaning. On the one hand, Paul did not want to elevate himself above others who worked for God's church. On the other hand, his role was indeed fundamental in creating a unified church in the early centuries, and this unity meant that the church, and the Kingdom of God, grew rapidly.

What is Paul referring to when he speak of a revelation he 'previously wrote briefly' (3:3)?

We have already commented (above) about Paul's special sense of call, so his comment suggesting that he wrote about this previously, and 'briefly', may mean that this is what he was speaking about earlier in the letter. Alternatively, and perhaps additionally, if Paul wrote this letter (as I believe), then he was conscious of repeating himself not just in Ephesians, but perhaps also in other letters; Galatians 2:1,9, 1 Corinthians 15:51, Colossians 1:26f. 1 Timothy 3:16.

Sometimes, we think about 'revelation' as a special event in which the Lord makes a personal appearance to deliver a message. This can sometimes happen, and Paul did speak about receiving the personal call of God to go to the Gentiles in such a way. This should not blind us to the fact that scripture itself gives plenty of evidence of people receiving revelation in other ways. For example, Acts 18:6f. describes how Paul was

led to this same decision by a sequence of events. He was forced to take action and 'wipe the dust from his feet' at the synagogue in Corinth, saying 'from now on I will go to the Gentiles'.

Paul's move to take the Gospel to the Gentiles was so radical in its day, it is not surprising that although he was called by Jesus to do it, he needed other experiences of life to teach him its truth, and he also wrote about it frequently. His comment that he 'previously wrote briefly' about it demonstrates the truth of this powerful call.

Why has God revealed His plan to 'holy apostles and prophets' (3:5)?

Paul's comments about God's 'holy apostles and prophets' in verse 5 are interesting. Paul does indeed say that although the mysteries of the Gospel were not fully revealed to people in the past, they were now revealed through Christ to the apostles and prophets of the early church. However, there is a little more to the verse than this, as we can see by looking more closely at what Paul meant by 'apostles' and 'prophets'.

The name 'apostles' was given to the disciples after they were commissioned by Christ to share the Gospel throughout the world (Matt 28:19), a group to which Paul was added because of his special revelation from Jesus. Because of the high esteem in which they were held, the early church seems to have used the term exclusively for the remaining twelve disciples and Paul. Consequently, later generations used the term 'mission', or 'missionary' (the Latin word for the Greek 'apostle', meaning 'one who is sent') to speak of people who were commissioned to go out and preach the Gospel, leaving the word 'apostle' for the famous disciples (and Paul).

The prophets of the Old Testament, of course, only received glimpses of the full work of God in Jesus Christ, and even the great prophet Isaiah never described the complete work of God for salvation through Jesus. The truth was this; since Pentecost, the Holy Spirit had come on all God's people with power, and prophets arose in the church according to the work of the Spirit (see Acts 11:12, 13:1, 15:32 etc.). The work of the prophet remained the same, which was to speak the Word of God when moved by the Spirit, but the gift was unrestricted to special people.

For these reasons, it is understandable that Paul would call both the apostles and the prophets of the early church 'holy', but not in any special sense. They were the means God used to convey His Gospel and His Word, but they were not the only people who were holy or the only people God used to do His will. The adjective describes the fact that apostles and prophets were set aside by God for a task. The New Testament sometimes uses the word 'holy' to describe all who are saved (e.g. 1 Cor 1:2, Eph 1:4, Col 1:22 etc.), so we should think of the word 'holy' as a common adjective in the life of the church, not a special one!

What does Paul mean by using the word 'shared' three times in verse 6 (3:6)?

The translation of verse 6 is explained in the notes above, and the triple use of 'shared' in this translation replicates the Greek word structure. It is difficult to overemphasise the importance of this verse, because it gives us an important insight into the mystery of the Gospel itself, and one that is often forgotten.

In Colossians 1:27, Paul says this, '*To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory*'. So here, Paul describes the mystery of God as the presence of Christ; '*Christ is in you*'. There is no more powerful message than this, but what comes next builds upon it. In his years of ministry, Paul preached this message many times. However, as he did so, he had to face churches that were split and divided over issues; Jews and Gentiles fought each other, and churches (e.g. at Corinth) were at odds over all manner of issues. So in later years, Paul expanded what he had to say about the 'mystery of God', adding the important truth found in Jesus' prayer in John 17, where Jesus asks that His followers might 'be one so that the world might believe'. Paul therefore preached the classic Gospel message of the revelation of God in Christ and Christ alone, but here (3:6), he added the essential scriptural message that all God's people were one in Him. Most specifically (for this was the most contentious issue of his day), Jew and Gentile Christian were one in Christ.

This is why Paul speaks so forthrightly in this passage about '*shared blessings, a shared body and a shared participation in the promise through Christ Jesus*.' (3:6). Here, Paul uses the language of the Old Testament when he says 'shared blessings', recalling the blessing of God on Abraham and David and their descendants. He also evokes his famous picture of the church as the 'body' of Christ, in which all the 'members' play their part, not independently, but dependently (as in 1 Corinthians 12). He then adds the fundamental Old Testament theme of the eternal promises of God found in Jesus Christ; all God's people share this unity

Discipleship

Application

Our conclusion must be that the unity of God's people is indeed part of the message of the Gospel. It is not some 'add on' to church life. If Jews and Gentiles are called to share 'blessings, body and promise' (3:6), then all God's people today are called to do the same. It is not a notion to be put to one side as if God will sort it out because we can't. It is a message that is consistent with the whole of scripture and requires our active concern and earnest intent. I will not emphasise the point further because those who have read these studies will be used to discovering that this theme occurs in scripture with great regularity. Each of us must respond to it with understanding and seek to fulfil what our Saviour and the whole of Scripture requires of us, which is to be 'one in Christ'.

Another application of this passage of scripture concerns our understanding of God's call. Here, Paul speaks at least about his own call, and the call placed on all God's people to know the truth of Christ and demonstrate the unity of Christ. Now, I once heard a very notable Christian leader comment that he did not understand 'all this talk about call'. He went on to say that it was only necessary that people were saved, and if he did his job well as an evangelist, then people would be saved. He asked 'what else is required?' Unfortunately, such an attitude does not reflect scripture. The Word of God frequently tells us that all who are called by God are called for a purpose, and each child of God has a task to do in the Kingdom. No one is saved as some kind of 'fodder' for the Kingdom of God, with nothing special to do except live a good life on earth and in heaven. God has plans for this world, and He works through people. The clear evidence of scripture is that each one who is saved has work to do in the Kingdom, and this is what we mean by our individual 'call'.

Questions for groups

1. Read through this passage as a group one verse at a time, and ask each other any questions that arise.
2. Do you believe, in principle, that the 'Gospel' necessarily includes the call for all God's people to be one.
3. Discuss what is meant by '*shared blessings, a shared body and a shared participation in the promises through Christ Jesus*' (3:6)

Discipleship challenges

- *Find a Christian from another church and discuss what you have found in this passage of scripture with them. If possible, try discussing this with as many other people as possible, and gauge their reaction to Christian unity and the Gospel.*
- *If possible, find a Bible dictionary or concordance, and look up the word 'mystery' in both the Old and New Testaments.*

Final Prayer

Jesus, Saviour of the World and redeemer of all humanity; forgive our foolishness and help us find all truth in You. Guide us in our response to other Christians, particularly those with whom we tend to disagree, and bring us to a place where we can be tolerant of others under Your authority. Help us we pray, Lord Jesus; AMEN
