

New Testament Survey for Beginners: Part 10 – Ephesians

The letter of Paul to the church in Ephesus is full of wonder and awe. It is easy to see why it is a favourite of so many Christians, and how it has been since the Protestant Reformation when these great truths were again brought to light. It takes up the electing love of God for His people in Christ from before the foundation of the world to the expression of that same uncompromising love which offered up Christ at Calvary on their behalf, and then preserves them for glory, for that perfect bliss of the endless ages of eternity which are yet to come. It also shows God's people as the Church, the bride of Christ, how she has unity despite the superficial differences within her number and how she is empowered to live out that unity in a fallen and hostile world. If ever there was a letter in which believers can be reminded over and over of what they have in Christ, and how they may be encouraged by that to fight the good fight of faith, this is it.

This letter is divided into two sections of three chapters each. The first sets forth the grace of God, the fact that sinners are saved by grace alone, saved through faith alone and in Christ alone; the second consists of several exhortations to those who receive this grace, how they are to conduct themselves, showing us what the Christian life is supposed to look like.

Chapter 1:3-14 is about the five great blessings that God gives His people, blessings which when once bestowed will never be withdrawn, namely, His electing love, redemption through the blood of Christ, the revelation of the mystery of His will (the first mystery being cosmic redemption), an everlasting inheritance, and the sealing of believers by the Holy Spirit who is the guarantee (the deposit or down payment) of this inheritance. Paul then informs the Christians in Ephesus that he is praying for them (15-23), praying that God may give them wisdom to know what they have in Christ, to know the exceeding greatness of His power toward all who believe, that same power by which He raised Christ from the dead and made Him the head over all things for the Church.

O dear Christian, are you aware of these rich benefits which are yours, forever yours, in Christ? Are you comforted by this unfailing power toward you, not your power to hang onto God but His power to take hold and preserve you? Do you think about such things, and does it flood your heart with joy to do so?

In chapter 2:1-10 we now see the exceeding greatness of God's power in action. All men by nature are dead in sin, not sick and dying, but spiritually dead and unresponsive to the call of God in the gospel. "But God," we are told – and right here we told of the regenerating grace of God at work in His elect when there is nothing that any man can do to give life to himself – but God made His chosen ones alive together with Christ, raised them up together with Christ, and made them sit together in the heavenly places with Christ. Notice that it is all in, with, and for Christ that this miracle of life is made to happen, and, in terms of this legal standing which all Christians have, this inheritance is, even in this life, already theirs in principle. It is as if they were reigning with Him right now.

Is this blessing for Jews only? No, it is for Gentiles as well (11-22). On the cross, Christ has reconciled both – that is, elect Jews and elect Gentiles – unto God, but also reconciled them to one another, making them one new man in Himself and giving them the same access by the Holy Spirit to the Father. Believing Gentiles, therefore, are to be considered fellow citizens of God's kingdom with believing Jews and members together of His Church without distinction.

This once hidden mystery (now the second mystery listed, incorporating both Jews and Gentiles into the body of Christ) is at last revealed (3:1-13), and it is the reason that Paul has been called to be an apostle to the Gentiles, to preach the unsearchable riches of Christ also to them. The fact that Paul is presently in prison ought not to discourage these believers in Ephesus, most of whom are Gentiles themselves, but should help them to see that God has His own methods of disseminating the good news regardless of the appearance of outward circumstances and making clear, through the Church, even to principalities and powers in heavenly places His eternal plan and gracious purpose for His people.

This second mystery now revealed is also the reason that Paul is praying for these Gentile believers (14-21), praying that they may not be disheartened but strengthened through the Holy Spirit in the inner man, praying that they may comprehend with all other believers the love of Jesus Christ which passes knowledge, and praying that they may be fully conformed to the likeness of God. As we often find in his writings, Paul is so overcome by the glory and grace of God that he closes this first section of his letter with an ascription of praise and a call for the Church to honour and glorify God, to praise and adore Him forever.

Starting chapter 4, we see how Christians are meant to live. On the one hand (4:1-6), they are to walk in unity with one another – not in the spirit of unity, which undermines truth – but in the unity of the Spirit, the kind of unity the Holy Spirit provides and promotes truth. What a remarkable concept and confirming evidence of saving faith that people of such dissimilar ethnic backgrounds should come together and be united in standing for truth and living it out in their lives!

On the other hand (7-16), within this unity of purpose there is also a diversity of practice. As a consequence of Christ's ascension, as well as a means of His equipping His people for service, He gave gifts to men, including church offices and the very men to function in those offices for the wellbeing of the entire body of Christ. Let the people of God serve faithfully in these offices, and honour those who exercise them, that they may grow up in Christ and edify each other.

Not surprisingly, we are also told how Christians are not to live (17-32), that they are to put off as a garment the old man (who they used to be in Adam) and put on the new man (who they are now in Christ). This calls for resisting the devil, keeping in step with the Holy Spirit and replacing bitterness with forgiveness.

Adding further detail to walking in unity with one another, Paul instructs the believers in Ephesus to walk in love, in light, and in wisdom (5:1-21). To achieve this, something they could never do on their own, they must not be drunk with wine (a sedative of the natural world), but be filled with the Holy Spirit (that supernatural stimulant of God) by whom they stand out and apart from the unbelieving world around them.

Paul does not condemn here the beverage use of alcohol, but taking in too much of it leads to every kind of debauchery, whereas one can never have too much of the Spirit of God. At the same time, the apostle does not imply that any believer is without the Spirit, but simply that he needs always to be filled with Him. However much of Him he has, he does well to drink in even more; the Spirit is the power to live the Christian life, to sing, to give thanks, and to submit to one another in the fear of God. This requires regular and unceasing refreshment.

Understand this, believer, that the dynamic of the Church's life is the Holy Spirit, who is the means of access to the Father (2:18), the source of revealed truth (3:5), the secret of inner strength (3:16), the unity of believers in the bond of peace (4:3), and the stimulus of all abiding joy (5:18).

Only as a Christian is filled with the Holy Spirit can he submit to others in the fear of God and so fulfill his obligations in regard to those relationships (5:22-6:9). The husband-wife relationship is a reflection of Christ and His Church, and in that same way therefore every husband is to love his wife and fully commit himself to her wellbeing; every wife, in turn, is to respect her husband and be subject to him in everything. This is a great mystery – a third mystery referenced in this letter – nevertheless, a husband and his wife are made one in marriage and each is to be wholly committed to the other.

Children are subject to their parents, and, whether or not their parents are believers, their obedience to them is itself to be “in the Lord” – that is, an essential part of their own service to the Lord. Fathers, as head of the home and as part of their service, are to raise their children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. Slaves are to serve their masters from the heart and as a means of serving Christ Himself. This principle applies to all employees as well, and to all citizens of the state, whoever may be subject to any earthly master (v.8). Such obedience is never to be in opposition to the law of God, nor is it something separate in itself, but is always to be pursued as an indispensable part of one’s obedience to God.

Finally, Paul makes it clear that believers living in unity with one another and according to God’s own established order is in the context of an ongoing spiritual warfare (10-20), which is to say that every disciple of Christ can expect to be opposed by the wiles of the devil all along the way. This battle he has is not with men, as one may too easily think, but with Satan himself and all the forces of darkness. Yet here, too, the Lord provides His people with the armour they need to withstand every attack. As the believer wields each piece of that armour, let him know that, as he perseveres in prayer both for himself and others, the Holy Spirit who helps him in all his weaknesses will provide the victory that is needed.

O believer, taste and see that the Lord is good (Psalm 34:8-10), and learn for yourself the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe!

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