

Bible Study – An Overview of Ephesians

You will find that the letter to the Ephesians is just a few pages long. You may be thinking that this should not take too long to study. Well, this letter is so comprehensive in its understanding of Christian doctrine and the practical application to us, as believers, that John Calvin, the French born Swiss Protestant Church reformer and theologian spent 48 consecutive sermons explaining it to his congregation!

Many scholars have described this letter as the ‘pinnacle’ letter in the New Testament.

The background to this epistle is that Paul wrote the letter probably around 60-62AD whilst under house arrest in Rome. Normally, that would mean he was chained to a guard. Ephesus, in Turkey, was well known to Paul whom, we are told in the book of Acts, spent some considerable time there during his journeys in Asia.

Ephesus was in those days a city with few equals anywhere in the world, situated on an inland harbour, at that time, with direct access to the Aegean Sea. The temple erected in the city to Diana, goddess of chastity, hunting and the moon was one of the seven wonders of the world.

What is very interesting to note is that Paul’s letter to the Ephesians is unlike most of his other letters to Churches which were often written to admonish them for particular errors or heresies as well as explaining doctrine and encouraging Christian principles of living.

In this letter, Paul is writing to expand our understanding of God’s eternal purpose; His grace to us and the response He expects from us as His chosen people, both individually and as His body of people – the Church.

Paul is addressing his letter to all faithful believers who live in the world and who live in Christ. We need to remind ourselves constantly that we should be living in two kingdoms – both in the world and in Christ.

What Paul is telling us in the epistle can be summed up in this way:

1. that God has given us new life in Christ.
2. that God has created a new society – the church – through Christ
3. what God expects of His new society – especially in terms of unity and wholeness of life and
4. how we are equipped by God to deal with evil.

The first three chapters of Ephesians set out Christian doctrine and one of the first points you will note is the reference to the Trinity. Immediately, in Ch.1, v.3 Paul refers to “God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” and in verse 13, we have the affirmation that “Having believed, you were marked in Him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit”.

Every blessing comes from God and Paul tells us in verses 4 - 14 that before the world began, God had chosen us to be His through our union with Jesus Christ. That He bestows His grace upon us. That by Christ’s death on the cross, we are forgiven our sins and we are set free. And that God’s plan will finally be completed through Christ and in Him as Head of the Body, when God brings all creation together at the end of time.

Paul says, be assured that God has made all believers his own; He has adopted us as His sons and daughters and we will be united with Him in the future. No one can explain this doctrine of past-election for it is a divine revelation, but John Calvin had this to say on the subject:

“Although we cannot conceive either by argument or reason how God has elected us before the creation of the world, yet we know it by His declaring it to us; and experience itself vouches for it sufficiently, WHEN we are enlightened in the faith.”

If we wish to know this for ourselves, we have to rest in Christ; we have to be in Christ. And the greatness of God’s love is such that we do not have to earn this relationship with Christ – we simply have to believe and trust in Him.

In Chapter 2 of Ephesians, Paul tells us that Christ’s death has transformed the Jew/Gentile divide and the God/man divide into a single multi-cultural family – God’s family. God has made both believing Jews and Gentiles “one” in Christ and we all have access to the Father through the Holy Spirit. Look at v. 12 – 15, “remember that at that time you (the gentiles) 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. But, now in Christ Jesus, you who were once far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. For 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”.

At the beginning of Chapter 3 Paul speaks of his own role given to him by God. Now, he is a prisoner of Christ. In fact, Paul is under house arrest in Rome ruled by Nero, chained to a soldier, day and night. Nero would have claimed Paul as his prisoner, but Paul knew better – he believed that in every circumstance of life, however bad, God’s sovereignty rules. Do we believe the same?

I think Paul is reminding us that Christ did not promise us a carefree life if we choose to follow Him – on the contrary, suffering is part of the Christian life for all of us.

Paul explains in verse 1 that the reason he is in prison this time is “for the sake of you Gentiles”. That was his reward for being a missionary for God, but, Paul did not have a problem with this because he knew that God was working out His will in every aspect of Paul’s life.

If we believe that God is working out His will in our lives because we have asked him to do so, the difficulties and suffering we experience in our lives will take on an entirely different light.

You may have heard the story of the time Sir Christopher Wren went to see how the building of St. Paul’s Cathedral was progressing. As he walked around inspecting the work, he came upon one man and asked him what he was doing. “I’m cutting a stone to fit into this column”, he said. He came upon a second man and asked him the same question. He replied, “I’m earning money for my family”. He came to a third man and asked him what he was doing. The man hesitated for a few seconds, then stood up and answered, “I’m helping Sir Christopher Wren to build St. Paul’s Cathedral”.

Paul is asking us whether we, as individuals, are helping Christ to build His kingdom on earth? If we suffer hardship, material loss or unpopularity when we make a stand for Christian principles, do we regard ourselves as victims of the world or as joyful servants of the Lord? Can we even say that we always make a stand for Christian principles when the occasion demands?

Paul goes on to tell us in ch. 3, verses 3-12 that the responsibility entrusted to him by God is to explain the mystery and to share the gospel of salvation with the gentiles.

But, what was the mystery, Paul referred to?

It is that God’s salvation through Christ is for all people, - Jew or non-Jew.

It is that God's plan for mankind has now been realised in and through Christ and secondly, will be proclaimed to the whole world through the Gospel. Paul is telling us that God has, at this moment in time, formed His Church – a new and reconciled humanity in union with Christ.

Paul is very strong in pointing to the biblical centrality of God's new Church as the body of Christ both in Ephesians and in other letters.

I know that God's son, Jesus Christ died for me as an individual, as he did for each one of you, but, He also died to make us one body of people in Christ – God's church. He died in order to redeem us and to enable us to belong to God's family.

The humility of Paul is constantly expressed in his letters and in this passage he tells us in verse 7 that he is only a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace. He describes himself as the least of God's people.

But this is no false humility. He was never concerned, after his conversion on the road to Damascus, with his own prestige because in words I once read, "Understanding the deep truths of God's word does not give a man a big head; it gives him a broken and contrite heart".

I love that phrase in verse 8, "the unsearchable riches of Christ". It means riches you can neither track nor control. They are a gift to us and the point is that Christ always enriches our lives when we invite Him into our lives – no matter what state our lives may be in.

Paul tells us in verse 9 that we have to make the gospel plain to everyone.

That task applies to all of us – not just a few. We should all be proclaimers of God's word, one way or another, in our daily lives. We may feel that is a daunting prospect, but if we truly belong to Christ, what else can we do?

Paul, is telling us in this ch. 3, that the church is central to God's purposes for mankind, and if it is, it must surely be central to our own lives. I do not think it is possible to claim a personal relationship with Christ which does not include full membership of the church. We cannot but accept this truth when we learn in v.10 that, 'God's 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'.

Is it not a staggering thought that Paul is saying that the Church on earth is observed by these spiritual powers and allows them to see the wisdom of God, but only to the extent that the Church is spiritually united, of course.

In the first three chapters of this letter, Paul has shown us God's eternal purposes being worked out in history and how God has created a new society - people who have been reconciled and restored to God - through Jesus Christ, by his death and resurrection.

Now, in chapter 4, he passes from doctrinal issues to the practicalities of our Christian lives. What we, as Christians must be and what we must do.

He starts with a plea urging each one of us to live a life worthy of the calling we have received. Verse 2 reminds us to be "completely humble and gentle, be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace."

This verse speaks the first of four truths about the unity which God intends his Church to enjoy. It depends first of all on our love, expressed by our humility and gentleness, patience and forbearance for one another.

Having started this chapter with the importance of love and its tangible expression in our lives, Paul next talks about the importance of Christian unity in verses 3-6. There is only one body – the Church, the body of Christ – because there is only one Spirit. There is only one hope, one faith and one baptism because there is only one Lord. And, finally, there is only one Christian family because there is one God and father of us all.

In moving from the subject of Church unity to gifts Paul makes a striking contrast between verses 6 and 7.

In the former, he refers to “one God and father of all, who is over all, and through all, and in all”, but he then goes on to say in verse 7, ‘to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it’. Paul has turned from ‘all of us’ to ‘each of us’, - from the unity of Christians to our diversity. He is making the point that unity is not to be construed as uniformity. The Godhead has apportioned various gifts to people which can give every Church an exciting diversity which contributes to the enrichment of all our lives.

We receive these gifts through grace. They are not equal gifts but every gift ought to contribute to the wellbeing of God’s church and his people.

And what are these spiritual gifts? The first thing to say is that they are extremely varied as Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 12 v.4, ‘There are different kinds of gifts, but the same spirit’.

In Ephesians Paul talks of those people who have been made apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers.

Paul is emphasising these particular gifts because they are fundamental to the building of God’s new Church. The Church needs leaders in order to equip all God’s people in their various personal ministries.

The whole emphasis of the New Testament, and of Paul’s writings in particular, is that the Church is the body of Christ and every member - every member - has a unique place and responsibility in God’s plan. Spiritual gifts are completely unselfish, of course, because they are given to each one of us for the service and benefit of other people.

The key verses on leadership are 11 to 13 where Paul tells us why Jesus Christ appointed leaders – it is “To prepare God’s people for works of service so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”

As John Stott says, I quote, “we have seen that it is the exalted Christ who bestows gifts on his Church, that his gifts are very diverse in character, that the teaching gifts are primary, and that their purpose is to equip God’s people for their ministries and so build up Christ’s body.”

Paul also tells us that the people of God must grow in maturity. From v.15 & 16, I quote: ‘speaking the truth in love we will in all things grow up into him, the Head, that is Christ. From him the whole body grows and builds itself up in love’.

Then Paul gives us stern warnings, in the second part of ch. 4, to live as children of light and he makes no bones about the requirement by writing in v. 17, ‘I insist on it in the Lord’. Insist on what? In a word, ‘Purity’ – purity in our lives and putting on the new self (v.24), “created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness”.

In the following verses (25-31) you will note that Paul lists all manner of sins which we are to avoid at all costs – not least our obligation, ‘not to grieve the Holy Spirit with whom we have been sealed for the day of redemption’.

The first 4 verses of Ch. 5, are really a continuation of the theme that has been apparent in the previous chapter regarding the unity and purity of the church. Paul’s thoughts have centred on the three aspects of ‘what we are; what we believe and how we should behave, which should mark the character of our whole life. In this context, he refers to one of our obligations in v.3 – “there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, impurity or greed because these are improper for God’s holy people”.

Then, in v.5, Paul begins to put more emphasis on why we should seek to become more sanctified in our personal lives and he gives us a very good reason to do so, for he makes no bones about the certainty of judgement for immoral behaviour. Such is the state of our society today that there appears little criticism of immorality – in many cases it is not even recognised and where it is, it is often applauded and even envied by some.

We need to be careful in our interpretation of Paul’s meaning here. He is not saying that any immoral thought or action will condemn us to Hell – otherwise we would all be going there, wouldn’t we? For those who are tempted into sin but, thereafter, truly repent, there is, of course, forgiveness through Jesus Christ. No, Paul is referring to those for whom immorality, greed and impurity are an accepted way of life. He confirms there is no universal salvation – that is a false and dangerous notion. Paul then goes on to warn us not to be partners with these people.

That is not to forbid our association with them, for how else are we to bring them the good news and get them to re-consider their life style. But we must not be tempted into participating in any aspect of their sinful life styles.

Do not forget that many habitually sinful people are as anxious for you to join them as we should be to bring them to the knowledge and love of our Lord, because, if they succeed, they are further justified in their lifestyle and lack of belief.

Paul moves on, in verses 8 – 14 to give further reasons why his readers should not be involved with the evil conduct of immoral people and he uses the symbols of darkness and light to make his points and v.14 is the conclusion of his argument:

“Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you”.

In this quotation, which may be an extract from an old baptismal hymn in the early church, he points to the illustration of the old Adam, in terms of sleep, death and darkness, being rescued by Christ – being converted from darkness to light.

Paul now moves on again in verses 15 – 17 as he urges us, firstly to live wisely and secondly to recognise that Christian wisdom is practical wisdom for it shows us how to behave

Indeed the word to ‘behave’ in the Hebrew context means to ‘walk’ and we must walk as children of light worthy of God’s call. And if we are wise, there are two ways of showing this.

Firstly, we will make the most of our time and not waste it on fruitless interests and efforts. Time is the one thing we all have in common and its’ the one thing that once lost, can never be recovered. How many years - not hours - have we lost in our lives through idleness, which is not the same as rest; self indulgence and wasted effort? We can all probably make better use of our time, can’t we?

Secondly, if we are wise, we will make every effort, as individuals, to discern and to do the will of God. We pray, in the Lord's prayer, "thy will be done", but how are we to know what that means for each one of us unless we individually pray for guidance from the Holy Spirit and think about God's purpose for us and our lives.

Paul is next concerned with the fullness of the Holy Spirit. He urges us to be filled with the Spirit and the Greek word is in the present tense – that is to say this 'filling' is a continuing process –not a one-off event.

So the question we need to answer is not "When were you and I first filled with the Holy Spirit?", but, "are we filled with the Holy Spirit now?"

In the context of the Church, Paul tells us that being filled by the Holy Spirit brings four more specific benefits:

The first is christian fellowship –v. 19. We love to sing together both to God and to each other. Psalm 95 is an example of the latter, "O come, let us sing to the Lord".

The second is our worship of God together. We can sing and pray to the Lord. We are not all blessed with fine voices but, as JB Phillips remarked years ago, 'we can all make music with our hearts for the ears of the Lord'.

Next, in v. 20 & 21 Paul calls us to give thanks to God for everything in the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

Giving thanks for everything is not meant to be taken literally, but to be taken in the context of the whole sentence. We thank God "for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Despite what you may have heard or read in some quarters, we do not thank God for sickness or life's calamities. We can thank him for being with us in our adversities. We thank him for everything which is true, worthy, loving and good and so on, for God is our loving Father.

'Finally', Paul says in ch.6 v. 10 & 11, 'be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armour of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes.' I do not think that means we only make our stand in Dorking. Evil is everywhere and we need to make our Christian stand wherever we find it and in whatever form. The general well-being in our land, not least in the south-east, gives most of us a feeling of personal security. Seemingly, threats to us or to the practice of our faith seem far away, but any evil, wherever it is practiced is an affront to our Lord and a danger to us for it is wholly against our loving God.

Evil will thrive in any situation where God's people do not make a stand against it and we have a total responsibility to protest on behalf of those unfortunate souls who are being victimised or abused in any way, regardless of where they live. Please read verses 10 - 18 at home, in this last chapter, where Paul tells us how to prepare ourselves for the battle against evil

John Mackay, one-time President of Princeton Theological Seminary, said that "he owed his life to the epistle to the Ephesians". He also wrote that in reading Ephesians, "I saw a new world – everything was new. I had a new outlook, new experiences, new attitudes towards other people. I loved God. Jesus Christ became the centre of everything....I had been quickened; I was really alive".