

# The Basis of Christian Salvation (1984)

## Exposition of Ephesians 1:1-14

by Eric J. Alexander

There is a sense in which the theme of the whole of the letter to the Ephesians is Christian salvation in all its dimensions. Chapters 1-3 expound it doctrinally. Chapters 4-6 apply it practically. Biblical salvation encompasses the whole plan of God for us as sinners. It reaches back into our past guilt to justify us. It reaches down into our present weakness to sanctify us. And it reaches forward into our future prospects to glorify us. Ephesians deals with all three of these dimensions.

My intention in these four expositions is to cover Ephesians 1-3 in the following manner. First, we will consider the theme the basis of Christian salvation in Ephesians 1:1-14. Next we will look at the ministry of Christian intercession in Ephesians 1:15-23. Then we will examine the nature of Christian experience in Ephesians 2. Finally, we will focus on the privileges of Christian ministry in Ephesians 3.

### Paul and the Ephesians

In verses 1-2 of chapter one, Paul introduces himself, the Ephesians and the theme of this letter. He introduces himself as follows: "Paul an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God." The word apostle establishes his authority. The phrase by the will of God establishes the origin of that authority, which is not self-assumed but divinely conferred.

He describes the Ephesians in the second half of verse 1. They are "the saints in Ephesus" - the word saints means separated by God for God - and they are "the faithful in Christ Jesus." That means they are those who have relied on Christ for eternal life, and they are those on whom he is able to rely.

In verse 2 Paul introduces the theme of the letter. It is summarized in the two words grace and peace, which are not merely a formal greeting but a real summary of the whole truth of the gospel. He then launches into a lengthy doxology in verses 3-14. This great doxology is the main theme on which I want to concentrate in this chapter.

### Paul's Doxology

There is no doubt that Ephesians 1:3-14 is one of the most magnificent passages in the whole New Testament, and yet grammatically it is just one long sentence. One scholar says Paul launches into this glorious doxology with a majestic contempt for grammar and analysis. Nevertheless, these verses have a fairly orderly structure. The doxology has three parts to it which are punctuated by the phrase to the praise of his glory or to the praise of his glorious grace. This phrase first occurs in verse 6: "to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us, in the One he loves." Verse 12 has "that we ... might be for the praise of his glory." Verse 14 has simply "to the praise of his glory."

These three sentences indicate that this doxology and indeed the foundation of the Christian gospel is trinitarian in its form. Let me point this out to you in the text. Verses 3-6 are concerned with the electing, predestining work of God the Father. Verse 4 states, "He chose us in him before the creation of the world." Verse 5 goes on, "He predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ." Verses 7-12 are concerned with the redeeming, atoning work of God the Son, and verses 13-14 describe the sealing and guaranteeing work

of God the Holy Spirit. The point that Paul is making is that when our salvation as sinners is in view, the whole resources of the whole Godhead are involved. God the Father plans and devises this salvation. God the Son procures and purchases it: And God the Holy Spirit applies and seals it in our life and experience.

With this in view Paul breaks out in verse 3 into the language of praise. The word that he uses, blessed (RSV) or "praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (NIV) is the word from which we get our English word "eulogy." And so Paul eulogizes God the Father for all the riches of his grace that are laid as the foundation of Christian salvation.

Now it is important for us to understand the nature of the great foundation stones on which our salvation is built. Such understanding produces worship in the Christian church and in Christian experience. This is why the apostle breaks out in this great cry of praise. He has explored in his own understanding something of the infinite glory of what the Godhead has done for our salvation. And that brings worship. Worship is not produced by researching the different ways in which people do it. It is not the result of some new idea or scheme. Worship is produced by pondering the great glory of what God has done for us in his saving work in Jesus Christ and by the Holy Spirit. That is what brings forth Paul's cry of praise.

### The Electing Work of God the Father

The first great foundation stone is the electing love of God the Father. It is important to realize that when Paul expounds the character of the Christian gospel he begins not with humanity and their needs but with God and his plan. Verse 4 states, "He chose us in him before the creation of the world." Verse 5 tells us that "he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ" Verse 11 declares that "in him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will." You could not get a stronger emphasis on the initiative of God in our salvation than that!

The two words he uses, choosing (or electing) and predestining, are slightly variant emphases of the same truth. Election refers to God's personal choosing of a people as a bridegroom chooses a bride or adoptive parents choose their children. Predestination refers to the plan of God in thus choosing us.

We need to look at this great truth which lies at the foundation of Paul's teachings rather carefully, and I want to do so under three headings.

1. Election is a biblical doctrine. This doctrine does not belong to a particular party or group. We too easily imagine that election was the invention of sixteenth-century Reformers like John Calvin or seventeenth-century Puritans or eighteenth-century evangelists like George Whitefield or perhaps the severe Scottish Presbyterians like John Knox. But the doctrine of election is a biblical doctrine.

In Deuteronomy 7:6-8 and Isaiah 42:1 we find God crystallizing what he repeats again and again through the Scriptures - that he is a God who chooses out for himself a people. Jesus spells it out for the disciples in John 15:16, "You did not choose me, but I chose you." The apostles learned it from the Old Testament and from the lips of Jesus, and they teach it consistently. The biblical testimony is that just as we are what we are physically because our earthly father decided to have a family; so we are what we are spiritually because our heavenly Father decided to have a family. It is fundamental for us to grasp that election is a biblical doctrine.

2. Election is a difficult doctrine. In verses 4 and 5 the apostle claims that God chose us in Christ before the creation of the world. This idea produces many problems in our thinking, some of which are insoluble. But I want to look briefly at three of these problems. One is the problem of human responsibility and its relation to election. How do we find a place for human responsibility if God chooses us before the creation of the world? The answer is that Scripture does not teach one or another of these two truths. It teaches both. Nor does it teach human responsibility and divine election as alternatives, but as partners, as friends, not enemies. It tells us that God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world, and yet Jesus says, "You refuse to come to me to have life." In other words, he holds people responsible for not coming to him.

This is not just a paradox. It's what we call an antinomy - that is, two truths which go alongside each other but which are seemingly incapable of being reconciled. Scripture teaches full human responsibility and the full truth of God's electing his people. Now many of us may say, "I don't understand that." And in many ways that's not really surprising. If you consider that we are dealing as finite creatures with finite minds with an infinite God whose wisdom is infinite, it is not at all surprising that we do not understand some of his ways. But in spite of our lack of understanding, we must humbly accept what Scripture teaches. John Calvin put it this way: "The best rule is not only in learning to follow wherever God leads, but also when he makes an end of teaching to cease from wishing to be wise."

Divine justice is a second problem that people have in thinking about the doctrine of election. If God has chosen some from before the foundation of the world, does this speak of injustice in God? Paul deals with this in Romans 9:14 when he is talking about the doctrine of election. He writes, "What then shall we say? Is God unjust?" His answer is this: "Not at all! For he says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy.'" What he is saying is that salvation for guilty, lost sinners is not a matter of justice. It is a matter of mercy, and mercy by definition is totally unmerited, so that no one can complain if he or she does not receive it.

You would not like to receive justice from God, would you? I most certainly would not. What I glory in is that he has dealt with me in mercy, and Paul is saying that mercy is the issue, not justice. Shakespeare put it perfectly in the Merchant of Venice. "If justice be thy plea, consider this: that in the course of justice none of us should see salvation." So what we are talking about is not justice but mercy, and the mystery of divine election is not that God passes over some, but that he chooses any.

The third problem is the problem of evangelism. If God has already chosen people, what is the point of evangelism and missions? Here we are gathered together in the interest of the cause of missions and spreading the gospel throughout the world. Now if God has already chosen a people, what is the point of that evangelism? How do we square that with what Paul is teaching here? I think we need to face that question and really understand it and not dodge it. And the answer to it is very straightforward. It is that God has not only chosen a people; he has also chosen the means by which he will bring salvation to them. And that means is the foolishness of preaching.

Indeed, it is God's electing love which gives point and authority to evangelism.

Paul's experience in Corinth, recorded in Acts 18, is a classic illustration of this. You remember how Paul was discouraged and persecuted and inclined to give up when there was so much opposition in Corinth? Then God appeared to him, as he frequently did in the middle of the night. He said to him, "Go on preaching, Paul. Don't give up in the midst of all

the discouragement and difficulties of these circumstances. Go on preaching." Why? "Because," he says, "I have many people in this city." But they hadn't been converted yet. How did God know? He knew because they were the people he had chosen. Paul's great encouragement was that the God who had sent him there had a people that he was going to call through Paul's preaching. So Bishop J.C. Ryle says preaching is "the hand of God, who from all eternity has chosen a people in Christ, by which he reaches out and claims them for his own."

But someone may ask, "How shall I know them in my evangelism? Who is elect and who is not?" Let me give you the answer which Charles Spurgeon gave to his students. He said, "Let me tell you as politely as possible that that is really none of your business! Your business is to go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature by every means. And God's business is to draw to himself those who are his own."

Now that is what puts heart into evangelism, my friends: Do you see that the task of evangelism is not merely my persuading people intellectually or moving them emotionally? The task of evangelism is to be the obedient instrument: in the hands of a sovereign God whose saving power goes forth through the foolish preaching of the weakest vessel. And that gives heart to evangelism and puts fiber into our being as we go forth into the world.

3. Election is a profitable doctrine. There are three things that a true grasp of this doctrine of election should produce. One is a biblical humility. When I discover that my whole salvation from beginning to end is God's doing and not mine, that means there is no ground for human boasting. All I have to boast in is Christ. That is true biblical humility.

Second, it should produce a spiritual security. Verse 5 states that God "predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ." Our spiritual security is the security of those who are adopted into God's family in accordance with his will and pleasure. We are his children by his choice. The doctrine of election is used in Scripture as a bastion or bulwark to the child of God in days of difficulty and distress.

You know how we often quote Romans 8:28 to each other and say, "Now don't worry. All things work together for good to those who love God." But how do we know that? How do we know that they work together for good? The context tells us that God predestines us in Christ to bear his image, and those whom he predestines he also calls, those whom he calls he also justifies, and those whom he justifies he also glorifies. He is in total, sovereign control of the work of grace that he is performing in our lives. So the doctrine of election is not a banner to be waved by people who call themselves Calvinists. Nor is it a bomb to be dropped on Arminians. It is a bastion to be taken by the people of God and used to bring us strength and support and to keep us in spiritual security. Toplady in his great hymn says, "Things future nor things that are now nor all things below or above can make him his purpose forgo or sever my soul from his love."

The third thing the doctrine of election should produce is an ethical energy - a biblical humility, a spiritual security and an ethical energy. That is just to say that Scripture does not concentrate on the question of how God could have chosen us, but why. Verse 4 tells us that God "chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight." Verses 11-12 state that "in him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we ... might be for the praise of his glory."

So the New Testament's universal answer to the question of election is that God chose us in order that he might change us into the likeness and glory of the Lord Jesus. This is the first great foundation stone that Paul lays for us, the electing love of God the Father.

### The Redeeming, Atoning Work of God the Son

The second great foundation stone is the redeeming, atoning work of God the Son (vv. 7-10). The connection between this theme and the previous one is the glorious grace of God which Paul praises in verses 5-6. "He predestined us to be adapted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will - to the praise of his glorious grace." The first place where God's grace is gloriously displayed is in our election by God the Father. The second is in our redemption by God the Son. And in these verses there are several things about redemption which we need to consider.

1. The need for redemption. Paul says that "in him we have redemption through his blood" (v. 7). But we need to understand where the need for redemption really lies; we need that redemption in Christ not primarily because we are unhappy and miserable and mixed up. The real reason goes back to the issue of why God chose a people. In verse 4 Paul tells us that God chose us so that we might bear his image and reflect his moral glory. But by nature and because of our sinfulness, that is not what we are like. We are fallen creatures and the image of God in us has been defaced. And it is precisely because God's eternal purpose is to make us reflect his glory and beauty that he sent his Son to redeem us. So we need redemption because the image of God has been effaced from our character, and the very essence of redemption is that his image will be restored in us.

2. The nature of redemption. Verse 7 says that "in him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins." Notice that redemption and the forgiveness of sins are closely linked. But they are not identical: Guilt and bondage do go together. When someone's guilt is proved in our legal- system, the transgressor is locked up. And that is an analogy of the result of sin. When people sin, not only are they guilty of transgressing God's law and therefore under his judgment, they also enter the service of a tyrannical master. That is why the classical picture of sinners is Egypt under judgment and the children of Israel under bondage to Pharaoh. And the classical picture of redemption is God coming not only to provide shelter from his judgment, but also to deliver his people from their bondage. "Where I see the blood I will pass over" describes shelter from judgment. "Let my people go" speaks of deliverance from bondage. So we need not only to be pardoned from sin's guilt but to be set free from its bondage, and redemption speaks particularly of this. "He breaks the power of cancelled sin, he sets the prisoner free." That's the nature of redemption.

3. The source of redemption. Again, in verse 7 Paul says, "In him we have redemption," Now that means that everything lost, guilty, imprisoned sinners need is found wholly in Christ. That is why the function of saving faith is to unite us to Christ. Literally, we believe into the Lord Jesus Christ. And the apostle's concern is that he might be found "in him." That is why, union with Christ is one of the central truths of this epistle, and the phrase in Christ one of the keys to it. Like branches in a vine or limbs in a body, everything that we need as sinners we draw from Jesus. Salvation is to be found therefore in him.

Do you see how this effects our evangelism? It is not theory that we are to present to people. It is a person. We are to offer Christ to them. This is what the Wesleys did as they went through England in the eighteenth century. They went offering Christ to the people because redemption is in him - he is the source of it. That is a vital truth.

4. The ground of redemption. Paul states that "in him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace" (v. 7). The grace of God is the sole ground on which he deals with sinners. It is his free, unmerited, undeserved favor. We shall never earn it. We can never merit it. We cannot even make a contribution toward it. The ground of redemption is solely the grace of God. As Archbishop Temple once said, "The only thing of my very own which I contribute to my salvation is the sin which makes it necessary."

5. The means of redemption. Verse 7 tells us that redemption is through his blood. Blood in Scripture is a symbol of life laid down in sacrifice. The means by which God provides redemption for us is the sacrificial, substitutionary, sin-bearing death of Jesus. All this is included in Paul's phrase "in him we have redemption through his blood." Redemption in Scripture always involves the paying of a price as a ransom, and the ransom price for our redemption is not corruptible things like silver and gold, but the precious blood of Christ as of a lamb without blemish and without spot.

6. The scope of redemption. There is a further dimension of Christ's redemption of which Paul speaks in verses 9-10. Biblical redemption refers not only to the payment of sin's penalty and to deliverance from sin's bondage; it also has a future dimension. It is what Paul calls in verse 10 a plan "to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head even Christ." The redeeming work of Christ will one day be consummated with a new heaven and a new earth. In other words, we are not only saved by grace through faith, we are saved in hope. There is a future element in what God has accomplished in Jesus Christ. Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, neither has it entered into our hearts to grasp the glory that lies before us yet, that Christ has won by his redeeming blood. Paul speaks of this not only here in verses 10-12 but also more expansively in Romans 8, where he speaks of the whole creation groaning and travailing together in pain, waiting for the redemption of our bodies.

Now that is something which Christ has won by his death on the cross. He has not only assured us concerning our past guilt, he has also assured us concerning our present weaknesses and frailties by delivering us from sin's bondage and power. Likewise, the future for the child of God is always bright with hope because Jesus has obtained for us the sure and certain hope of a redemption that deals not only with our souls but also with our bodies. We shall have new bodies in which to pray and worship and serve him. God is also going to build a new heaven and a new earth that will be filled with righteousness. The redeeming grace of God involves all that.

### The Sealing Work of God the Spirit

In verses 13-14 Paul describes the final foundation stone which provides the basis for our salvation, the sealing work of the Holy Spirit. As God the Father plans this redemption, and God the Son procures it, so God the Holy Spirit applies it to us. Paul says in verse 13, "You also were included in Christ ... you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit." Now, a seal was commonly used in the ancient world as a mark of ownership. Even today we mark goods to indicate ownership - and this is precisely what Paul has in mind. The New Testament uses this image to describe what happens when God sends his Holy Spirit into our hearts as the seal and evidence that we are Christ's.

The Holy Spirit applies to us the benefits of Christ's redemption. When we are drawn to faith in Christ and the Holy Spirit inhabits us, he applies to us personally all that God has done in

Christ historically for our salvation. Then he begins to change our character from within to bring forth the fruit of the Spirit. A children's hymn puts it this way:

Jesus is our shepherd, for the sheep he bled.  
Every lamb, is sprinkled with the blood he shed.  
Then, on each he set us his own secret sign.  
"They that have my spirit; these," said he, "are mine."

In verses 13-14 Paul writes: "You heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit." These verses describe three stages we went through in order to be "included in Christ." First, we hear the word of truth, the gospel of our salvation. Second; we believe. Third, we are sealed or marked by the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is also a deposit or guarantee (v. 14). He guarantees that what we now possess as the redeemed of God is a first installment of that which is yet to come. Paul always has his eye on the future. And that is something we need to grasp in our own Christian experience. We need to have our eyes on the future, our eyes lifted up to the glory that awaits us.

The New Testament church constantly looked in that direction. They had their eyes on the glorious inheritance of the people of God, that inheritance which is reserved undefiled, incorruptible and unfading for us who are being kept by the power of God. The Holy Spirit is just the first installment of that glory that God has given to us in Jesus Christ! If we are discovering something of the infinite glory that there is in Christ, if we have known something of the blessing of God's saving grace that Paul is preoccupied with, then Paul says we are only tasting the borders of it here in this world.

In one sense we do have full salvation here. We have full and final justification from our sins. But in another sense full salvation still waits for us. We have yet to taste the full glory of that which awaits us in heaven. Therefore, it is vital that we have our eyes on that day. We should recognize that for the people of God the best is yet to be! That is what ultimately distinguishes the children of God from the world at large. For the world the worst is yet to come. But for us the Holy Spirit is the seat of our salvation and the guarantee of our inheritance.

In summary, the basis of Christian salvation is really threefold. It is all of God. It is all of grace. And it is all in Christ. Now that should affect our thinking practically in three ways. First, if salvation is all of God, that should affect our thinking about the place of prayer in the life of God's people and in our service as Christian workers.

If salvation is God's work and not ours, then it is a simple, logical corollary that prayer is fundamental, not supplemental in the kingdom of God. The problem so often is that we have reversed that and made prayer supplemental rather than fundamental. If you are training and preparing to serve God, the fundamental way in which you will serve him is in prayer and not in public. Do you really believe that? If not, you had better believe it soon! It's a cardinal law of Christian service. Not that you get a lot of other people to pray for you; although that's important, but that the fundamental way in which you serve God is in the place of prayer.

If salvation is all of grace, that should affect our thinking about ourselves. True biblical humility comes from seeing that it is by the grace of God that I am what I am. Paul asks,

"Where is boasting then?" It is excluded. And biblical humility is born on the ground of grace.

If salvation is all in Christ, that should affect our thinking about the world around us and about our own lives. Christ is the greatest need of the world in which we live. There is also, therefore, a great need for men and women to go out into the world as ambassadors for Christ, people in whose lives Jesus will be seen. For it is to him that people will be drawn. Once we realize these things, our thinking and our lives will never be the same.

The Ministry of Christian Intercession (1984)  
Exposition of Ephesians 1:15-23  
by Eric J. Alexander

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"Prayer is the hard work of the kingdom of God, and that is probably the reason that the smallest meeting in the vast majority of churches and fellowship groups is the prayer meeting, because that is where the real work goes on."

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There are two areas in which the apostle Paul clearly gives himself to every church in the New Testament. This is illustrated by the fact that so many of his letters are really the exposition of truth sandwiched between two things: an assurance that he prays continually for the recipients and an appeal that they will pray for him.

For example, in Romans 1:9-10 Paul says, "God ... is my witness how constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times." Then at the end of the letter he appeals to them, "I urge you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me" (15:30). Again and again in Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and other letters, we find this same pattern. The great exposition of truth at the center of the letter is sandwiched between this assurance that he prays for them and the appeal that they will pray for him.

Prayer and preaching are the two great emphases of the apostle's ministry. There is no question that the secret of the effectiveness of his ministry lies here, in that particular marriage of teaching and prayer. There is no question either that the secret of all effectiveness in Christian ministry and service lies precisely in this marriage. If we try to divorce these two things from each other; we discover that in some sense we are disabled. But when preaching and prayer have been brought together, we are following in the apostolic tradition.

### The Work of Prayer

If God is calling you to serve him, you really need to ask him to make you effective in the ministry of prayer. There is no doubt that here is where the real work is done. We betray our conviction about this when we speak about praying for the work. In fact prayer is the real work. Prayer is the hard work of the kingdom of God, and that is probably the reason that the smallest meeting in the vast majority of churches and fellowship groups is the prayer meeting, because that is where the real work goes on.

In his book entitled *Prayer*, O. Hallesby has a marvelous chapter which is simply headed "Prayer as Work." In it he likens the work of the kingdom to mining. He says there are two great operations: one is the extreme, exhausting hard work of boring into the solid rock to plant the explosive; the other is setting off the charge and sending the rocks flying in all directions. That's the exciting part. Everybody likes to be involved in it. But the really hard labor is boring into the solid granite in order to plant the explosive.

Hallesby compares the work of prayer to that labor. Anybody can light the fuse, he says, but the difficult work takes real commitment, real perseverance, real toil, sweat and tears. And few are willing to do it. Prayer is where the real work is done. In the kingdom of God prayer is fundamental. The disease of modern evangelicalism is that we have made it

supplemental. And this is one of the vital lessons for us to learn from Paul's prayer in Ephesians 1: 15-23.

There are several issues which arise in Paul's remarkable prayer here, and I think it would be helpful to approach them by looking at three aspects of the prayer: Why Paul prays, how he prays and what he prays for. It is that general pattern I want us to look at so that God may teach us to pray.

### Why Paul Prays

The phrase "for this reason" at the beginning of verse 15 gives us the first key to the motive of the apostle's prayer. It refers back to the first half of the chapter. Paul is prompted: to bow down in thankfulness before God for the sheer glory of this salvation that he has been expounding to us in verses 1-14. And he thanks God for the unmistakable evidence of that salvation in the lives of the Ephesians. That evidence, according to verse 15, is twofold. First, they have appropriated the riches of this salvation through faith in the Lord Jesus: "For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus." Second, they have exhibited the first fruit of the Holy Spirit's work in their lives by their love for all the saints: "Ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints."

These are the two classical and crucial evidences of true Christian experience: belief and behavior, or faith and love, or a right relationship with Jesus and a right relationship with our fellow believers. Paul says he is constantly giving thanks for them for this reason that this glorious gospel has come to them and they have appropriated its riches by faith and have shown evidence in their lives of its reality by the love that they have toward their fellow believers.

Notice that this is the great hallmark that the saving grace of God has come to us - the salvation that God the Father planned, that God the Son procured and purchased, and that the Holy Spirit applies and seals in our lives. Paul says the evidence that this glorious salvation has come to us is that we have believed in the Lord Jesus Christ and have love toward our fellow believers.

This Christian love of which Paul speaks is a primarily moral and not an emotional love. Christian love does not mean having an emotional attitude toward other people or an emotional involvement with them. It quite simply means the moral condition of putting others before ourselves. Therefore, the opposite of Christian love is not hatred: It is self-love. That is why love in the New Testament can be commanded. Have you ever thought about that? You cannot command somebody to be emotionally involved with someone else. But God can command unto put others first and ourselves second.

So someone has wisely said that Christian love is not the victim of my emotions, but the servant of my will. That is why this kind of love is an evidence of grace. By nature we love and serve ourselves rather than God. So Paul gives thanks to God because he sees the evidence of salvation in the lives of the Ephesian Christians by the love they have for one another. "Since I heard about ... your love for all the saints, I have not stopped giving thanks for you."

We need to ask whether our souls respond in the same way. We often use the phrase, "It drove me to my knees." I find it interesting that when we say that we are almost always speaking about some crisis or adversity. Isn't it strange how seldom we are driven to our knees in thankfulness to God for the glories of the gospel as we see them evidenced in the

lives of his children? Are you asking God to cultivate in you a spirit of thankfulness like this? I think it is vital for the sweetening of the whole of life. Paul prayed like this because he lived like this. We, too, will never pray any other way than how we live. Our prayer life is a reflection of the whole of our life. We need to cry to God to cultivate within us this spirit of thankfulness, of rejoicing in the blessings of God's grace, chiefly when we see God's grace in the lives of other people.

Paul also prays for the Ephesians. In verse 16 he writes, "I have not stopped ... remembering you in my prayers." In verse 17 he says, "I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you ..." and so on. In his prayer Paul is motivated to do two things for the Ephesians.

First, he is motivated to pray the truth in. That is really what he is doing in this intercessory passage. He is taking these mighty truths of the gospel that he has been expounding, and now he prays them in. His exposition and teaching are linked with his intercession and pleading with God. This is how the truth of God is bored into the hearts of people.

Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones said the best teaching in the world is useless unless the Holy Spirit takes hold of it and gives it a deep lodging in our whole being. And the way that the Holy Spirit does that is when the truth of God is prayed in. So, when we have taught the truth or shared Christ with people, our task is not over. We really need to go away and spend time praying that truth in.

Second, Paul is motivated to pray the Ephesians on. He has seen the evidences of grace in their lives, and he has bowed before God with thankfulness. He could say with the apostle John, "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth" (3 Jn 4). But Paul never confuses gratitude with complacency. He now prays them on into new depths of understanding and new experiences of God's grace and power, praying them into new stability. This is how people grow. Paul cries to God in Ephesians 4 that these Christians may no longer be mere infants spiritually but may grow up into the fullness of the stature of Christ, into mature manhood and womanhood in the Lord Jesus.

How do people do that? They do it by the teaching of the Word. But they also do it when somebody takes the burden of their spiritual stability on their heart and prays them on. Have you ever taken somebody on your heart like that? Some child of God who is in the nursery stages of spiritual experience? The marks of a baby are beautiful in babyhood (except perhaps at 3 in the morning). But when they persist year after year, that's a tragedy. And when people remain spiritual babies year after year, playing around with the dolls of spiritual infancy, that's a greater tragedy! We need to be given the diet of the Word of God that will put sinew and fiber and muscle into our spiritual beings and cause us to grow and go on into spiritual manhood and womanhood. One of the ways that happens is when somebody really prays us on. I give thanks to God with all my heart for my brother, who, before he died at the age of twenty-nine, spent years praying me on through days of spiritual stagnation. After he died I will never forget reading what he had written about me in his journal, "Lord, take him on. Take him on!"

And I say to you, there may be people for whom that is God's ministry for you - to pray them on. In this passage the apostle is praying these Ephesian Christians on.

## How Paul Prays

We now turn to the manner of Paul's praying. The first thing to notice is that he prays with perseverance and persistence. In verse 16 he writes, "I have not stopped giving thanks for

you, remembering you in my prayers." In verse 17 he says, "I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ ..." In other words, his praying is not spasmodic, crisis praying or praying which is controlled primarily by his feelings.

So he exhorts the Ephesians, "Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints" (6:18). Prayer and perseverance are therefore frequently tied together in the apostle's appeal.

We have difficulty with this. I think one of our problems arises from our failure to grasp that prayer in the Scripture is not primarily an emotional experience. It is a duty commanded by God. Have you ever really grasped this? "Pray without ceasing" is a commandment. "Men ought always to pray." Now ought is a word of duty. This is a matter of moral obedience. We cannot wait until we get some kind of tingle in our spine which makes us feel we really must begin to pray. It's a matter of obedience.

In my own church we have a prayer meeting every week, and generally it's difficult for people to get in to pray. But on one occasion there were great long silences. Few people were praying, and a young student came up to me afterwards and said, "That was rather a dull, dead prayer meeting." I said, "Yes." She said, "Wasn't it strange that so few people prayed?" And I said to her, "Well, now, I happened to notice that you didn't pray." "No," she said. "I didn't feel like praying." I said to her, "My dear, prayer in the Scripture is a duty commanded by God. It is not a glandular condition." We need to recognize that, because it is one of the things that so much controls our thinking. Do not misunderstand me and imagine that you will never feel warmed in your soul towards God and lifted up into the heavenly places as you pray. But when that does not happen, that doesn't mean you stop praying.

The second thing we need to notice is that Paul reminds himself of God's nature and character. In verse 17 he writes, "I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father ..." or "the Father of glory" (RSV). Nothing is more important in our approach to God than this recollecting of his character, his true nature, his majesty and his glory. The real qualification for praying is not that we have read all the right books or that we know some technique. It is that we are getting to know God.

The apostle says, "I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ ..." Now there is a great phrase: You will remember how the Old Testament saints would pray to God as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. What they were saying was that God has revealed himself in his dealings with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He had dealt with them in grace; he had covenanted with his people through Abraham. The Old Testament saints reminded themselves of God's nature and character. Likewise, they reminded themselves of his mighty acts in history. "You are the God," they said, "who brought us up out of the land of Egypt and from the house of bondage." They also reminded God of his acts in history. Now it's not that they were giving God a history lesson. They were saying, "This is the God you are. We have seen you in days past. We have proved you in the days of our fathers, and we come to you today and plead with you on the ground of your character." Now that's the great ground of prayer. That's how God's people come to him and plead with him.

Where do we see God's character most gloriously revealed? It is revealed in the face of Jesus Christ. Where in history has God manifested his glory most perfectly? It is in all that he has done in the coming, living, dying, rising and ascending of the Lord Jesus. And so Paul

said, we come to you as the God of our Lord Jesus Christ: Everything that God has revealed of himself in Jesus is a great encouragement to the apostle as he prays.

Then he says God is "the glorious Father" (v. 17). The reference is to the infinite majesty and excellence of God. Paul is not only encouraged to approach him by this, he is also awed before him. He is the Father of glory. That is the great keynote of Paul's prayer. He is concerned about the glory of God. That is the great underlying burden of the prayers of men and women in Scripture. That needs to be our great concern and longing too.

Do you know the ultimate motive for the Great Commission? It is not so much the condition of the lost in all their appalling anguish and agony. The ultimate motive of missions is the glory of God. This is what drives us to prayer. If we have a true zeal for God's glory and there is some area of the world where God is being robbed of his glory, then it will drive us to God to cry to him as the glorious Father. Ultimately that is the great burden on the apostle's heart.

But as he reminds himself of the majesty and glory of God, he is also reminded of the adequacy of the God to whom he comes, who has no limitations of any kind in what he can do for his children. Do you see how important it is to pray with this picture of the character of God before our eyes and in our hearts? This is why Jesus combines these two beautiful things in the Lord's Prayer, when he teaches us to come with intimacy and simplicity to God as our Father. But he doesn't leave it there. He says, "When you pray, say 'Our Father in heaven.' " Now that doesn't mean that God is in distant location from us. It means that he dwells in the place of unlimited, unbounded power and authority.

That is the difference between earthly fatherhood and heavenly fatherhood. There are many occasions when children come to their parents asking for things, not realizing that their resources and wisdom are limited. Often parents do not know what is the best possible thing to do for them. But our heavenly Father suffers no such problems. His resources are endless and unlimited. His wisdom is perfect. And his love is unchanging.

### What Paul Prays

We now come to the third aspect of Paul's prayer - what he prays about. There are three elements in his petitions.

1. He prays for an increase in their knowledge of God. "I keep asking that God ... may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better." Paul desires that their knowledge of God might deepen. And that, of course, is the very essence of salvation. If you were to be asked, "What is the real purpose of life in this world? What is the key to our existence? What is the heart of eternal life?" I wonder what you would say. I'll tell you what the Scriptures would say. They would say, in the words of Jesus, "This is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ; whom you have sent." "Knowing" in Scripture does not refer to knowing a subject. It speaks of a deep, intimate, personal knowledge.

How does that relationship come about? How do we come to know God? And how do we get to know God better? Paul says we need the Spirit of wisdom and revelation. He prays that God "may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better" (v. 17). Now there is not really much difficulty getting to know, for example, a language or the geography of an area, because these are matters which can be researched. But it's different when you start speaking about getting to know a person. We sometimes say about

people, "He's very difficult to get to know:" That is because we can conceal ourselves. We can withdraw ourselves. It is possible for us to refuse to be known.

Now if that is true of ordinary humans, how infinitely more is it true of God from whom we are separated by our sinfulness and his holiness? We can only know God as he is willing to reveal himself to us. So Paul prays not only for a spirit of wisdom to enlighten our minds and understanding, but for a spirit of revelation. Where has God revealed himself? He has done so in two places chiefly: in Christ and in the Scriptures. Of course, God has also revealed himself in creation, but he has not revealed himself savingly there. That's an important distinction. There's a little verse that somebody gave me to put in my garden when I came to Glasgow seven years ago. It said, "You are nearer God's heart in a garden than anywhere else on earth." Do you know, I began to wonder if Adam and Eve would have agreed with that after everything that happened to them! I doubt it, really. Because although God does reveal himself in his majesty and glory in creation, he is not revealed savingly there. He is savingly revealed in Christ and in Scripture.

So where shall we go if we want to grow in the knowledge of God? The answer is to holy Scripture, begging God to give us the aid of his Holy Spirit, that spirit of wisdom, to open the eyes of our understanding, for this is what Scripture is for. God has not given us holy Scripture simply that we may survive another day, although it gives us grace to do that. Nor was it written to give us a blessed thought to encourage us at the beginning of a day, although it also does that. But the primary reason that God has given us his Word is that we might come to know him, that we might be acquainted with his ways and understand his purposes and identify ourselves with him. This is the great reason for holy Scripture.

How would you feel if people were only interested in you for the things they could get out of you? Wouldn't you call that insincere love? Yet isn't it true that sometimes that's the focus of our interest in God? But the great reason for holy Scripture is that we may come to know God, understand the glory of his purposes and identify ourselves with him. He made us to know him. The great tragedy of the world is expressed in Jesus' heart cry in John 17, "Oh, righteous Father, the world has not known thee" (v. 25 RSV). This is the ultimate tragedy, because the knowledge of God is what life is all about.

We often say that knowing of God is different than knowing about God, and that's true. A person can know a great deal about God and be a prime theologian and not know God personally at all. But I want to balance that by saying it is a very strange love relationship where somebody doesn't want to get to know absolutely everything they can about the other person. The lover constantly says to the beloved, "Tell me about yourself." We need to have this same attitude about getting to know God.

2. He prays for their understanding of the call of God. "I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints" (v. 18). One of the great longings of the apostle Paul is that these believers in Ephesus might have their eyes set not on earthly treasure but on heavenly glory. That they might live as Jesus taught us in the Sermon on the Mount, with their eyes on their treasure in heaven. This is what Paul is praying for them, "that you may know the hope to which he has called you." That's the great distinction of the Christian salvation. It brings a sure and steadfast hope to us concerning the future and declares that our true citizenship is yet to be revealed to us. The glories of the gospel that we have tasted here in this world are not to be compared with the glories that still wait for us. "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived" the glories of the inheritance that God has reserved in heaven for us.

Now this kind of spirit that he prays for, this future dimension in our salvation, is what our forefathers would have called heavenly-mindedness. It is, I suppose, an unpopular phrase in our day. People say, "He's so heavenly-minded he's no earthly use."

Do you know, I've never met anybody like that. I don't have problems with people like that in my church. My problem is with people who are the opposite - so earthly-minded they're no heavenly use. I think we need more and more to have our eyes set on that infinite glory. It was said of Samuel Rutherford, a great Scotsman; that he had his heart on heaven, his hands to the plow and his feet firmly on the ground. And that's a great combination.

3. Paul prays for their awareness of the power of God. "I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know ... his incomparably great power for us who believe" (vv, 1819). Paul prays that a revelation might be given to them. Now for Paul the place where the power of God is most visibly seen is not in creation or in natural phenomena like earthquakes, storms or volcanoes. It is seen in the gospel. He says, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Rom 1:16). What saves us and sanctifies us and glorifies us is the power of God. In verse 19 Paul calls it "his incomparably great power." It's one of those superfantastic words in the Greek, a multiplying of language. He also prays that we might: know the "immeasurable greatness of the energy of the might of his strength" (v.19). That's a literal translation. It's almost impossible to put into English. The apostle is piling words upon words to describe this glorious power of God that has been revealed in Jesus Christ.

Where has God demonstrated his power? Paul says, "That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come" (vv. 19-21). What is that power? Do you notice that it is power for us who believe? The very same divine power which raised Jesus from the grave and brought him to the right hand of the Father and set him in a place of incomparable glory is the very power that is available to us. No wonder the apostle cries to God that the eyes of our understanding might be opened that we would grasp this! How awful it is that we often live in such poverty and in such spiritual paralysis when the full magnitude of God's power is available to us!

My favorite Old Testament story is about Ben Hadad, the king of Aram (2 Kings 6). Ben Hadad was in great trouble. He was an enemy of Israel and had discovered that whenever he made an attack on Israel, somehow or other all his plans had been made known beforehand. He went to the people within his courts and said, "Which of you has betrayed us?" And they said, "Nobody, my Lord, O King. It's that little prophet Elisha down in Dothan. He seems to know even the things that my Lord the king plans in his bedchamber." "Well," said Ben Hadad, "send an army. In fact, send the cavalry, send the artillery, send everything we have, and get him!" So down they went, launching everything they had to find Elisha, the little prophet of God.

It must have been quite amusing. I'm sure Scripture is full of this kind of beautiful humor. Somebody would stop this great army and say, "Where are you going? What battle are you going to fight?" "Oh," they would say, "we are going to arrest the little prophet down in Dothan."

Elisha was there with just his servant, a young man. The young man looked and saw all the army and cavalry of Ben Hadad and all the horses, chariots and artillery - and his heart

quaked! He ran to Elisha, dragged him outside and said, "Do you see this?" "Don't be afraid," the prophet answered. "Those who are with us are more than those who are with them." The young man looked around and saw the hills full of the horses and chariots of the enemy and all the soldiers standing on guard. Then he looked at Elisha and himself. I'm sure he said to himself, "That's the trouble with these old fellas. They don't face reality. They should have retired him a long time ago."

But it was Elisha who saw reality, and he cried to God, and said, "Lord, open this young man's eyes!" And the Lord opened the young man's eyes, and he saw that the hills were full of the horses and chariots of the Lord. And that day a mighty victory was wrought by God.

"Greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world." My friends, if we have that confidence, we can go anywhere in the name of God. Oh, may God make us conquerors and more than conquerors through him. Amen.

The Nature of Christian Experience (1984)  
Exposition of Ephesians 2  
by Eric J. Alexander

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"By nature people are not just lost and needing redirection to God. They are not just confused and needing to be intellectually sorted out. Nor are they just unhappy and needing to be cheered, or weak and needing to be strengthened. Neither reformation of manners nor indoctrination of mind nor even inspiration of spirit will go to the root of the human problem, because the root of the human problem is that by nature people are dead and need nothing less than a resurrection into life."

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What happens to people when they become Christians? What is the nature of the experience of those who are the objects of God's gracious work? In chapter two of Ephesians Paul answers this question in two ways.

Ephesians 2 is divided into two parts. Verses 1-10 describe our resurrection in Christ. Verses 11-22 describe our reconciliation through Christ. So resurrection and reconciliation are the two words that dominate Paul's exposition of the nature of Christian experience. Or if we use the phrases that we find in the two halves of the chapter, we are "made alive with Christ" (v. 5) and we are "brought near through the blood of Christ" (v.13).

#### Our Resurrection in Christ

Paul begins with a description of our natural state. "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins." Ronald Knox's translation is even more vivid: "He found you dead." This is indeed what the apostle is saying. When he is describing the nature of Christian experience, Paul begins with our unregenerate state and says, "This is how God found us." He came in Jesus Christ to seek and to save, and when he found us, we were dead in transgressions and sins.

Now that is every person's condition by nature. And it is vital for the sake of our evangelism, our prayer, our relation to the lost, for us to grasp the real condition of people before the grace of God touches them. By nature people are not just lost and needing redirection to God. They are not just confused and needing to be intellectually sorted out. Nor are they just unhappy and needing to be cheered, or weak and needing to be strengthened. Neither reformation of manners nor indoctrination of mind nor even inspiration of spirit will go to the root of the human problem, because the root of the human problem is that by nature people are dead and need nothing less than a resurrection into life.

This is why only God can save them. We may convince them intellectually, we may stir and move them emotionally, but by ourselves we will never regenerate them spiritually. Only the Holy Spirit can do that. We need to ask God to drive this truth into our hearts. It should be the foundation of all our thinking about serving God.

It is important to clarify what it means for someone to be spiritually dead. Undoubtedly, we can identify many evidences of spiritual death in contemporary society. Francis Schaeffer has contributed an enormous amount to our thinking in this area. For example, in his book *Death in the City*, he sees evidence of a cultural and philosophical death in the modern

world. He describes the despair among literary and artistic people and the hopelessness of those involved in the drug culture. All of these things are symptoms of spiritual death.

But I think that it's important for us not to overemphasize these particular symptoms of spiritual death. The happy, well-adjusted pagans in suburbia are just as dead as those who experience all the anguish of the modern world, because they too are without God and without Christ.

Likewise, respectable religious people who are unregenerate are spiritually dead, because they are without God and without Christ. So it is to every unregenerate person that Paul addresses these words in verse 2, "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins." He emphasizes it with the words "all of us" (v. 3) and with the statement, "Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath" (v. 3).

What then is this spiritual death, this universal condition which affects people from every environment, every nation, every culture and race?

I think the essence of it can best be seen by looking at its opposite, which is spiritual life, or eternal life. Jesus defines eternal life for us clearly in his great high priestly prayer in John 17. "This is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" (v. 3). Therefore, the mark of those who have eternal life or spiritual life is that they know God. The mark of those who do not possess spiritual life, who are spiritually dead, is that they do not know God. That is the essence of spiritual death. It is the condition Jesus describes further on in his prayer in John 17 when he cries to God, "O righteous Father, the world has not known thee" (v. 25 RSV).

That is a verse that affects me profoundly whenever I read it. Somebody has said that these words are the greatest heart-rending cry that ever escaped the lips of the Lord, Jesus. "O righteous Father, the world has not known thee." And one of the things that really troubles me is that I can face the world around me in all its respectability and be unmoved by its true condition. I can walk up and down the streets of Glasgow and see people who appear to be perfectly well-integrated. Many of them are quite happy. Most of them are extremely well off. But they do not know God, and my burden is that I can walk along the streets without a pang. We are wracked with pain when we see emaciated bodies in famine-stricken Ethiopia - and rightly so. God deliver us from hardness in that sphere too. But it troubles me that we seem to be more concerned about that than about people who are spiritually bankrupt, who do not know God and Jesus Christ. We need to develop a heart of compassion for those who are spiritually dead.

There are tears of nature, and there are tears of grace. The tears of nature are the tears that all people weep at sights that move the human heart. But the tears of grace are tears that only Christians weep because they're burdened about issues that matter only to them and to God. We need to weep with the compassion Jesus felt toward Jerusalem when he saw its people as sheep having no shepherd: That multitude had no shepherd, and Jesus wept over them. The turning point in our own day will come when we learn to weep the tears of grace.

But spiritual death is not just the absence of the knowledge of God. In Ephesians 2: 1-3 Paul tells us that it is a positive reality in three ways. First, he tells us that this death is a judgment. "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins" (v.1). Now Lenski, the New Testament commentator, says this verse should be translated, "You are dead because of your trespasses and sins." In other words, the death is the result of judgment.

By nature and practice, people are rebels against God's laws, and their spiritual death is the result of God's judgment. That is what happened in Genesis 3. When God gave man his law for living he said, "You may eat of every tree of the garden. It has all been created for you. But on the day that you eat of that particular tree, you shall die." And the judgment was that they were driven out of God's presence and became strangers to him. And there was a fiery sword put in the Garden of Eden to prevent them from drawing near. People might imagine that they didn't die immediately on that day. But the simple fact is, their separation from God was the real death. Physical death only put the cap on that. Physical death, if you like, was the sacrament of that spiritual death; it was the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual reality.

But spiritual death is not only a judgment. It also involves a sinister and malignant control. Paul describes it for us in verses 2-3. "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts." Notice that Paul specifically tells us that this death involves being brought under bondage to the world, the flesh and the devil. The world: "You followed the ways of this world" (v. 2). The flesh: "All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature" (v. 3). The devil: "You followed ... the ruler of the kingdom of the air" (v. 2). So often people imagine that those who are not under bondage to Christ are free. But Paul says just the opposite, that spiritual death involves being enslaved to the world, the flesh and the devil. Many people are scarcely aware of the bondage they have to the world. J. B. Phillips describes them as those who are "drifting along the stream of the world's idea of living." In our day we badly need to establish what John Stott has called a Christian counterculture, a way of living that makes us refuse to be in bondage to the fashions of a godless world or to the majority culture.

There was an advertisement that appeared in Britain sometime ago which was very significant to me. It asked a question about a product it was advertising. (I shall not give them the benefit of advertising by telling you what it was.) The question that was asked was this. "Can three million American women be wrong?" Now that's a very interesting question. The answer to it is, of course, definitely! And considering the particular product, it is ninety-nine percent certain that they were wrong. But the idea, you see, was this: If three million American women have been conned by this, can you avoid being conned as well?

We need to be aware that the world makes its approach to us in all sorts of subliminal ways. This is what the apostle is saying. The mark of spiritual death in our society is that people are following the wrong things. They are "following the ways of this world" (v 2). They are following the desires and thoughts of the flesh (v. 3). They are following "the ruler of the kingdom of the air" (v. 2). The world, the devil and the flesh. When we follow these things, they enslave us.

In the second half of verse 3 Paul tells that spiritual death not only involves a solemn judgment and brings a sinister bondage; it also confers a dreadful status. Like the rest of humanity, we were by nature objects of wrath. That is the real horror of spiritual death and of being without Christ. The essence of what is serious about sin is not what it does to us - ghastly though that can be. Nor is it what it does to other people - though as a pastor of an urban church, I often have the wreckage of what sin does to other people washed up on my front door.

But that is not what makes sin really serious. The most serious thing of all about sin is what it does to God. It brings down his active, holy wrath on sinners. That's what makes it so serious to be outside of Christ. Those outside of Christ have no shelter from the wrath of our holy God. And that's where Paul says all of us were by nature.

This was our position by nature. No wonder Paul introduces what has happened to us when we became Christians with two great words which begin the Greek of verse 4: "But God." The NIV places "because of his great love for us" between the conjunction and the word God, but the Greek has simply "but God." We were both dead and without hope in a situation that was utterly filled with despair. But God has performed the miracle of his grace by doing that which no one else can do. He has raised us from this spiritual death into spiritual life.

Notice the four words in verses 4-5: "God made us alive." If you are a Christian, nothing less than this has happened to you. "Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions ... and God raised us up with Christ." So it is not just that we have committed our lives to Christ, although we have if we are Christians. It is not just that we have received him into our hearts, although we have done this too if we are Christians. It is that God has resurrected us out of a spiritual grave into newness of life.

The real picture of what has happened to us is the picture of Lazarus in the grave. Remember that Jesus came to him and called down into the dark hopelessness of that place of death, and he said, "Lazarus, come forth!" And as they all stood with bated breath, Lazarus emerged out of the tomb and into, newness of life. And from the dark tomb of what we were by nature, God has called us and drawn us and brought us into new life in Jesus Christ.

That is why we glory in Christ Jesus. That is why we thrill at the knowledge that we are children of God. The New Testament ransacks the universe for comparisons that will be adequate to describe what has happened to us when we became God's children. And the only two possible comparisons are the creation of the universe at the beginning and the resurrection of Jesus on the third day. So Paul says the same God who commanded the light to shine out of darkness has shined in our hearts (2 Cor 4). And the same God who raised the Lord Jesus from the grave and broke its bondage over him has raised us in Jesus into newness of life.

We are resurrected people. When we celebrate the resurrection on the Lord's Day or on Easter, we are not just celebrating something that happened in history, although it did. We are not just celebrating something that happened to Jesus. Easter is something that happens to us when we are raised into newness of life in Jesus Christ. And the Lord's Day morning is a day for the Lord's people to truly rejoice. God has raised us and has re-created us in Christ Jesus. We need our minds expanded to grasp the glory of what his redeeming work in our lives really means.

God made us alive with Christ by raising us together with Christ (vv. 5-6). 'So we are not just spectators of Christ's resurrection, we are participants. And every spiritual blessing that God has for us is found in Christ. God unites us to Jesus as branches to a vine, as limbs to a body, so that all that he is and all that he has wrought in his death and resurrection and ascension become ours through him. That's why the real meaning of faith is that we believe into the Lord Jesus Christ. Scripture tells us that our union with Christ is a faith union. And when we believe, we believe into the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is also a spiritual union, because we are all baptized into the one body by the same Spirit. The Holy Spirit baptizes or unites us to the body of Christ when we are regenerated. Thus we share in the glory of Christ's resurrection. So Paul says we are no longer dead; we are made alive in Christ. We are, no longer under judgment, for there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ. We are no longer in bondage; we are free in Christ. We are no longer under God's wrath, because in Christ we are under his smile. Indeed, Paul describes our position in verse 6 as seated in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus. That is the sphere in which we have access to him, and enter into some foretaste of his glory.

Now the next question is why has God done all this? The perfect answer is found in the word which occurs twice in verses 7 and 8. It's simply the word grace. The apostle says that God has done this "in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God." That is God's motive in salvation. His motive is to be found in nothing outside of himself.

This is what Paul emphasizes again in verses 8-10. Salvation is neither a reward for any form of human merit nor the result of any form of human effort. It is the gift of God. It is the creation of God, and we are his workmanship. Self-display and self-boasting are totally foreign to Christian salvation and to the world of the heavenly places. There will be display in heaven. But it will be a display of God's glory and grace. There will be boasting in heaven, but it will be boasting of the exploits of God and of the Lamb, who alone are worthy.

#### Our Reconciliation through Christ

In verses 11-22 Paul describes the second major category of Christian experience. We who have been made alive in Christ have also been brought near in Christ. Once again Paul urges us to remember what our condition was before the grace of God touched us. In verse 12 he writes, "Remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world." There are some things Scripture commands us to forget and never remember. But there is one thing we are to remember and never forget - what we were before God's grace reached us.

In verses 12-13 Paul emphasizes such words as separate, excluded, foreigners and faraway. He identifies the second element in the plight of humanity as our alienation from God, from Christ, from God's people and God's promises. This is a dreadful catalog of exclusion and alienation from everything that brings hope.

Paul is really tracing our spiritual biography in three stages. Stage one: We were separated from Christ, alienated from God and his people and without hope in the world (v.12). Stage two: By the death of Jesus on the cross, he has reconciled us to God and to each other. "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ" (v. 13). Stage three is the result of this: "You are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household" (v. 19). These three stages are marked out in the NIV with the three phrases at that time(v. 12), but now (v. 13) and consequently (v. 19). To stage one we could give the title "Alienation," to stage two the title "Reconciliation," and to stage three the title "Habitation."

1. Alienation. Alienation is a problem that many have identified as modern. Indeed, it has become quite an "in" word in intellectual circles. It's a psychological problem because people are alienated from themselves. It's a sociological problem because people are

alienated from each other. It's an ecological problem because people are alienated from their environment. It's an economic problem because workers are alienated from the decision-making processes. Rousseau described it politically. The younger Marx described it sociologically. The secular existentialists described it philosophically. Alienation has become a common feature of modern thinking.

But here Paul tells us what we desperately need to see, that the ultimate, fundamental alienation is neither sociological nor psychological nor economic; it is theological. It is the alienation of people from God. "You were separate from Christ ... and without God in the world." That's the real alienation from which every other form of alienation is derived.

The separation of which Paul speaks has two dimensions. It's a spiritual alienation of all people - both Jews and Gentiles - from God because of sin. But it is also a human alienation of Jews and Gentiles from each other. These two separations were symbolized in the temple to which Paul refers in verse 21. (He speaks of God building a holy temple in the Lord, and we are joined as stones in it.)

There were two significant barriers in the temple. There was a great dividing wall of hostility which separated the Jews from the court of the Gentiles (v.14). There was a notice there threatening the death penalty to any Gentile who breached it. But there was another great dividing barrier in the temple, a great veil which separated not Jews from Gentiles, but all people from God and from the holy place where he dwelt. That was the permanent symbol of our alienation from God.

Let me say a word about the alienation of Jews and Gentiles from each other, because it is less familiar to us today. These two groups experienced a fierce, interpersonal hostility. Of course the distinction between Jews and Gentiles was one that God himself had made, because he chose the Jews as a nation, and he made them a separate, privileged people to whom he gave his covenant, his promises and the Messiah himself. But the hostility between Jews and Gentiles was not God's idea. Indeed, God favored the Jewish nation, not that they might monopolize his gifts, but that they might be missionaries to the world. So in Genesis 12:3 God's initial promise to Abraham is "in you shall all the families of the earth be blessed." Isaiah 49:6 reiterates that promise as the Lord says, "I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth."

Sadly; the Jews became obsessed with privilege and ignored responsibility. The Gentiles were rejected and were regarded as inferior because they did not have the outward symbols. According to verse 11 the Gentiles were called the "uncircumcised" by the Jews, who called themselves "the circumcision." So the Gentiles remained, in William Hendrickson's striking paraphrase of verse 12, "Christless, stateless, friendless, hopeless, and godless."

The Jewish tragedy is the sad picture of a people who refused God's call to be missionaries. Is this not a great danger for us? We can look at teaching like this and forget that there can be a tragedy in our generation if we refuse to take the burden of the world on our hearts.

2. Reconciliation. Verse 13 states, "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were faraway have been brought near through the blood of Christ." The blood of Jesus Christ reconciles both Jewish and Gentile sinners to God and unites them together in Christ. Verse 14 goes on to say, "He himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations." That is, Christ has dealt with the law's curse, he has

borne its penalty. "His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility" (vv. 1516). This whole concept of reconciliation means that banished sinners can only have access to a holy God through the blood of Christ, who in his death bears the ultimate results of our alienation from God against sin and brings us reconciliation.

We need to go to the Old Testament to understand the meaning of reconciliation. Leviticus 16 describes what happened on the Day of Atonement. Two animals were taken for sacrifice, not just one. The High Priest first took a lamb, and laid his hands on it. Symbolically he laid all the sin and guilt of the people on that lamb, then sacrificed it as a sin offering to God. The lamb's blood was shed as a substitutionary sacrifice for sin: The other animal was not slain. The priest also laid his hands on it, but he didn't kill it. Symbolically he transferred the guilt of the people to this animal, commonly called the scapegoat, and then the animal was led out into the wilderness. It was taken to a place of utter isolation, a place that was outside the camp, a place representing the garbage heap of their national life. There it was let loose in the barren wilderness.

Our Lord Jesus fulfilled both of these pictures and types. He is the Lamb of God who was slain, whose blood was shed, the Lamb without blemish and spot. But he is also the one who suffered outside the camp, who was taken into the far, distant place of alienation from God and all humanity, from the depths of which he cried to his Father, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The cross teaches us the meaning of alienation. Our Lord Jesus tasted all its ghastly bitterness, the reality of being cast out from the presence of God and of bearing the wrath of God on his soul. God's beloved Son became the object of his wrath, so that we who were the objects of his wrath might become the children of his love. That's what God has done in Jesus Christ. It's breathtaking! He is our peace. He has destroyed the barrier by entering into it.

Christ also makes peace between Jew and Gentile by bringing them both to the cross. "He himself is our peace," Paul writes, "who has made the two one" (v. 14). His purpose is to create a new society and a new humanity, which is the Christian church, the body of Christ. That is what Jesus was beginning to do. That is what his death on the cross was inaugurating. It is in his body alone that all hostilities are ultimately and radically dealt with. Today we hear so much about revolution, but there is no revolution radical enough to deal with our problems except the revolution of Jesus.

3. Habitation. Verses 19-22 describe God's new society, the church, in three ways. It is God's people: "You are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people" (v. 19). It is God's household or family: "You are ... members of God's household" (v.19). And it is God's temple: "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit" (vv. 20-22). That is what God is doing in the world. He is creating the church to be a habitation, of God where his presence is known, where men and women will increase in the knowledge of him because there he will reveal himself, where people will become aware that the living God is among his people. God is building us into such a temple.

I was in Colorado Springs earlier this year, and the hotel I was staying in was being rebuilt. There was a lot of dust around and some inconvenience about not being able to go through some of the corridors. But they had a notice up which met me again and again as I was

going through the hotel. It said this: "Please be patient with us. We are under reconstruction." As I was walking along the corridor the first morning, I thought, "Blessed be God. So am I." We are under reconstruction. The living God is building us into a new society and into a new temple for his glory. We need to say to one another, "Please be patient. I am under reconstruction." God is building us into a temple, a dwelling place, a habitation for himself and for his glory. And one day, by his grace (for he is supervising the work himself), he will complete it, and we shall be truly a habitation for God. This is what God is doing in the world today. He is creating a new society, and we, who have been resurrected and reconciled, are part of it for the glory and praise of his great name. Amen.

# The Privileges of Christian Ministry (1984)

## Exposition of Ephesians 3

by Eric J. Alexander

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"There is no privilege in the world like being called to be the ambassador of the King of kings. In the whole universe there is no calling to which you could be called that could be a greater privilege. "

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There were two gifts the apostle Paul could never really get used to. One was the gift of God's grace in the gospel: "It is by grace you have been saved, through faith-and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God" (2:8). No greater gift could have been given to the apostle. He spends much of his life wondering at the amazing mercy of God, at the "unspeakable gift," as he calls it, of God's grace in Christ.

The other was the gift that God gave in calling Paul to become a servant of the gospel: "I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power" (3:7). Although Paul describes himself in this chapter as less than the least of all God's people, God lavished his grace on him by giving him the gift of preaching the unsearchable riches of Christ. Now it is this gift of ministry of which Paul speaks especially in Ephesians 3.

We can see a certain pattern in Ephesians 1-3. Chapter one looks at how God planned and procured our salvation in Christ. Chapter two describes how God brings that salvation into our experience as we are resurrected in Christ and reconciled to God and to one another through Christ. In chapter three Paul considers how God provides for the spread of that gospel so that others might come to know its grace and power. God does that, quite simply, by putting his hand on a person like the apostle Paul.

In verse 1 Paul introduces himself with these words: "For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles." In human terms, of course, Paul is a prisoner of Nero. But the apostle never thought in merely human terms. He thought with a biblically fashioned mind. So he writes, "A prisoner of Christ Jesus."

We too need to ask God to train us up in Scripture so that we may think with a biblically fashioned mind about all kinds of issues: about ourselves, about our plans, about others, about the world, about history, about the future, about everything. We need to be those who think with a biblical mind. Paul knew that he was where he was because he was Christ's prisoner.

There were two great motives which formed and molded the whole of the apostle's life and thinking. One great motive, the chief one, is what he repeats so frequently in chapter one - "For the praise of his glory." Everything in the apostle's life and everything he saw God doing in history was for the praise of his glory. We can catch this atmosphere through the whole of the epistles. The great overwhelming motive of the apostle's life was to live for the praise of God's glory.

The other and secondary motive which dominated in Paul's thinking is captured in the phrase "for the sake of the Gentiles." Everything Paul was, everything he had and everything he did was for the glory of God and for the sake of the Gentiles. He would gladly spend and be spent for these two great motives. He lived and preached and ate and slept

and worked and prayed and preached and suffered and bled and ultimately gladly died for the glory of God and for the sake of the Gentiles.

We too need these twin overwhelming motives in our lives, because they are the secret and key to everything that we are. We need to be those who live for the sake of God's glory and for the sake of the Gentiles, that is, for the sake of those to whom God will send us. That's what real Christian service is all about. It is a wholehearted giving of our whole being without stint or reservation for the glory of God and for the sake of those whom we serve in his name. Or more simply, we live for him and for them. These are the two motives we need to ask God to brand into our lives and character. Everything needs to be gathered up and focused on these.

If you're a photographer, and rather a bad one like me, do you sometimes find that all the wrong things are in focus and all the important things are out of focus? Do you sometimes find the very thing you wanted to be in the center of the picture is all blurry? This is what is true in so many people's lives. All the unimportant things are in sharp focus, and the fundamental things are out of focus.

In this generation, above all else, we need to sharpen the focus of our lives! Is your life sharply focused on these two motives - for him and for them? Do people, if they know you at all, have no doubt that this is what your life is all about? For him and for them? And we need to add a third phrase: for life.

Short-term service is a great thing. But my experience of visiting missionaries indicates that for the first five years most of their time is spent battling with language and getting oriented to a new culture. So if you plan to serve God as a missionary, you need to be willing to serve for life. For him, for them, for life - this is how you should plan to live, because this is what really matters to God.

At the beginning of chapter three Paul is about to tell the Ephesians that it is "for this reason" (the reason he has just been expounding in chapter two) that he prays for them. But he breaks off his thought in verse 1 and does not resume it until verse 14, where he repeats the words, "For this reason." In other words, verses 2-13 could be placed in parentheses. They are one of Paul's "glorious digressions."

In verses 2-13 Paul focuses our attention on two things. First, the mystery God has revealed to him (vv. 2-6); and second, the ministry God has committed to him (vv. 7-13).

### The Mystery God Revealed to Paul

Paul uses the word mystery three times in verses 3, 4 and 9. Verse 3: "The mystery made known to me by revelation." Verse 4: "My insight into the mystery of Christ." And verse 9: "To make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery." In contemporary English the word mystery tends to suggest something which is inexplicable, obscure, puzzling, almost incomprehensible. But in the New Testament a mystery is something which is concealed until God reveals it. Once he reveals it, it becomes known. It is therefore an open secret.

What then is this mystery? In verse 4 Paul calls it "the mystery of Christ." It is obviously, therefore, a mystery which somehow centers on Christ. But in verse 6 he explains more

fully that the mystery is that Jews and Gentiles have become one people through union with Christ. This is the mystery that God has revealed to the apostle.

In verse 6 Paul uses three parallel expressions all having the same prefix meaning "together with." He says that in Christ and through the power of the gospel Gentiles have become heirs together with Israel, members together of the one body and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus. So the mystery of Christ which God has revealed to Paul is that Jews and Gentiles are completely one through union with Christ.

Now that really is news! In verse 5 Paul says this "was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets." The Old Testament did reveal that God had a purpose for the Gentiles, but it was not until the New Testament revelation that we knew how God would incorporate them into his people. So the revelation that God has given to the apostles and prophets is that he incorporates the Gentiles into the people of God by incorporating them into Christ.

Some people thought that the Gentiles needed to become Jews before they could become Christians. There was a great controversy in the early church about the need for circumcising those who were Gentiles and about the need for getting them to obey certain kinds of Jewish laws and practices. But here Paul says the revelation God has given is that he means to incorporate both Jew and Gentile into Christ and make them his one people. This is how he is going to create the new society, the new humanity in Christ.

Now before we turn from the mystery revealed to Paul to the ministry given to him, I want you to notice a principle: before God commits a ministry to his people, he reveals a mystery to them. In other words, revelation always comes before proclamation. And proclamation depends upon revelation. That's why it is so vital to be absolutely clear about the place and authority of holy Scripture. Our proclamation must be based on what God has revealed in his Word.

### The Ministry God Committed to Paul

In verses 7-13 Paul emphasizes the enormous privilege of his ministry. "I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me" (vv. 7-8). Now if we could have seen Paul on television, his face would have been filled with astonishment. "To me, who am less than the least of all God's people, this was given: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ!" He is saying that nothing more amazing, nothing more glorious could have happened to anyone than to be called to be a servant of such a gospel, to be a steward of such riches. Paul is astonished. He could see no greater display of the grace of God than this. He is overwhelmed with God's grace and goodness.

We need to recapture this same sense of wonder. One of the devil's more subtle devices is to dull our sense of wonder at God's mercy and grace.

You remember how the aged apostle John finds himself speaking with bated breath about the love of God. "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!" (1 Jn 3:1). Literally it means, "From what country is this love?" He looks around the universe and sees that there is nothing comparable to God's love. The hymn writer says, "Where is the blessing that I once knew when first I saw the Lord?" But here is an old man, and in his old age he says, "From what country is this love that God has

lavished on us, that we should be called children of God? And that is what we are." If God permits me to grow old - I mean really old - I would like to grow old like that.

Now for the apostle Paul there are two things that create this breathtaking sense of privilege: the nature of the servant and the nature of the service.

1. The nature of the servant. To describe himself in verse 8, Paul bends the Greek language almost to breaking point. He takes a superlative, one of the "most" words, and makes a comparative out of it. The English equivalent would not be "less than the least of all God's people" but "the leaster of all God's people." Now that was not mock modesty or an affected humility. Paul is not becoming a groveler or a hypocrite. This is how he really saw himself. He recognized that he was the least of all God's people, and then he says that's not enough. He is less than the least of all God's people. But the one thing that is obviously true about the apostle is this: the mark of his growth in grace. He says on one occasion that he is the "least of the apostles," then on another that he is the "chief of sinners," then finally that he is "less than the least of all God's people." And his growth in grace is marked by this genuine humility. Ours needs to be too.

The one thing that will disqualify us from true usefulness to God is not lack of education or ability, not lack of gifts or expertise, not lack of experience or whatever. The one thing that will disqualify us from God's service is an inflated view of our own importance. For God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble. Do you see what that means? He holds the proud at arm's length. He resists them. If we are full of ourselves and our own importance, we may be actively involved in the mechanics of serving God. God may even allow us to gain great reputations for ourselves and draw attention to ourselves. But so far as being useful to God is concerned, we will have disqualified ourselves.

The apostle recognized that everything of worth in him was due to the grace of God. He says, "By the grace of God I am what I am." That's encouraging, isn't it? If what matters is what the grace of God does in us and for us, then the least of us may take heart before God and recognize that this is what is going to be the key, not our natural gifts or advantages or the lack of them, but what God may make us by his grace.

2. The nature of the service. The service God gave Paul is also described in verses 8-9: "To preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things." "What a ministry God has given to me," says the apostle. What a privilege to preach the unsearchable riches in Christ and to be a steward of the wisdom and plan that God has had in his mind from before the foundation of the world. There is no human being who could be given a higher privilege. I wonder if you've really grasped this. The call to serve God and to handle the mysteries of the gospel is the most astonishing privilege in all the world! And it ought to become more and more of an astonishment to us as time goes on. If God calls you to be a servant of the gospel and instead you become President of the United States of America, that will be a most dreadful comedown.

We used to go on holidays from time to time to little place in England. During these holidays we went to a church where there was a lovely fellowship of the Lord's people, and we were greatly blessed there. I remember one of the first times we were there. Some of the members said to me, "Have you met Paul, one of our members, by the way?"

" No, I don't think so."

" Oh," they said, "you really ought to meet Paul."

And then somebody else said to me, "Do you know Paul? Have you met Paul?"

"No, I haven't met Paul."

"Oh," he said, "you really ought to meet Paul. Has nobody introduced you to Paul?"

"No, but I really can't wait to meet him. Sounds like a fascinating fellow! By the way," I said, "what's so important about him?"

"Well," he replied, "the job he has! Nobody has told you about Paul's job?"

"No," I said, "but everybody keeps talking about him." Eventually I asked, "What does Paul do?"

"Oh, he's the queen's footman!"

Do you know what the queen's footman does? He's that chap who dresses up in that ridiculous outfit with the powdered wig and stands behind her coach when she's going to Westminster Abbey. He opens the door for her and lets her out and so on.

As I began to think about it, I said to myself, "In God's name, I am the ambassador of the King of glory, and it doesn't excite me the way that these people are excited about somebody's being the footman to an earthly monarch!" Yet there is no privilege in the world like being called to be the ambassador of the King of kings. In the whole universe there is no calling to which you could be called that could be a greater privilege. That does not mean that there are not glories in secular callings. There are. But sometimes in the morning, when I'm shut up in my study, digging into the riches of holy Scripture, I find myself saying, "Fancy being paid for doing this!"

It's absolutely astonishing! The privilege of serving God is overwhelming to me sometimes. And I tell you that if God calls you into this kind of service, this is how you need to see it. "Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach the unsearchable riches of Christ." Touching people's lives for eternity - oh, what a calling! Seeing men and women resurrected into newness of life. What a calling! What a privilege and what a gift!

What is it that Paul was given the privilege of preaching? Look at how he describes it in verse 8. It is "the unsearchable riches of Christ." Literally, "the untraceable riches," too deep to fathom, too profound to comprehend, so vast that we will never come to the end of exploring them. Paul's point is that everything the believer needs in this world is found in the unsearchable riches of Christ. You will never come to the end of these. You may explore them through all eternity, but you will never come to the end of them. All God's riches are in him. And we need to be persuaded that a bankrupt, needy, starving world desperately needs these riches today. The riches of God are all there in Jesus Christ and when Paul offered Christ to people and urged them to grow up into Christ, he was offering them the most astonishing riches the universe knows.

People will sometimes say to me, "How long did you stay in your previous church?"

"Fifteen years," I reply.

Then they say, "What on earth did you find to preach about for fifteen years? Didn't you get dry after a time?"

My dear friends, with such riches as are in Christ and are revealed in holy Scripture, my soul might get dry and my mind might get a bit paralyzed, but the riches of God are unfathomable and inexhaustible! And to those of you who are being called to be preachers, let me say this: If you stick to holy Scripture, you will never run dry. The riches of Christ are unsearchable.

Paul also has the privilege of preaching the unfolding plan of God: "To make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things" (v. 9). Paul is preaching the unfolding plan of God down through history. It is only through Scripture and through a biblically-oriented mind that we can really understand history. And Paul's ministry is to open the understanding of men and women to this glorious plan of God which focuses on the church that he is building. Verse 10 states: "His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms."

What then is at the center of God's unfolding plan? What is at the center of history? It's not some particular regime. It's not some particular nation. It's not a capital like Washington or Peking or Moscow or London. The center of history is the church of Jesus Christ. It is the key to history.

And when the church of Jesus Christ is built, God will bring down the curtain on history, call all humanity before his last judgment and wind up the affairs of this bankrupt world. The church is the key to history. That's the glorious thing about preaching the gospel. God brings his plans for the church to completion through the calling out of a people by the preaching of his Word. There is something absolutely glorious about this. God is creating a new society, a new creation, a new people, and this is where he means to display his many-splendored wisdom.

He is going to display this wisdom to the angelic creation. Do you see this amazing picture in verse 10? God is, as it were, taking the church in his hand in order to form and beautify it. He is fashioning a people. And one day he's going to hold up this new creation, this new society, to the angelic hosts and say, "Look at that! Do you see that? Well, that's my new creation, the beautiful people of God I've been reforming and re-creating. This is what I've been doing all this time. That's what history is all about, and that's what the universe is all about. It's just a theater in which I've been doing this amazing thing."

John Stott writes:

As the gospel spreads throughout the world, this new and variegated Christian community develops. It is as if a great drama is being enacted. History is the theater. The world is the stage. Church members in every land are the actors. God himself has written the play, and he directs and produces it. Act by act and scene by scene the story continues to unfold. But who are the audience? They are the cosmic intelligences, the principalities and powers in the heavenly places. And we are to think of them as spectators of the drama of salvation. Thus the history of the Christian church becomes a graduate school for angels.

Now we don't know too much about angels, but it's clear that they are not omniscient. There are things into which they long to look, things that they do not know. But God displays the riches of his wisdom to them through the church.

So whatever it may cost, whatever suffering is involved in this ministry, Paul says this is a most glorious investment. Do you notice this is the answer to discouragement? In verse 13 he says, "I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory." That means there will be discouragement. The ministry of the gospel is a great privilege. It is an astonishing gift from God. But it doesn't mean you will not find discouragement and hardship and days of real trial and tribulation in the midst of serving God. But having the vision is the key. Do not lose heart, says the apostle, because God has given us a glorious vision.

Paul's Prayer for the Ephesians

Now at verse 14, Paul takes up the phrase with which he began the chapter, "for this reason," and goes on into the prayer. Let me say two things about this prayer by way of introduction. First; Paul is still dealing here with the privileges of Christian ministry and service. For the noblest and highest and most effective way to serve God is through the ministry of prayer. And indeed this epistle contains again and again this combination of exposition and intercession.

Second, although Paul is confined in the prison, he is not debarred from this most important form of service. Martin Lloyd-Jones says this: "The enemy can confine Paul to a cell. He can bolt and bar doors. He can chain him to soldiers. He can put bars in the window. He can have him confined physically. But he can never obstruct the way from the heart of the humblest believer to the heart of the eternal God." Now if God can illumine our minds and convince us in our spirits that this is the most basic kind of service, one that nothing can take away from us, then this will be enormously significant for our future ministry and effectiveness.

I want to ask three questions of this prayer, as we did of the one in chapter one. How does Paul pray? To whom does he pray? For what does he pray?

1. How does he pray? In verse 14 Paul says, "I kneel before the Father." "I bow my knees," says the RSV. And that, of course, is a reference to posture, but I don't think Paul is primarily thinking of physical posture. There is a posture of the heart and spirit which is reflected in our physical posture, and the only real significance of physical posture in prayer is that it's an outward reflection of an inward posture. We can close our eyes, which is a posture to prevent our being distracted, but then fill our minds with all sorts of other things. We can have our knees bowed and our heart lifted up in disobedience to God. And we can so often make our posture anything but a reflection of our inward heart.

2. To whom does he pray? He bows before God as Father. If you have an NIV you will notice in the margin that it says the Father from "whom all fatherhood" is named. That is really a better translation. The thought would then be that God's fatherhood is the perfect original from which all fatherhood derives its significance. We have not projected the idea of fatherhood onto God; all that is good in human fatherhood derives from God and is an imperfect reflection of his fatherhood. Yet we are able to learn from human fatherhood. Jesus taught us in Matthew 7:11, "If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!" So when we come to God, we come to him as a father whose fatherhood is perfect.

3. For what does Paul pray? He prays primarily for people's inner being - for their soul, their heart and their mind. "I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being" (v. 16). He is praying for a reforming, a strengthening, an establishing of their inner being, and for the power of God to be made available to them in their inner being. The result of this is "that Christ may dwell [or be at home] in your hearts" (v. 17). Now of course he is already there if you are a Christian. But Charles Hodge rightly points out that the presence of God is not static but may be known by us in an increasing measure. God's presence is an increasing, living reality.

Second, Paul prays that they might have spiritual stability (vv. 17-18), and he uses two metaphors to describe that stability: rooted and established. The metaphors are horticultural and architectural. He prays that God would give them deep roots and firm

foundations in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. They emphasize depth and quality as distinct from superficiality and mere quantity.

This is a great emphasis of holy Scripture. Do you remember how Jesus emphasizes this at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, when he pictures two men who are building? The one who builds on sand gets things done quickly. He doesn't take any trouble about the foundation. He's only interested in what's seen, so he raises a house in no time. The other man on the other side of the road is digging and digging, down and down until he disappears from public view, because he's going for a solid foundation. People who are passing by looking at the first may say, "My, there's a man who's really getting on with the job. He's really producing something that is impressive. What that silly fool is doing down in his hole nobody can tell! But people may be like that, and you just need to leave them to their own devices."

Then when the storm came, the real test also came. And the man who had no foundations found that his building was just a great public show with no solid, secret, deep, hidden foundation. In every sphere of Christian life and service, that's a lesson we need to learn. Let your foundations go down. Let your roots go deep - and deep particularly into the love of God.

Listen to Paul again. "I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ" (v. 17). Now most commentators, I discovered, think of this establishment in love primarily as our love for God. But I am bound to say that the more I study this, the more I find myself in disagreement with them - an uncomfortable position to be in, when you're disagreeing with people like Charles Hodge, John Stott and even John Calvin. They all say that it is our love for God. But it is increasingly clear to me that it is God's love for us that we are to be rooted and built up in. The parallel use in Colossians 2:7 is "rooted and built up in him." And it would be much more like Paul to describe our roots and foundations as being in God and in what God is rather than in anything so feeble and changeable as our own love for him. That also moves more naturally into the next part of verse 18, where Paul prays that we may grasp something of the dimensions of this vast love of Christ. But I'll have a word with John Calvin about that when I get to heaven.

Paul longs that these roots might give us the capacity to grasp more and more of the love of Christ, the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge. (Notice, it doesn't bypass knowledge; it surpasses knowledge. That's an important distinction.) And the goal is that we might be filled with God (v. 19).

This is what Christian life and experience is all about - that we might be filled with God. That means that all God is and all that we have been reading about, he means to pour into my being. That's mind-boggling, but it's true! That we might be "filled to the measure of all the fullness of God." And our fullness, Paul goes on to tell us, is directed toward one goal: "To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations" (v. 21). What is God doing all of this for - this glorious display of his grace and riches in the church? Why has he given us new birth? Why is he creating the church? And why has he created the universe? It's for this: "glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations." There is nothing beyond it. The glory of God is everything for the people of God. That's what heaven is all about, you see. Heaven focuses on the glory of God. And you and I need to prepare for heaven, whether we reach it next year or next century, by focusing everything on the glory of him who alone is worthy. To his name be all the honor. Amen