

UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE

STUDY BOOK

SPRING 2024



**FREED
TO SERVE**
The Books of
Galatians and
Ephesians



Thru-the-Bible
Book by Book

STUDY BOOK SPRING 2024

For use with *Understanding the Bible's Leader's Guide*.

FREED TO SERVE

The Books of Galatians and Ephesians

UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE—A quarterly series of Bible book studies that will help you understand the Word of God and apply it to your life.



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Galatians & Ephesians

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is not adequate for acceptance by God. Obedience to the Old Testament Law, or at least to parts of it, is also necessary. So they were trying to enforce the Law among the Gentile Galatians.

The Judaizers' teaching drew a fierce reaction from Paul. In Paul's mind, to make the Law mandatory for salvation is, in effect, to nullify the Gospel. Salvation is by grace through faith in Christ alone,

apart from the works of the Law. Christians are not bound by the Law but are free in Christ.

Paul could not immediately go to Galatia to straighten out the churches in person. So he wrote to them, defending his teachings and his status as an apostle (Gal. 1—2), explaining Christian freedom from the Law (Gal. 3—4), and encouraging the Galatians to live out their freedom in Christ (Gal. 5—6).

How to Use the *Study Book*

The *Study Book* is meant to be used with a Bible opened beside it. Before studying one of the lettered sections within a lesson, read the corresponding Bible passage. Then refer back and forth between your Bible and the *Study Book* until you get the

meaning of the passage. Also think about your personal answer to each of the "Ask Yourself" questions. Finally, come to class prepared to discuss the Bible passage and raise any questions that have occurred to you.

1

Free to Know the Truth

Galatians 1

a Paul's Greeting to the Galatians (1:1-5)

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age. —Galatians 1:3, 4

Starting his letter, Paul followed the traditional pattern of his day: he named himself (vs. 1), he named his readers (vs. 2), and he pronounced a blessing upon them (vs. 3). All this is typical, yet Paul used the pattern for his own special purposes. We can detect already in the first five verses of chapter 1 Paul's concerns in writing this letter.

Paul wanted to warn the Galatians that they were being drawn into error. From what we can tell, some Jews professing to be Christians had come among the Galatian believers and had spread damaging ideas. Many of the Galatians had accepted these ideas, one being that Paul was not on a level with the other apostles.

Paul must have been pained to learn that many people who had come to faith through his ministry

were now doubting his authority. But personal reasons were not the main reasons why Paul wanted to restore the Galatians' faith in him. He knew that if his authority was not respected, his ministry could not be effective. So Paul plainly declared himself an "apostle," or ambassador, sent by God (vs. 1).

Later in the letter, as we will see, Paul went to great lengths to defend his apostleship by describing his independence from other church leaders. But here Paul said only that he had been appointed an apostle neither by "men" (meaning a group of church leaders, such as those in Jerusalem), nor by "man" (meaning any single church leader such as James, Peter, or John). Instead, Paul had been appointed an apostle by God the Father and God the Son.

Paul mentioned the Resurrection not just because it showed the link between the Father and the Son, but also because it showed the link between Christ and Paul. The risen Christ had appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-8; 22:3-11; 26:12-18). Paul considered his vision of the resurrected Christ to be a factor qualifying him for apostleship (1 Cor. 15:7, 8; Gal. 1:15, 16).



Ruins of the Roman aqueduct (water conduit) leading to Pisidian Antioch, the site of one of the churches Paul is thought to have written to.

Paul's greeting to the Galatians came not from himself only, but also from some "brothers and sisters" (Gal. 1:2). These may have been his coworkers and the members of the church with whom he happened to be ministering at the time he wrote the Letter to the Galatians. It's likely that these people had little or nothing to do with the letter's contents. Yet by mentioning these others, Paul implied that they stood behind him and the counsel he was going to give to the Galatians.

Ask Yourself . . .

When I'm facing a difficult situation, do I seek strength from my fellow believers, or do I try to go it alone?

As he did in all his other New Testament letters, in Galatians Paul pronounced the twin blessings of grace and peace upon his readers (vs. 3). In so doing, Paul united typical Greek and Hebrew styles of address. Letters in Greek often began by wishing the reader grace. Jews greeted one another with a wish of peace. Certainly, however, Paul thought of *grace* and *peace* in terms of their Christian meanings.

Normally Paul would have ended his greeting with the statement in verse 3. But in this case he added a description of Jesus (vs. 4) and a doxology (vs. 5). Probably he made these additions because of the Jewish-Christian troublemakers in the Galatian churches.

Casting doubt on Paul's authority was not the most serious offense these people committed. Even worse, these troublemakers (called Judaizers) taught the Galatian believers that their faith in Christ was not enough. According to the Judaizers, Gentile Christians needed

also to perform certain works of the Old Testament law, especially circumcision.

Legalists today are concerned about other laws than circumcision, but legalists are still a plague upon the Church. They try to impose unnecessary rules on others, and this distracts attention from what really matters. This study of the Letter to the Galatians should help us recognize signs of legalism and appreciate more fully the freedom believers have in Christ.

The teachings of the Judaizers revealed that they had a poor understanding of what Christ accomplished for sinners on the cross. So Paul emphasized that Christ voluntarily "gave himself for our sins" (vs. 4).

Since sinners are unable to save themselves, Christ has to "rescue" repentant sinners. And what He rescues repentant sinners from is "the present evil age." This rescue has a couple of meanings. First, it means that Christ has secured for believers a place in the age to come—the future righteous age, as opposed to the present evil age. Second, the rescue means that while we Christians live our lives in this age, God helps us withstand temptations to sin.

Paul was careful to point out that though Christ gave Himself voluntarily to die for our sins, His sacrifice was in keeping with the Father's will. When Paul thought about that glorious act of God's grace, he broke forth in praise to God for what He has done (vs. 5).

b The True Gospel versus No Gospel (1:6-10)

As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God's curse! —Galatians 1:9

In the opening of his letter, Paul hinted at his concerns about the Galatians. Now he got right to the point.

Paul admitted to being "astonished" (vs. 6) that the Galatians were allowing themselves to fall into the Judaizers' errors. He hadn't expected it of them. They had been saved only a few months or years before; their experience of grace was still fresh. And now, already, they were allowing themselves to be bound by the law.

From other New Testament books, we know that Paul could be tolerant about matters of secondary importance (see Acts 21:20-26). But this was not such a matter. The teaching that the Galatians had accepted was nothing less than "a different gospel" (Gal. 1:6), which was really "no gospel" (vs. 7). In other words, this teaching was a perversion of the true Gospel. By accepting this teaching, the Galatians were "deserting" God, who had called them to belief (vs. 6).

We should ask ourselves why it was terribly wrong, in Paul's view, for anyone to insist that Christians

must follow laws such as the one about circumcision. What was the harm?

We read later in chapter 1 that Paul had tried as hard as anyone to please God by obeying the law. But he had not found peace with God until he had met Christ on the road to Damascus, and had believed in Him. Thus Paul had learned from personal experience the truth that salvation comes by grace through faith alone, apart from works of the law. The Judaizers, by saying that faith was not enough, were actually contradicting the Gospel they claimed to believe.

False gospels always mix truth with error. This makes them seem safe. But even partial error can be deadly. Mature and discerning Christians need to confront each error and purge the Church of it.

In Paul's eyes, the Galatians had done wrong in believing a false gospel. But the Judaizers had done worse in promoting that gospel. Twice Paul declared that anyone preaching a gospel other than the one he had delivered to the Galatians deserved eternal condemnation (vss. 8, 9). Paul was impartial about this: he included himself (the "we" in verses 8 and 9 probably refers to Paul alone) and even angels in the curse.

After denouncing the Judaizers, Paul asked some rhetorical questions about his own motives (vs. 10). Evidently the Judaizers had accused

Anathema

The Greek word translated "God's curse" (Gal. 1:8, 9) is *anathema*. Originally this word referred to anything dedicated or consecrated to God. But eventually it came to mean something delivered over to God for destruction.

Paul of preaching a Gospel of grace in order to gain popularity. So Paul asked very pointedly, perhaps even sharply, if he were now trying to please people instead of God. Obviously the answer is that he was not, since his harsh words would have offended many of the Galatians.

Paul did not enjoy offending people; in fact, normally he would bend over backward to please others (1 Cor. 10:33). But he knew that sometimes unpopularity was a price he had to pay for the defense of the Gospel.

We, too, can't always please people and God at the same time. Let us always choose to please God.

Ask Yourself . . . *How have pleasing people and pleasing God come into conflict in my life?*

C Paul Called and Saved by Grace (1:11-17)

I did not receive it [the gospel] from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ. —Galatians 1:12

The Judaizers in Galatia had made Paul himself an issue. By bringing his authority into question, they hoped to raise doubts about the message he preached. The apostle responded to this challenge by reviewing his life before the Galatians, with an eye to how his experiences confirmed both his authority and the truth of his message (1:11—2:21).

The Judaizers' gospel of faith plus works was man-made. But Paul's Gospel of faith plus nothing was God-made (1:11). Paul had not "received" (vs. 12) the Gospel in the way Jews received truth by listening to their rabbis. Nor had Paul been "taught" the Gospel in the way students were taught subjects formally in schools. Instead, the Gospel had come to him directly, "by revelation from Jesus Christ."

Clearly, Paul's reference hinted at his meeting with the resurrected Christ on the road to Damascus. In this meeting, Christ had not taught Paul doctrine. Rather, Christ had demonstrated His lordship, which is the central fact of the Gospel.

The Galatians had already heard, either from others or from Paul

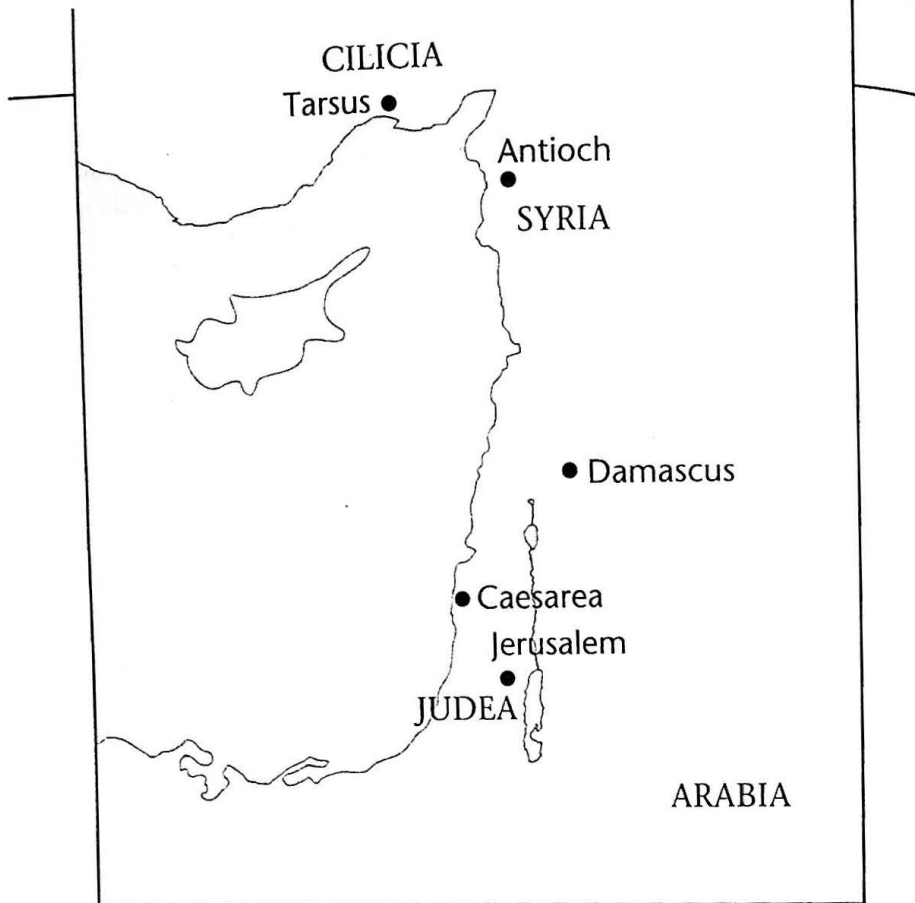
himself, the story of Paul's pre-Christian life and conversion (Gal. 1:13). But Paul reminded them of the story because he knew his life was an excellent example of salvation by grace, not by works.

Before meeting Christ, Paul had wanted more than anything to achieve righteousness through the rituals of Judaism. As a Pharisee, Paul's religion had been based, not on the Old Testament alone, but also on teachings built up over centuries by religious professionals (vs. 14). Paul had been an expert at following this mass of laws (see also Phil. 3:4b-6).

A special way in which Paul thought he could earn credit with God was by persecuting Christians, who from the viewpoint of strict Jews were heretics. It seems Judaism had nourished a cruel streak in Paul's nature (Acts 8:1-3; 9:1, 2).

Against this dark backdrop of misguided zeal, Paul's transformation at the hands of God shone all the more brilliantly. But looking back, Paul saw God acting graciously toward him long before his conversion. Like the prophet Jeremiah, Paul had been set apart from birth and called to perform an important service for God (Jer. 1:5; Gal. 1:15). Paul's call to be an apostle to the Gentiles had been confirmed when God revealed His Son, Jesus Christ, to Paul on the road to Damascus (vs. 16; Acts 26:17, 18).

Ask Yourself . . . *How did God act graciously toward me before my conversion?*



As a new convert, Paul had more than one course open to him. We might expect him to have gone immediately to meet with the apostles in Jerusalem. But instead, Paul went to an unknown location in Arabia, which at that time was a large and vaguely defined region east of Palestine.

Why did Paul go to Arabia? No details are given. Since it was a sparsely populated area, Paul may have gone there to get away for a lengthy period of meditation in the presence of Christ.

Sometimes we, too, need to meet ourselves and God anew in a place of solitude. Such times can give a whole new direction to our lives.

For Paul's purpose in writing to the Galatians, the reason for his move to Arabia was of little consequence. He merely mentioned going to Arabia, and then returning to Damascus, to show that during the crucial period of his early Christian life he had been apart from the other apostles. Paul owed his apostleship and understanding of the Gospel to God, not to people.

d A Brief Visit to Jerusalem (1:18-24)

Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days.
—Galatians 1:18

Paul continued to recount the history of his early years as a Christian, emphasizing his apostolic independence. He had said that he did not immediately go to Jerusalem (vs. 17). But he did go there "after three years" (vs. 18), probably meaning three years after his conversion.

The delay of Paul's trip to Jerusalem showed that he had been in no hurry to meet the other apostles. But this delay was not the only evidence of his apostolic independence. Paul had stayed in Jerusalem for but a short time—15 days (see Acts 9:26-28). Furthermore, while there he had met only two apostles: Cephas and James (Gal. 1:18, 19). (The other apostles may have been out of town doing missionary work.)

Paul had spent most of his time in Jerusalem with Peter, one of the 12 original apostles. The two had met as equals. But Paul must have greatly benefited by hearing Peter's stories about Jesus. Paul, in his turn, surely had told Peter about his encounter with Christ on the Damascus road and about his adventures since then.

The meeting between Paul and Peter shows us how believers can enrich each other through a mutual

sharing of their spiritual experiences. Learning how God works in the lives of others often is just the encouragement we need to help us cope with our own problems.

Though Paul must have become personally close to Peter and perhaps others during his stay in Jerusalem, he had been there for so little time and had met so few apostles that he obviously could not have come much under their influence. Paul knew the Galatians would have a hard time believing this. The Judaizers had given them a different account, apparently declaring that Paul was subordinate to the Jerusalem apostles. So Paul vowed before God that his words were true (Gal. 1:20).

Paul told the Galatians he had left Jerusalem for the regions of Syria and Cilicia (vs. 21). At first, he had gone to his hometown of Tarsus in Cilicia (Acts 9:29, 30). Later, Paul had lived in Antioch of Syria (11:25, 26). Paul may have mentioned the two provinces together, naming Syria first, because it was traditional to do so. At this time Cilicia was under the control of Syria's governor.

Perhaps with a touch of sadness, Paul mentioned that during this period he did not have the opportunity to get to know the believers in "the churches of Judea" (Gal. 1:22). Of course, Jerusalem was in Judea, and Paul had met some Christians in Jerusalem. But because Paul's visit to Judea was short, he had spent all his time in the capital, not getting to meet with any of the churches that were springing up in the surrounding towns of Judea.

While most of the Judean Christians had not had an opportunity to meet Paul, they certainly had heard a lot about him (vs. 23). Previously his name had been connected in the believers' minds with persecution. But hearing of

his turnabout had been thrilling for them. They had praised God for the changes in Paul (vs. 24).

JAMES,

the
Lord's Brother

Jesus had four half brothers (Mark 6:3). The eldest of these brothers was James.

During Jesus' earthly ministry, James and the other brothers refused to believe in Him (John 7:5). It's likely that James became a fully convinced follower of his brother only after Christ's resurrection (1 Cor. 15:7). But eventually he became a leader in the Jerusalem church (Gal. 2:9). Paul evidently considered James an apostle (1:19).

According to historical reports, James was stoned for his defense of the Christian faith about A.D. 62.

Ask Yourself . . .
Who regularly encourages me in my faith? How can I become an encourager to someone else?

2

Free to Stand Firm

Galatians 2

a Another Visit to Jerusalem (2:1-5)

We did not give in to them for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you.

—Galatians 2:5

For Lesson 1 we read about a brief visit Paul paid to Jerusalem (Gal. 1:18, 19). Galatians 2:1-10 describes

another visit of Paul's to Jerusalem. This visit occurred after "14 years" (vs. 1), probably meaning fourteen years after his conversion. Scholars are divided over whether the visit of Galatians 2:1-10 should be identified with Paul's second visit to Jerusalem (Acts 11:27-30; 12:25) or with his third (15:1-35).

Apparently some Judaizers from Jerusalem had visited the church of Antioch, pretending to be Christian brothers. But then they had returned

Titus

Titus, a Gentile, appears to have been converted through Paul's ministry, perhaps in Antioch. Paul recognized Titus's fine qualities and worked with him for many years.

After Paul's reference to Titus in Galatians (2:1-3), Titus does not appear again in New Testament history until Paul's third missionary journey. On at least two occasions Paul sent Titus to Corinth to deal with problems there (2 Cor. 8:6). Later, Paul left Titus at Crete to strengthen the churches on that island (Titus 1:5). Finally, just before Paul's death, Titus went to minister in Dalmatia, an area that is northwest of Greece (2 Tim. 4:10).

to Jerusalem and had begun trying to turn the Jerusalem Christians against the way Gentile Christians were being treated in Antioch. Paul compared these men to spies who infiltrate a military camp to uncover secrets (Gal. 2:4).

The idea of going to Jerusalem was not Paul's own. God had given him a "revelation" (vs. 2)—probably a command to clarify the issue of how Gentile Christians should relate to the Jewish law.

Knowing that in Jerusalem he would face Judaizers, Paul took with him two specially chosen companions: Barnabas and Titus. Barnabas was a respected Jewish leader of the church in Antioch who agreed with Paul about the Gentiles' freedom from the law. He would lend weighty support to Paul's words. Titus was an uncircumcised Gentile Christian. He would show that a Gentile could be a good Christian without being circumcised.

Paul was convinced that the Gospel he preached—salvation by faith alone—was the true one and that his authority stemmed from God. Nevertheless, Paul realized that if he were opposed by the other apostles, his work would be hampered—it would be like "running . . . in vain" (vs. 2). So his goal in going to Jerusalem was to secure the acceptance of the other apostles for his position regarding the Gentiles.

Wisely, Paul arranged a private meeting with the church leaders; a public conference would have given the Judaizers an opportunity to interfere and cause an uproar. In the

private meeting Paul told the other apostles what he was teaching the Gentiles, presumably including the part about their not needing to keep the Jewish laws. The others accepted his interpretation of the Gospel.

By gaining the leaders' acceptance, Paul seriously weakened the position of the Judaizers. Yet the Judaizers continued to oppose him. They wanted Gentile converts to be required to obey the law. More immediately, they wanted Titus to be circumcised.

But with the Jerusalem leaders backing them up, Paul and those of his opinion held their ground against the Judaizers (vs. 5). They knew what was at stake. If the law were forced on the Gentiles, the Gospel would be nullified. And if Titus were circumcised, a precedent for Gentile circumcision would be established.

The law was not forced on the Gentiles, and Titus was not circumcised (vs. 3).

Paul's behavior in Jerusalem on this occasion can teach us much about how to handle conflict in our churches. Paul was unbending in regard to the Gospel. Yet he tried to limit conflict as much as possible. He was concerned both about truth and about unity. Those should be our concerns too when we are involved in conflict.

Ask Yourself . . . *Is there any major conflict going on within the church now? If so, how might Paul's model guide my behavior in relation to the conflict?*

b The Agreement in Jerusalem (2:6-10)

James, Cephas and John, those esteemed as pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the circumcised. —Galatians 2:9

Paul was glad for the other apostles' backing, but their backing did not mean they were superior to him. They had affirmed his interpretation of the Gospel, not commissioned him to preach it. So while Paul wanted to show the Galatians that the Jerusalem apostles had agreed with him, he was equally concerned to show them that he remained independent of the other apostles.

Some Bible students have taken Paul's descriptions of the apostles at Jerusalem as put-downs. Paul said they were "held in high esteem" and "esteemed as leaders" (vss. 2, 6, 9). But it is a mistake to view these references as put-downs. Paul loved and respected the apostles at Jerusalem. However, because the Judaizers in Galatia had claimed the other apostles were superior to Paul, he emphasized his equality with the apostles rather than the respect they

PAUL'S Humility

No one can reasonably accuse Paul of having an exalted opinion of himself. Paul recognized his unworthiness and gave full credit to God's grace for whatever he had become.

- "Although I am less than the least of all the Lord's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ" (Eph. 3:8).

- "But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ" (Phil. 3:7).

- "Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief" (1 Tim. 1:13).

deserved.

We, too, need to keep a balance in our attitude toward church leaders. We should respect them but not idolize them. Our attitude toward church leaders should be based on their faithfulness to their task rather than on their personality characteristics.

As evidence that the apostles at Jerusalem were not superior to him, Paul said they had added nothing to his message (vs. 6) and had in fact recognized his ministry as legitimate (vs. 7). Paul was doing God's work, and the apostles had known better than to interfere in it (vs. 8).

Paul referred to the apostles James, Cephas, and John as "pillars" (vs. 9). Like the pillars upholding the temple, these men upheld the church. In other words, they were the chief leaders of the Jerusalem church at this time. So Paul dealt mainly with these men.

Business people today often conclude a deal with a handshake. That's just what happened between Paul's group and the Jerusalem apostles. The Jerusalem apostles extended the "right hand of fellowship" to Paul and his friends. Clasp-ing right hands was a symbol of agreement and friendship.

The agreement between Paul and the other apostles concerned a division of labor. The "pillars" recognized that God had chosen Paul as an apostle to the Gentiles, just as He had chosen Peter as an apostle to the Jews. So they agreed that Paul's group would minister among Gentiles, while the others would minister among Jews. In practice, the two ministries—to the Gentiles and to the Jews—often overlapped. But nevertheless, the agreement shows that the parties were equals in authority and that the mission to the Gentiles was legitimate.

In the same way, Christians today should respect each other's areas

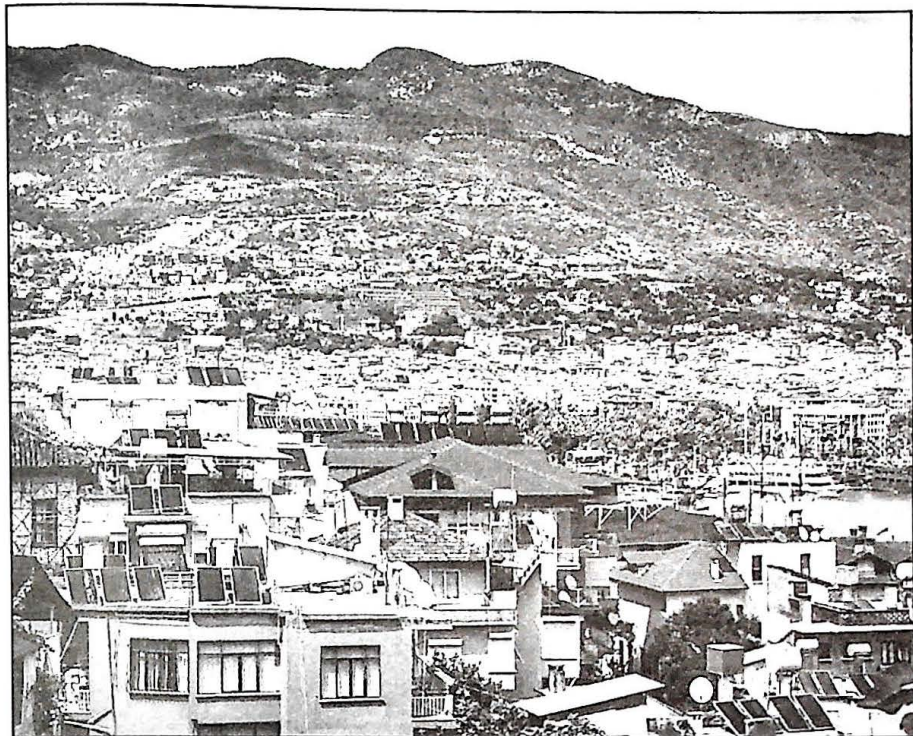
of ministry. Sometimes we may be tempted to think that the ministry God has given us is the most important one. But God has given other people gifts and temperaments unlike ours so that they can fill roles that are different from but just as legitimate as our own. Let us support and respect each other as we work together for our common cause.

Ask Yourself . . . *Is there anyone in my church whose ministry I should appreciate better?*

The Jerusalem apostles added one condition to the agreement. Paul had already brought funds for the poor Christians of Jerusalem (Acts 11:27-30). The apostles wanted Paul to gather funds for the Christians of Jerusalem wherever he traveled among the Gentiles (Gal. 2:10).

Commentators have suggested a number of reasons, including famine and persecution, for continuing poverty among the Jerusalem Christians. One or more of these suggestions may be correct. Or perhaps the apostles felt that the Jerusalem church, as the first church of the whole Christian movement, deserved this special mark of respect.

In any case, Paul was more than willing—he was eager—to accept this condition. And Paul was as good as his word (see Rom. 15:25-28). He was concerned about the poor. He may also have seen this collection for the Jerusalem church as an opportunity to help knit the Jewish and Gentile parts of the church together.



Syrian Antioch today. Its modern name is Antakya, Turkey.

C A Conflict with Peter (2:11-14)

When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned.

—Galatians 2:11

Paul was not yet done telling about his personal experiences as they related to the apostles and to Judaizers. He saved for last the most powerful incident. This was his dramatic conflict with Peter over the issue of Gentiles and the law (vss. 11-21).

After visiting Jerusalem, Paul returned to Antioch of Syria, where previously he had been working. The church in Antioch was composed of both Jews and Gentiles. The Gentile believers did not keep all the Jewish rules. For instance, before eating church meals and the Lord's Supper, they did not wash ritually as the law required. According to Jewish tradition, such omissions meant Jews should not associate with them. Nevertheless, the Jewish Christians in Antioch overlooked the lawbreaking committed by their Gentile brothers and sisters.

The two groups ate together, and in other ways lived in harmony.

Sometime after the agreement in Jerusalem, Peter came to Antioch, presumably to contribute temporarily to the church work going on there. At first Peter participated fully with the Gentile Christians, as did the other Jewish Christians, since he had learned not to call anyone unclean (Acts 10:28). But all that changed after some men from Jerusalem arrived in Antioch (Gal. 2:12).

We don't know much about these men or why James sent them to Antioch. They may have carried a message to Peter from James that changed Peter's mind. At any rate, somehow they caused Peter to begin drawing back from the Gentile Christians.

Once Peter set the example, other Jewish Christians in Antioch began drawing back from Gentiles too. Most disappointing to Paul, Barnabas—who had been Paul's ally in the meeting at Jerusalem—allowed himself to be influenced by the Judaizers (vs. 13).

Prejudice is contagious. When others around us look down on a certain person or group of people, it becomes hard to buck the trend. That's when individual courage is required. Instead of joining the move to prejudice, we can try to start a move against it. The destruction of a prejudice can also be contagious.

Ask Yourself . . . *Have I ever given in to the pressure of prejudice?*

Jesus' death had broken down the wall between Jews and Gentiles.

Now Paul was horrified to see that wall being rebuilt in Antioch. Quick and decisive action was needed. Since Peter had started the defection by his public actions, Paul decided to rebuke him publicly. Maybe by doing so he could change others' minds too.

The first part of Paul's strategy was to point out to Peter the inconsistency of his actions (vs. 14). Before the Judaizers arrived, Peter, a Jew, had lived like a Gentile (by ignoring Jewish laws and customs). So why was he now demanding that Gentiles live like Jews (by following those laws and customs)? To say one thing and do another is the essence of hypocrisy.

d Justified by Faith (2:15-21)

We, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified.

—Galatians 2:16b

Peter was not alone in hypocrisy. The other Jewish Christians in the Antioch church, except Paul, were hypocrites in this matter too. So Paul broadened his speech to address all those who were "Jews by birth," not "sinful Gentile"—a phrase by which Jews commonly referred to Gentiles (vs. 15).

For centuries, legalistic Jews had believed that they could make themselves acceptable to God by obeying the law. But they were mistaken. No one can perfectly obey the law, so no one can be justified by keeping the law. That was never the law's purpose.

The Jewish Christians of Antioch had learned this lesson. They had learned, in addition, that sinners can be justified through faith in Christ and only through faith in Christ. Paul reminded them of these truths (vss. 15, 16). It wasn't just Gentiles who needed Christ; Jews needed Him too.

While the Jewish Christians of Antioch knew that obedience to the law was ineffective in producing justification, the visiting Judaizers wanted to impose the law on Gentiles. Evidently the Judaizers thought the Gospel, when on its own, reveals one's sinfulness without revealing a way to avoid sinning. Thus, to them, the Gospel seemed actually to make Christ promote sin. Paul denied this claim (vs. 17).

On the contrary, for a Christian to revert to the Jewish law is really to break the law (vs. 18). That's because such a use of the law is really a misuse of the law. According to

verse 19, the law was meant to show people their need for a fuller relationship with God—a relationship made available through Christ. Then once we have been saved through faith in Christ, He lives within us and we look to Him for direction in life (vs. 20). Without God's grace given through Christ, none of us can be justified and reconciled to God.

Justification

"Justification" is one of the most important words in Paul's writings (see Gal. 2:15, 16). It is a legal word referring to God the Judge declaring a person who is guilty of sin as "just," or righteous. The basis for this gracious act is Christ's sacrificial death on the cross. The sinner receives the gift of justification through faith.

Justification is linked with reconciliation with God and the process of salvation in the repentant sinner's life.

Ask Yourself . . . *Can I honestly say of myself that "Christ lives in me"?*

Apparently the Judaizers claimed that Paul nullified God's grace in giving Israel the law when he taught that Gentiles need not obey all the law. Far from it, said Paul. He did not set aside the grace of God.

Instead, he established God's grace by teaching that justification and right behavior are possible through Christ rather than through the law (vs. 21).

In Paul's speech to the mistaken Jewish Christians we see the central-

ity of Christ in Paul's thought and life. And in this Paul becomes a good model for us. Do we trust in anything other than Jesus Christ to make ourselves pleasing to God? At every point of decision do we ask ourselves what Christ would have us do?

3

Free from the Law

Galatians 3:1-25

a Faith in the Crucified Christ (3:1-5)

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified.

—Galatians 3:1

At this point in his letter, Paul began a more systematic argument against the position of the Judaizers. Carefully, line upon line, he presented reasons and proofs why the Galatians should not depend upon the law to earn God's favor (chapters 3-4).

To set the stage for his argument, Paul asked the Galatian believers a series of pointed questions (3:1-5). He prefaced the questions with the unusual address of

"foolish Galatians" (3:1). By calling the Galatians foolish, Paul did not mean that they were stupid but that they weren't using their God-given

Paul's Public Notice

The Greek word translated "clearly portrayed" in Galatians 3:1 literally referred to the posting of a notice or placard in a public place. In New Testament times the word was often used to describe a father proclaiming that he would not be responsible for the debts of a wayward son.

Paul used the same expression to convey the opposite message. On God's behalf, Paul had posted the image of God's Son crucified. In this case the message of the public notice was not that the Father refused responsibility for the sin debt of humanity, which Christ had taken on Himself. Rather, because of the death of His Son, the Father had canceled the sin debt for all who believe.

wisdom to the best advantage—they should have known better than to believe the Judaizers. And by calling his readers “Galatians,” rather than “brothers” as before (see 1:11), Paul adopted a more formal tone suiting his message.

Paul’s first question was one he did not actually expect them to answer: “Who has bewitched you?” (Gal. 3:1). He and they both knew he was referring to the Judaizers. The Galatians had been “bewitched,” or deceived, by the visitors among them.

Immediately after the first question, Paul reminded the Galatians that they had heard him preach Christ crucified. In fact, Paul had described Christ’s crucifixion and its significance so plainly that it was as though they had seen the crucifixion with their own eyes. Here is another reason the Galatians should have known better than to be taken in by the Judaizers’ doctrine, since that doctrine in effect made Christ’s death unnecessary (see 2:21).

Having brought the image of Christ’s death to his readers’ minds, Paul asked them the central question: “Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by believing what you heard?” (3:2). Of course, the answer to this question was that they had been saved and had received the Spirit through faith based on Paul’s Gospel of Christ crucified. The implication for the Galatians here was that since faith in Christ (and not obedience to the law) had been effective in starting them on the Christian life, then faith

in Christ (and not obedience to the law) would be effective in continuing them in that life. To believe otherwise would be foolish (vs. 3).

We don’t have any record of the Galatian Christians suffering persecution for their faith, although of course it is possible that they did so. However, if we understand verse 4 correctly, then it appears that the Galatians certainly had suffered for their faith sometime prior to Paul’s writing the letter. Paul’s point in referring to this suffering, then, would be to say that if they now abandoned the Gospel they had suffered for, their suffering would be a waste.

Finally, Paul repeated his central question (compare vs. 2, 5). The wording of the question is slightly different this time, notably in the addition of the word “miracles.” This may refer to gifts and works of the Spirit that the Galatians enjoyed since their salvation.

While we may be inclined to join Paul in his feeling of indignation at the Galatians’ betrayal of all God had done for them, we should first take a look at ourselves. Do we ever forget all we have been through as Christians—both the good and the bad experiences—when a particularly appealing temptation appears? If we keep in touch with the Spirit and use our God-given wisdom, we may be able to avoid mistakes that would sidetrack us in our spiritual journey.

Ask Yourself . . . *Lately, have I been tempted to turn my back on what God has done for me?*

b Abraham—a Case in Point (3:6-9)

So also Abraham “believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” Understand, then, that those who have faith are children of Abraham. —Galatians 3:6, 7

After calling on the Galatians to remember their own experiences with Christ, Paul proceeded to strengthen his argument for the superiority of grace over the law by appealing to Scripture (vss. 6-14).

Paul’s first scriptural teachings were grouped around the figure of Abraham (vss. 6-9). Probably Paul’s opponents had taught the Galatians that male Gentile believers needed to be circumcised, as Abraham had been, in order truly to become Abraham’s children and participate in God’s blessings upon Abraham. So Paul had to set the record straight.

In discussing Abraham, Paul may have used the same Bible passages the Judaizers had used, only interpreting them differently. First he quoted Genesis 15:6: “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness” (Gal. 3:6). Though Abraham and his wife were childless and past the age of having children, Abraham believed God’s promise that he would have a son and, through the son, many descendants. That’s the faith God credited as righteousness.

Abraham’s faith was in a promise, since he lived before Jesus Christ.

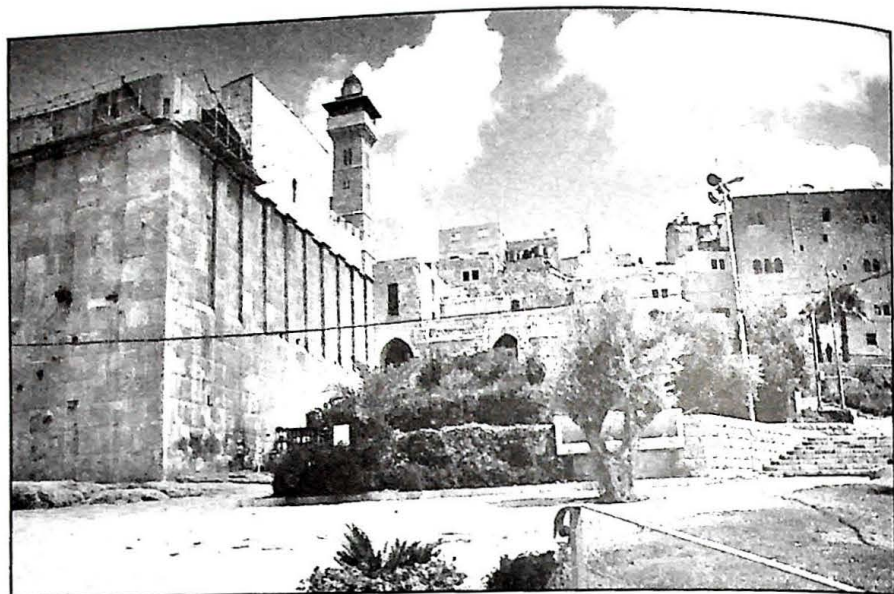
Yet his faith, like saving faith in Christ, involved believing God. All who believe in God through Christ are counted righteous with Christ’s righteousness.

In this sense, said Paul, all who have faith are children of Abraham (Gal. 3:7). Even Gentiles, who are not physically descended from Abraham nor are necessarily circumcised, can become children of Abraham through faith in Christ (see also Rom. 4).

This inclusion of Gentiles in Abraham’s family was part of God’s plan from the beginning. Paul personified the Scripture, saying that it “fore-saw” God’s justification of Gentiles and “announced” the Gospel to Abraham (Gal. 3:8). This means that God, represented by His Word, preached the Gospel of grace for Gentiles even as early as Abraham’s day, when He told Abraham, “All nations will be blessed through you” (Gal. 3:8; compare Gen. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18).

Jesus Christ is a descendant of Abraham. Through Him, God’s grace is available to people of all nations. Thus, through Christ, the blessings God promised to Abraham are distributed worldwide in the form of salvation and life in the Spirit.

Many people mistakenly view the Old Testament as having little more than historical value for Christians. Yet we should be thrilled to realize that many promises of the Old Testament pointed to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We are children of Abraham by faith in Christ!



This fortresslike structure in Hebron covers the suspected site of the Cave of Machpelah, where Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, and Leah were buried.

Abraham

Abraham was one of a family of idol worshipers in the Mesopotamian city of Ur around 2100 B.C., when the living God called him to move to Canaan. At the age of 75, Abraham obeyed.

He and the members of his clan never had a permanent home in Canaan, but rather ranged across it as nomads, and even lived for periods in neighboring areas. Yet God blessed them, and Abraham became wealthy.

God repeatedly promised Abraham that he would have a son and that his descendants would possess the land of Canaan. Finally, when Abraham was 100 years old, his son Isaac was born.

The father of Israel died at the age of 175. For details on Abraham's life, see Genesis 11:26—25:11.

C Redeemed from the Law's Curse (3:10-14)

[Christ] redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.

—Galatians 3:14

All who trust in Christ are blessed. Not so those who trust in the law; they are cursed. To teach this sober truth, Paul continued his lessons from the Hebrew Scriptures. Again, Paul may have turned to many of the passages used by the Judaizers, but he interpreted them differently.

In this section of the letter, Paul made four points, backing up each one with a scriptural quotation (vss. 10-13). Then he made a concluding point (vs. 14).

Paul's first point is that all who rely on observing the law are under a curse (vs. 10). The explanation he gave for this claim is Deuteronomy 27:26. The original purpose of the Deuteronomy verse was to encourage obedience to the law. But taken at face value, the verse shows that people are mistaken to trust in the law for salvation. No one can ever perfectly keep the law without God's grace through Christ.

Paul's second point: the law justifies no one (Gal. 3:11). In support of this point, Paul quoted Habakkuk 2:4. In its original context, this

verse explains that righteous people live by faith, unlike wicked people who live by selfishness. Thus in a reversed form, this verse says much the same as Paul said: those who trust in God rather than in their own efforts (such as to keep the law) are counted righteous.

For his third point, Paul said that law and faith are mutually exclusive as means to produce righteousness (Gal. 3:12). As Leviticus 18:5 shows, law keeping is a matter of doing rather than of believing. Faith, on the other hand, is a matter of believing. Thus law keeping and faith are quite different.

The first of Paul's four points in this section of Galatians said that all who rely on the law are under a curse (Gal. 3:10). In the last of his four points, he told how people are redeemed, or ransomed, from the curse of the law: by Christ's becoming a curse for us (vs. 13).

Backing up this point, Paul quoted Deuteronomy 21:23. In ancient societies the body of an executed criminal was sometimes hung on a tree as an added insult or a public warning. Old Testament law prohibited this practice and encouraged same-day burials because an executed person was accursed (see vss. 22, 23). By extension, it could be said that Christ was cursed (bearing our curse) because He was hung upon a "tree" (a wooden cross).

Finally, Paul took the subject of redemption from the law's curse and linked it with what he had said earlier about blessings through Abraham (Gal. 3:6-9) and even

A Lash and a Curse

At least five times, Paul received the punishment of 39 lashings at the hands of Jewish synagogue officials (2 Cor. 11:24). One ancient Jewish writing says that during such punishments, various curses listed in Deuteronomy were read aloud between lashings. If this practice was carried out during any or all of Paul's lashings, his memory must have been thoroughly impressed with the curses, one of which he quoted in Galatians 3:10.

earlier about receiving the Spirit (vss. 2, 5). Paul gave the reason why Christ paid the ransom for us (vs. 14). Christ became our sacrifice so that God's promise to Abraham that all nations would be blessed might be fulfilled. In other words, He died so that God's Spirit would come.

We should never cease to be grateful for the shame and suffering Christ endured on the cross for our sake. He didn't have to do it. But He did it because He loves us.

Ask Yourself . . . *Do I know people who think they don't matter? If so, how can I tell them about God's love for them?*

d The Unchangeable Promise (3:15-18)

If the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on the promise; but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise. —Galatians 3:18

Softening his tone by calling his readers "brothers and sisters" (vs. 15), Paul again used Abraham as a key to understanding the Gospel.

Paul's point in this section of the letter is this: God's introduction of the covenant made with Moses (the law) after Abraham's time did not cancel or even change the covenant God had made with Abraham. The covenant with Abraham—namely, His word that "all nations will be blessed through you"—was a lasting promise.

In our day, once a contract has been signed, it cannot be changed (unless both sides agree). The same was true of formal agreements between people in Paul's day. Based on the Greek word translated "covenant," it seems that the legal instrument Paul had in mind was a will. But the situation was the same for any legal agreement of the day.

Paul used the way human covenants cannot be changed to illustrate that God's covenant with Abraham remained unaltered. Probably the Judaizers in Galatia had taught that since the law had been introduced, the blessings of Abraham could be received only by those who kept the law.

God's covenant with Abraham took the form of a promise to him and his "seed" (Gal. 3:16; see Gen. 12:7, for example). Paul surely knew that both the Hebrew and Greek words for "seed" can be either plural or singular. But from Paul's perspective, the word clearly referred to a single person, namely, Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:16). In Christ—and only in Christ—does God bless all nations.

The covenant with Moses, though it came after the covenant with Abraham, did not cancel the earlier covenant (vs. 17). The two covenants merely existed side by side. Paul's reference to 430 years perhaps was based upon Exodus 12:40 and 41, verses that refer to the period of the Hebrews' sojourn in Egypt. The actual period between the beginning of the Abrahamic covenant and the beginning of the Mosaic covenant was somewhat longer.

Despite the addition of the law of Moses, the inheritance, or blessing, of Abraham's descendants continued to be based on God's promise (Gal. 3:18).

Probably every one of us, at one time or another, has let someone down by not keeping a promise. But not so with God. His Word is true, and whatever He has promised He will do. God would not break His promise to Abraham that all nations would be blessed through him. And He won't break His promises to us.

Ask Yourself . . . *Which promises of God are most dear to me?*

e The Purpose of the Law (3:19-25)

The law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.

—Galatians 3:24, 25

In this section of the letter, Paul asked and answered two questions that might naturally have arisen in his readers' minds after his previous comments.

The first question is this: "Why, then, was the law given at all?" (vs. 19a). To summarize Paul's answer, the law was added as a temporary provision by which God prepared people for Christ's coming.

According to Paul, God gave the law "because of transgressions" (vs. 19b). The law showed people their sinfulness by giving them specific commandments that, as they well knew, they often failed to keep (compare Rom. 5:20). Thus when Christ came as the fulfillment of God's promise, the Jewish people should have been ready and willing to seek the forgiveness of their sins through Him.

As a means of preparing people for Christ, the law, unlike God's promise to Abraham, was temporary. Though the law came from God, it had heavenly mediators (angels) and an earthly mediator (Moses). The tradition that the law came through angels (Acts 7:38, 53;

Heb. 2:2) probably was based on Deuteronomy 33:2 and Psalm 68:17. Much more clearly, the Old Testament shows that God gave the law through Moses.

Normally, covenants that need a mediator are those in which both parties are active (Gal. 3:20). The covenant of Moses was of this kind. God gave the law, but the people were responsible to obey it.

The covenant of Abraham was not of this kind. It had only one active party: God, who is one (see Deut. 6:4). God gave the promise to Abraham, and He would fulfill it.

Next, Paul posed the second question: "Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God?" (Gal. 3:21a). The short answer to this question is "Absolutely not!"

The long answer is a little more complicated. Paul taught that the law and the promises are not opposed to one another. They merely worked on different levels.

The law had been practiced with varying degrees of success over a period of several centuries, yet it had made no one righteous. Only God's grace can do that. Thus Paul concluded that the law cannot produce righteousness.

Furthermore, "Scripture has locked up everything under the control of sin" (vs. 22). Paul may again have had in mind Deuteronomy 27:26. The law not only brought about a knowledge of sin but also brought all humanity under its curse. Thus the law prepared people for faith in Christ, who was the fulfillment of scriptural promise.

The law acted as a temporary guardian for God's people (Gal. 3:23-25). Wealthy families in the Roman world often would have a servant who supervised the conduct of the family's sons. Paul compared the law to this servant. In other words, the law temporarily supervised the people of God until Christ came. Like a child's guardian, the law was a servant of merely temporary usefulness.

For the Judaizers to insist on circumcision, Jewish dietary laws, and distinctly Jewish ethical principles was a step back to immaturity. Likewise, Christian legalism is always a sign of spiritual immaturity. Let us grow up in Christ.

Ask Yourself . . . In what ways have I matured spiritually in the past six months?

4

Free to Be Heirs of God

Galatians 3:26—4:11

a **Clothed with Christ** **(3:26-29)**

So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

—Galatians 3:26-27

Last week we saw that the believer's relationship to the law can be compared to that of a child under the supervision of a surrogate guardian (3:25). However, from the context of verse 23, we see that law's guardianship is more comparable to that of a prison guard—by necessity enforcing a strict lifestyle upon a convict, who could not be expected to naturally abide by the rules were he or she free of the law's supervision.

Verse 25 declares the means by which any human sinner (imprisoned for life without parole) might be freed and reformed: only faith in Christ can free us from law's supervision and sin's shackles. In fact, this faith makes us "children of God"—rather than our Judge, we relate to God as our Father (vs. 26).

A son of God clinging to legalism—to the guardianship and supervision of law—is tantamount to a freed prisoner running back to his cell, clinging to the security of the bars and the clear restrictions imposed by the prison guards. Worse yet, it's an affront to God to claim His salvation, yet continue to live as if we still needed imprisonment.

Paul also described salvation as being "baptized into Christ" (vs. 27). This baptism of the Spirit takes place in every believer at the moment of salvation, when God's Spirit washes away all sin and brings spiritual life out of death and decay (that spiritual baptism of which water baptism is a meaningful symbol).

Likewise, to "have clothed yourselves with Christ" refers to the moment of salvation, when we laid aside our dirty prisoner's garb and put on Christ's robes of righteousness (see Col. 3:8-15). The point is, why would we cling to the lifestyle of a death-row prisoner—why put back on those prison stripes?

Ask Yourself . . . *When have I been prone to prefer the confines of law over faith in God's grace?*

Freed as we are, there are still the temptations to live as if we were prisoners of the law. In fact, Paul pointed to one such worldly view that is incompatible with being clothed in Christ: discrimination. Like nothing else in history, Christ's coming into the world has made

it possible for diverse people to live in true unity. And while many social and civil efforts have been worthwhile and had some success, real unity is only possible for those who have become children of God through faith in Christ (vs. 26).

Paul made it clear in this passage

SLAVERY

in the Roman World

Slavery was widespread in the Roman Empire by Paul's day. Most slaves got that way by being born to slaves. Others lost their freedom when they became prisoners of war or were kidnapped by pirates and sold to slave traders. Some people even sold themselves into slavery.

Slaves were generally treated well. Most were well fed and well clothed. They had the right to have families, control their own money, and defend themselves in court. Many were educated at their owner's expense, and some held posts of importance. Because of their security, slaves were often better off than poor free people, many of whom lived in the streets.

Most owners set their slaves free after a few years. The reason for such an action might be to show gratitude, or to save money, or to make the slaves available for military service. Frequently, masters established their freedmen in business, and then became partners in the business.

Slavery in the Roman world of the first century A.D. was not as bad as it could have been. But it was still slavery. Paul used slavery repeatedly as a symbol of a negative condition.

that children of God have no business promoting ungodly divisions, such as those based on distinctions of race (neither Jew nor Greek), social status (slave nor free), or gender (male nor female). And how did Paul conclude this is possible? It's only because "you are all one in Christ Jesus" (vs. 28).

Ask Yourself . . . *Are there groups of believers with whom I'd just as soon not be united in Christ? If so, why?*

In a world that sinfully presumes to distinguish people's worth by any measure, Christians—of all people—must be exemplary when it comes to practicing equality. If Christ makes no such distinctions, then those who have been clothed in Christ must not do so either.

Furthermore, Jesus commanded His followers to not only love those whom they consider neighbors, but their enemies as well (Matt. 5:43, 44). So while we cannot have true unity with people who don't know Christ, we clearly are called to love them—regardless of race, gender, or any other human distinction.

Significantly, Paul then repeated his teaching that all believers are Abraham's children and heirs. In Paul's Epistle to the Romans, he explained how it is that anyone can claim this inheritance of righteousness: by faith (Rom. 4:1-5). Only in the setting of faith in Christ can the world witness true peace and unity.

Ask Yourself . . . *What worldly divisions, if any, do I help perpetuate?*

b Children, Not Slaves (4:1-7)

You are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir. —Galatians 4:7

In order to drive home his point concerning the status of the believer in Christ, Paul used one more illustration based on customs of his day. In the previous verses, Paul contrasted what believers were before they received Christ with what they had become. In these opening verses of chapter 4, Paul brought the issue to a climax as he compared the status of a slave with that of a son.

Paul established a hypothetical situation in which a father apparently died, leaving behind a young son, a minor, as the heir of his father's estate. The estate actually belonged to the child, but he could not control it until he reached the age specified by the father in the trust.

The child was subject to "guardians and trustees" (vs. 2), or tutors and managers, who were in complete control of the child. As far as having freedom to act and decide on his own, the child was no different from a slave.

Paul took the child's "slavery" as symbolic of our spiritual slavery before coming to faith in Christ. We were enslaved to the "elemental spiritual forces of the world" (vs. 3). Much debate has centered on what Paul meant by the "elemental

Coming of Age

In modern Western society, "coming of age" for a child has lost much of the significance it held in ancient times.

In ancient Judaism, a Jewish boy became a *bar mitzvah* ("son of the law") shortly after his 12th birthday. At that point his manhood was recognized. The event was accompanied by a somber religious ritual and a joyous celebration and time of merrymaking. (Modern Judaism has retained much of this ancient tradition.)

Among the Greeks, a boy came of age at about 18. This recognition came at a festival called the *Apatouria*, when he symbolically passed from his father's care to that of the state.

Under Roman law, the father seems to have been allowed to set the time of his son's maturity. This moment was celebrated at a sacred family festival known as the *Liberalia*, held annually on the 17th day of March. During this ceremony the son was formally adopted by his father as his heir.

Paul may have had this Roman custom in mind, for he indicated that the time of the son's maturity was set by the father (Gal. 4:2).

spiritual forces of the world." To list just three suggestions by Bible scholars, Paul may have been referring to the law, to angels and demons, or to the superstitions of heathen religions. Whatever he meant by this, Paul was underscoring the enslaved status of a person before receiving Christ's Gospel of grace.

But onto that dark and dreary scene of slavery, Paul shone the glorious light of freedom in Christ. With great care, Paul gave his statement about Christ's coming (vs. 4). In His sovereign freedom, God chose the moment for His Son's birth. It was the climax toward which the divine plan had been moving throughout the ages. All that happened in the coming of Christ, in His earthly ministry, and in His death was under the most precise scrutiny of the Father.

Indirectly, Paul affirmed Christ's virgin birth ("born of a woman," not of man) and His obedience to the law ("born under law"). In the fullest sense of the word, God became sinless man in the person of His Son so that He might identify with us. In Christ's death

on the cross, He accomplished His purpose in providing redemption for all those “under the law” (vs. 5). He shared the curse of the law with all of us (3:13) and became the eternal sacrifice for our sins. The word translated “redeem” (4:5) literally refers to a ransom or payment. Christ bought us out of our slavery.

Returning to his earlier theme, Paul brought the illustration to a climax by describing those who have received Christ as having received their full inheritance. This is more than just a legal maneuver in which repenting sinners are adopted into God’s family as children. We receive “the Spirit of his Son” (vs. 6). We actually share the life of God in our daily experience.

This new relationship revolutionizes our prayer lives. We approach the Father, not as slaves—apologetic and fearful. Rather, we who have experienced this new freedom in Christ come as children of the King. “Abba, Father” (vs. 6; see also Rom. 8:15) is an address of love and intimacy reserved for children who are fully aware of their standing with their father.

Ask Yourself . . . *Do my prayers reflect my intimacy with the heavenly Father?*

Galatians 4:7 sums up Paul’s argument. The Galatians were no longer slaves to the basic principles of the world, but now were children of God and heirs of God.

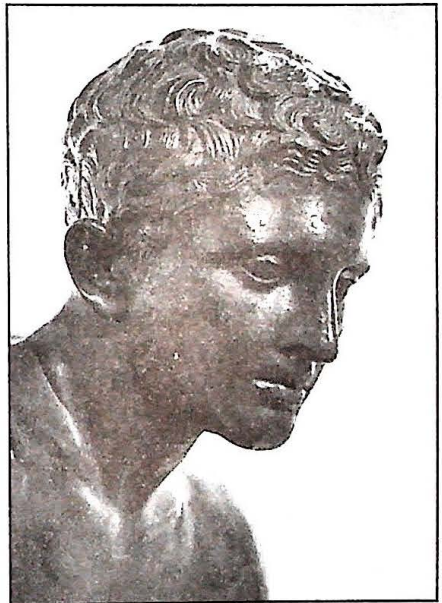
The same is true of all believers. God loves us as His children and will give us all good things.

C Turning Back to Former Ways (4:8-11)

Now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable forces?

—Galatians 4:9a

Paul was finished with his formal arguments against the efforts of the Judaizers to enslave the Galatian believers again under the requirements of the Mosaic law. But he



Hermes was one of the pagan gods the Galatian Christians may have worshiped before being known by God (Gal. 4:9). This bronze statue of Hermes was sculpted by Lysippus.

could not leave the subject without one more rather lengthy appeal to the Galatians.

Dwelling on the past can be unhealthy, especially if it resurrects guilt over sins that have already been forgiven. But there are times when reflecting on our past can cause us to appreciate more fully our present blessings. Already Paul had reminded the Gentile believers in Galatia that they were children and heirs of God. But lest they take for granted the favored status that was theirs as members of God's family, he asked them to remember their former religious experiences.

Before becoming Christians, most of the Galatians had followed pagan religions. These religions involved

praying to and offering sacrifices to statues representing the 12 major and many minor gods and goddesses. Most cities of the Roman Empire had shrines and temples dedicated to these gods. Inside the shrines and temples were statues of the gods, before which the pagans worshiped.

Ask Yourself . . . *What did I worship before coming to Christ?*

Paul said the pagan gods "by nature are not gods" (vs. 8). In other words, Paul denied that they had reality. However, pagan worshippers believed that they were real, and this belief made the worshippers "slaves" to the false gods.

Now, however, the Galatians knew God (vs. 9). This does not

Jewish Religious Calendar

March	April	May	June
NISAN	IYAR	SIVAN	
14 <i>Passover</i>		6 <i>Pentecost</i>	
15-21 <i>Unleavened Bread</i>			
Sept.	October	November	Dec.
TISHRI	HESHVAN	KISLEV	
1-2 <i>Trumpets</i>		25 <i>Dedication</i>	
10 <i>Atonement</i>			
15-21 <i>Tabernacles</i>			

Other Jewish holy times included sabbaths, new moons,

from the bondage of sin.

Paul was distressed to learn that these Galatians, so soon after he had led them to know Christ and to experience His saving grace, were deeply involved in observing ceremonies (vs. 10). They had become fanatical in keeping the Jewish religious holidays—"days and months and seasons and years." The problem with these observances was the temptation to think that by honoring them, one had done one's duty to God. They can't take the place of faith.

Paul's disappointment because of what the Galatians had done reached rock bottom when he was

almost, but not quite, ready to say that his time with the Galatians had been wasted (vs. 11). But the word "somehow" is very important. It was Paul's way of saying that, in spite of his deep concern, and however close he may have come to giving up on them, he had not done so. Thus with new resolve, Paul was ready to do everything in his power to see them brought back to their spiritual senses.

Ask Yourself . . . *Is it possible that any of my Christian teachers feel their efforts are wasted on me?*

5

Free to Be Zealous for Grace

Galatians 4:12-31

a The Power of Paul's Example (4:12-16)

I plead with you, brothers and sisters, become like me, for I became like you.

—Galatians 4:12a

Last week's Bible passages ended with this statement of Paul's: "I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you" (vs. 11). Paul was in a nostalgic mood, thinking back to his earlier relations with the Galatian Christians.

That nostalgia continues in this week's first passage (vss. 12-16). Paul recalled the unusual circumstances of his first meeting with the Galatians. In contrast with the warm reception he had received from them at that time, their present rejection of his teaching saddened and puzzled him.

While staying with the Galatians, Paul had abandoned strict Jewish practices, living like a Gentile, so as to put no obstacle between the Galatians and the Gospel (vs. 12). And now, of all things, the Galatians were trying to live like Jews! Paul conceded that the Galatian believers

had not wronged him personally by switching to a lifestyle centered on the law. Yet for their sakes, he appealed to them to become as he was; that is, like him they should live by grace and not by law.

An illness was the reason Paul first preached among the Galatians (vs. 13). Probably his illness had caused him to detour into Galatia for treatment and recovery or had kept him in that area longer than he had planned. Of course, this change of Paul's plans was a part of God's plan all along.

The nature of Paul's illness is not known. Suggestions range from malaria, contracted along the mosquito-infested coastal plain, to some form of eye disease. The latter suggestion is based on Paul's statement that the Galatians would have given him their eyes if they could have (vs. 15). But this statement may merely mean that the Galatians would have gone to any length to help him. In ancient times the eyes were often considered the most precious parts of the body.

Whatever the nature of the illness, it had been a trial to the Galatians (vs. 14). They had been tempted to reject Paul, probably either because

his care put a burden upon them or because they viewed sickness as divine disapproval. Yet the Galatians had resisted the temptation to treat him with contempt or scorn.

Ask Yourself . . . *Do I try to avoid sick people?*

Paul's Afflictions

Paul was a remarkably hardy man. During his approximately 35 years of ministry, he survived very many hardships. For instance, one time he was stoned and left for dead, but afterward he got up and went on his way (Acts 14:19, 20). A partial catalog of his afflictions—including imprisonment, flogging, lashing, beating, stoning, shipwreck, sleep deprivation, hunger, and thirst—is contained in 2 Corinthians 11:23-27.

In the same letter, Paul said he had been given "a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me" (12:7). This apparently was another physical affliction.

By now we cannot know if the thorn in the flesh or one of Paul's other recorded afflictions was the "illness" he recalled in his Letter to the Galatians (4:13, 14). We can be certain, however, that this illness was only one of a great number of times Paul suffered physically.

Far from treating Paul contemptuously or scornfully, the Galatians had received him with hospitality, as they would have received an angel or even Christ Himself, doing all they could for Paul. He was a messenger from God, and they had treated him as such.

The Galatians make excellent models for today's Christian hosts and hostesses. When visiting missionaries, traveling evangelists, or other Christians come to our churches, we should make them feel comfortable and wanted, receiving them as valued members of our own spiritual family. Hospitality is a virtue that never goes out of style.

Ask Yourself . . . *Do I view hospitality as a trial or as a joy?*

Remembering his excellent first reception among the Galatians, Paul was disappointed to contrast that memory with the way the Galatians were now receiving him and his teachings (vss. 15, 16). Paul had not changed; he was still telling them the truth. But they were acting differently. They had lost their joy. And since they had allied themselves with the Judaizers, Paul feared he had become something like an enemy to them.

b The Wrong Kind of Zeal (4:17-20)

Those people are zealous to win you over, but for no good. What they want is to alienate you from us, so that you may have zeal for them.
—Galatians 4:17

The difference between the way the Galatians had received Paul in the past and the way they received his message in the present could be traced directly to the Judaizers. So Paul called attention to the Judaizers' manner and motive.

Paul saw the situation in Galatia in terms of zeal. The Judaizers' manner was zealous, and their motive was to transfer the Galatians' own zeal from Paul to themselves (vs. 17).

Zeal is not bad (vs. 13), but zeal can be misdirected. Paul knew this from his own experience. Before his conversion he had been intensely zealous for the Jewish religious traditions (Acts 22:3) and for the destruction of the Christian Church (Phil. 3:6).

Paul also knew personally about the proper kind of zeal. After his conversion he was zealous to share his newfound faith with the world and to safeguard those whom he had introduced to Christ.

Ask Yourself . . . *What am I zealous about?*

The Galatians were zealous too. Apparently when Paul was with

GOOD & BAD

Kinds of Zeal

In the Letter to the Galatians, Paul taught that zeal may be good or bad, depending on its purpose (4:18). Here are a couple of similar statements in other letters by Paul:

- "The Israelites . . . are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge" (Rom. 10:1, 2).

- "Since you are eager [zealous] for gifts of the Spirit, try to excel in those that build up the church" (2 Cor. 14:12).

them, they had been zealous for his ideas. But when he was away from them, they became zealous for the ideas of the Judaizers. Paul wanted them to have zeal for the Gospel whether he was with them or not. Consistency of behavior, regardless of whether one is supervised, is a mark of maturity.

The impression left by Paul's analysis of the Galatian situation is that there was a lot of enthusiasm in the churches, but not all the enthusiasm was appropriate. The same situation can exist in Christian churches today. Our emotions may be aroused by some aspects of worship. But if these emotions are not controlled by sound knowledge of biblical truth and by well developed integrity, they can easily be used to lead us away from a godly course. Because of their spiritual immaturity, the Galatians may have been especially vulnerable to being misled.

Paul often referred to people who had been converted under his ministry as his sons and daughters; for him, evangelism was spiritual childbirth. In the case of the Galatians, he felt as though he were having to endure birth pangs a second time (Gal. 4:19). In other words, they had gone so far backward spiritually because of the Judaizers that Paul virtually had to start from scratch with them. The truth that Christians are free in Christ and not under the law is hardly an advanced concept. The Galatians should have accepted this truth as a matter of course and moved on, but they had not.

In this passage Paul used the childbirth imagery in an unusual double way. Not only was Paul giving birth to the Galatians, but also Christ was being formed within the Galatians as a child is formed in his or her mother. However, the Galatians needed more time for Christ to be fully formed (for them to more fully mature in Him). This may very well mean that, in Paul's view, they were still far from being truly Christlike.

For whatever reason, Paul was not able to visit the Galatian congregations at this time (vs. 20). He felt, though, that if he were with them, he could more effectively deal with their problems and could clear up many of his questions.

We, however, can be grateful that Paul was not immediately able to go to them. Otherwise, we would not have the Letter to the Galatians.

C A Lesson from the Law (4:21-23)

It is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. His son by the slave woman was born according to the flesh, but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a divine promise.

—Galatians 4:22, 23

After making a fervent personal appeal (vss. 12-20), Paul capped his

theological argument with a final scriptural lesson (vss. 21-31). The Galatians seemed eager to take upon themselves the burden of keeping the law. So Paul thought an argument based on passages in books of the law would help bring them around to his side (vs. 21).

Probably the Judaizers in Galatia had used historical and geographical features in an allegory to support their own position. The Judaizers' argument may have run something like this: "Isaac, not Ishmael, was the

true son of Abraham. Isaac's descendants, the Jews, were given the law and operate true religion from Jerusalem. Consequently, you Gentile converts to Christianity must ally yourselves with us Jews by obeying the law if you want to receive God's blessings on Abraham's descendants.

"Furthermore, you should listen to the teachings of Jewish Christians from Jerusalem rather than to the teachings of Paul. Paul is like Ishmael; his teaching is okay as far as

A Study in

Contrasts

Hagar

Sarah

Ishmael

Isaac

ordinary birth

promised birth

old covenant

new covenant

Mount Sinai

Mount Zion*

present Jerusalem

Jerusalem above

slavery

freedom

Jews

Christians

Judaizers' gospel

Paul's Gospel

it goes, but it doesn't go far enough. We are like Isaac; our teaching that you must keep the law as well as believe in Christ is the complete Gospel."

Evidently this argument sounded plausible to the Galatians. They had at least partly accepted it.

Ask Yourself . . . *How vulnerable am I to believing clever misinterpretations of Scripture?*

The Judaizers were not the only ones who could argue on the basis of historical and geographical features. Paul could do so too. But his argument would come to a much different conclusion.

Paul began with the same historical incidents that (presumably) the Judaizers began with (vss. 22, 23). These incidents are recorded in Genesis 16; 17:15-21; and 21:1-21.

Abraham and his wife, Sarah, reached old age without producing children. God promised Abraham that he would have many descendants, but Sarah and Abraham grew impatient waiting for God to fulfill the promise. So they agreed that Abraham should have sexual intercourse with Sarah's slave woman, Hagar. This he did, and Hagar bore him a son named Ishmael. Ishmael was not, however, the son God had promised.

Several years later, Sarah finally bore a son, Isaac. This boy was the son God had promised. Sarah, fearing that Ishmael rather than Isaac would receive their father's inheritance, drove Hagar and Ishmael away.

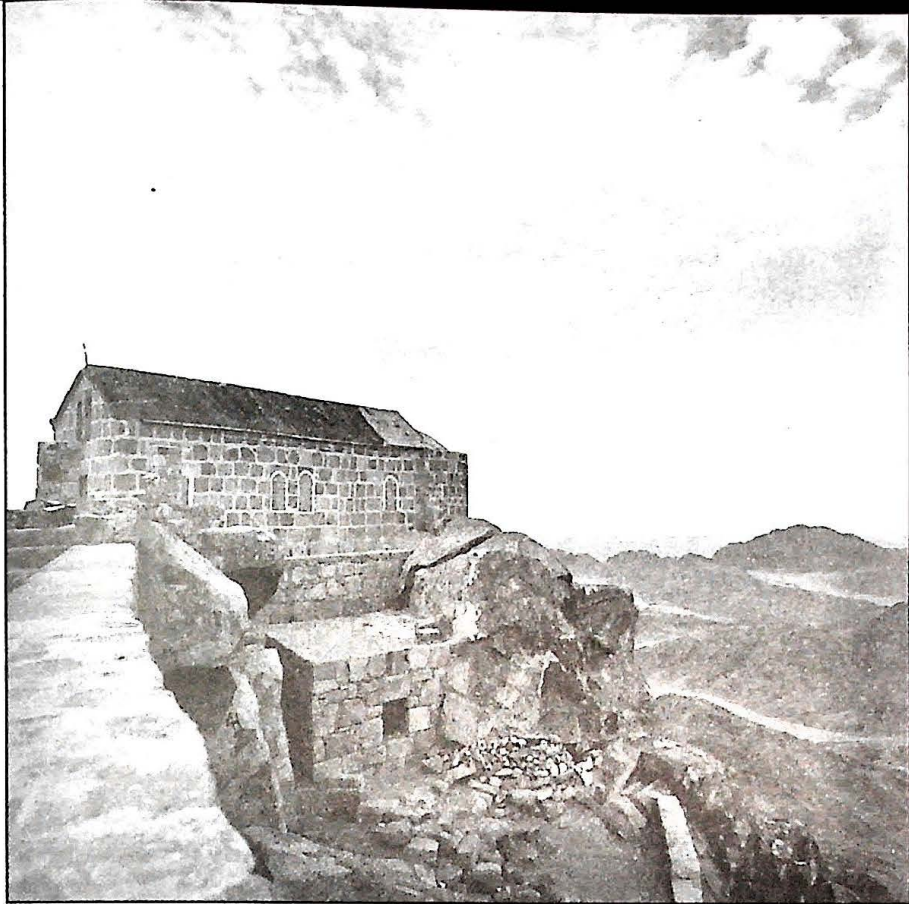
As we will see, Paul based an elaborate argument on the two sons.

d **An Allegory of Slavery and Freedom (4:24-31)**

Brothers and sisters, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman. —Galatians 4:31

Paul's treatment of historical and geographical features from the Bible is allegorical ("taken figuratively," vs. 24). This does not mean Paul questioned the historical accuracy of the Old Testament. Rather, it means he saw in the ancient writings a spiritual meaning that went beyond the stories themselves.

During the Israelites' wanderings in the wilderness, they stopped at Mount Sinai (Exod. 19). There God entered into a covenant with them and gave them the law. It was this law that the Jewish Christian Judaizers from Jerusalem were trying to enforce on the Galatians. Paul considered Hagar's literal slavery to be symbolic of the spiritual slavery caused by the law given at Mount Sinai (Gal. 4:24, 25). Hagar also corresponds to the Jerusalem of Paul's day. That's because Jerusalem was the center of the Jewish religion and the hometown of the Judaizers. Paul personified the city of Jerusalem and said she was enslaved with her children, meaning the Jews.



A small chapel now occupies the summit of the mountain identified as Mount Sinai.

They were still enslaved to the law because they had not found freedom in Christ.

Christians, on the other hand, are the children of another mother: the Jerusalem that is above. This mother is free (vs. 26). Paul quoted Isaiah 54:1 to show how this heavenly Jerusalem can be said to be the mother of all Christians (Gal. 4:27).

Isaiah prophesied of the enslavement of the people of Jerusalem and Judah in Babylon. During that time, Jerusalem would be "barren"

(would be largely empty of people), as Sarah was literally barren before conceiving Isaac.

But Isaiah also prophesied of a later time when Jerusalem would have many children (would once again have inhabitants). In the same way, the Jerusalem above would have many children. In other words, many people would come into the Church. This is similar to God's promise to give Abraham many descendants.

Ask Yourself . . . *Am I helping to bring people into the Church?*

The Galatian Christians, as well as all Gentile and Jewish Christians, are the fulfillment of this prophecy. Thus the Galatians were like Isaac and the Judaizers were like Ishmael.

Paul said Ishmael persecuted Isaac (vs. 29). Probably he was referring to the event described in Genesis 21:9.

Then he said, "It is the same now." He may have been referring to the general persecution of Christians by unbelieving Jews in his day (see Acts 13:44, 45; 14:2, 19, 20). Paul compared this persecution to the Judaizers' persecution of the Gentile Galatian believers. In Paul's eyes the Judaizers' teaching that the Galatians needed to obey the law if

they were to find acceptance by God amounted to persecution.

When Sarah saw Ishmael persecuting her son, she urged Abraham to eject Hagar and Ishmael (Gen. 21:10; Gal. 4:30). When Abraham hesitated, God's words indicated that it would be all right for him to let the mother and boy go (Gen. 21:12). According to Paul, the Galatians could see this as an assurance of being free from the persecution.

Galatians 4:31 contains Paul's main point in developing the allegory. While the Judaizers may have taught that the Galatians were children of the slave woman unless they obeyed the law, Paul said the Galatians were children of the free woman already. By God's grace, they were free. So are all who believe in Christ.



Free to Be in Christ

Galatians 5

a Don't Turn Back to Slavery (5:1-6)

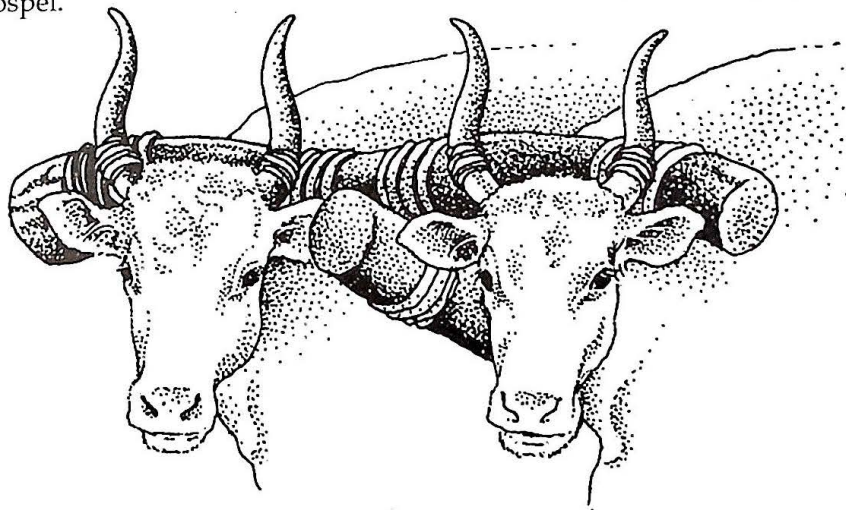
It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

—Galatians 5:1

Thus far in the letter, Paul defended the Gospel of grace on personal and theological grounds. In the remainder of the letter his emphasis falls on practical implications of the Gospel.

The first passage of this lesson leads off with a powerful pronouncement of liberty: "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free" (vs. 1a). Christ has not set us free so that we would be enslaved again; He set us free to be free!

And with freedom comes responsibility. While the Galatians could not have set themselves free (Christ did that for them), Paul said they had the duty to resist being enslaved again (vs. 1b). The Judaizers were trying to place on their shoulders the yoke of obedience to the law. But Christians should stand



Paul used a yoke to symbolize the spiritual slavery of legalism.

firm as free people, not be weighed down under burdens like oxen.

One might ask why Paul called the Galatians' subjection to the law being burdened "again"; they were Gentiles, and had not been under the law before. Probably Paul again had in mind the "elemental spiritual forces of the world" (4:3). To Paul, unbelieving Jews and pagans were all under the domination of the "elemental spiritual forces." Thus for former pagans to turn from Christianity to legalism was, in effect, to return to slavery under the elemental spiritual forces.

Although the Galatians had begun observing the Jewish religious holidays and perhaps had assumed other aspects of the law at the instigation of the Judaizers, they apparently had not yet submitted to circumcision. They were, however, contemplating this move.

Paul tried to convince the Galatians not to accept circumcision by warning them of two negative consequences of the step.

The first negative consequence was that Christ would "be of no value to you at all" (vs. 2). Circumcision was a symbol of submission to the law. If the Galatians looked to the law for righteousness in their lives, they could not also be looking to Christ for righteousness.

The second negative consequence of being circumcised was that they would be "obligated to obey the whole law" (vs. 3; compare Jas. 2:10). The law is a package. If they were to try to obey some parts of it, they would have to try to obey all

of it. But they had better not expect righteousness on that basis, since no one can perfectly keep the law.

Although the Galatians had not yet submitted to circumcision, they had already begun looking to the law for righteousness. Thus they had already "been alienated from Christ" and had already "fallen away from grace" (Gal. 5:4). These two statements mean about the same thing. Grace comes through Christ, and the Galatians had begun to center their lives on the law rather than on Christ. By moving away from Christ, they were moving away from the source of grace.

In verses 5 and 6 we find Paul's description of the proper attitude toward gaining righteousness. Believers receive righteousness through faith in Christ. Circumcision has nothing to do with it.

From what we have read, we might assume that Paul thought circumcision in itself was evil. But that is not the case. At one time he even circumcised Timothy (Acts 16:1-3). But Paul did so because Timothy was half-Jewish and Paul thought circumcision would make Timothy more acceptable to Jews. Paul was indifferent toward circumcision itself, but he strongly opposed circumcision performed out of a misguided idea that it was a means to righteousness.

It is not the act of circumcision that matters, but the acts of love—acts that flow from faith in Christ.

Ask Yourself . . . *How do I express my faith through love?*

b Who Is Preaching the Truth? (5:7-12)

Brothers and sisters, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been abolished.

—Galatians 5:11

In a day before the popular events of football, baseball, and basketball, track-and-field events drew huge crowds. Most cities in the Roman Empire had a large, oval stadium where footracing and other athletic events were held.

Paul often referred to the Christian life in athletic terms (for examples, see 1 Cor. 9:24-27; 1 Tim. 6:12; 2 Tim. 2:5). He did so again in the Letter to the Galatians. He compared his readers to runners in a race, and he compared the Judaizers to unfair competitors who had cut in on them, causing them to break their stride (Gal. 5:7).

Ask Yourself . . . *How well do I seem to be running in my race of faith?*

Undoubtedly, the Judaizers claimed their

message came from God. But Paul denied this (vs. 8). His true Gospel, but not their false gospel, came from the Lord.

Verse 9 quotes a popular proverb of Paul's day: "A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough." This proverb fits the Galatian situation perfectly. False teaching, like yeast, spreads and affects everything it touches. Consequently, all the Christians of Galatia were in danger

Circumcision

Circumcision has been practiced for thousands of years by many people around the world, especially those in the Near East. God chose this practice as a sign to mark those males who were in covenant with Him.

Hebrew circumcision began with Abraham (Gen. 17:10-14) and was formalized in the law of Moses (Lev. 12:3).

Over time, some Jews began to see circumcision, not as a sign of a relationship with God, but as the means to a relationship with Him. This overvaluation of circumcision carried into the early church. Paul's opinion was that while Jews were free to decide whether to circumcise themselves and their sons, no one should try to force Gentile Christians to be circumcised.

because of the Judaizers' doctrine.

The situation looked grim, yet "in the Lord" (vs. 10), or by faith, Paul was optimistic that the Galatians would come around to his view. Furthermore, he believed that those responsible for the problem would suffer God's judgment.

Apparently the Judaizers had claimed that Paul himself preached circumcision. They may have based this claim on the fact that Paul did not object to Jews living according to the law. But Paul answered their claim by saying that though once (before his conversion) he had advocated circumcision for all, he no longer did (vs. 11).

Paul offered a proof and a reason for his counterclaim. As a proof, Paul pointed to his persecution by the Judaizers. Obviously, if he agreed with them, they would not be persecuting him. As a reason, Paul said he did not preach circumcision anymore because that would nullify Christ's work on the cross. The cross is offensive to Jewish law, yet is the source of life for all who believe.

Ask Yourself . . . *Have I ever tried to remove the offense of the cross from my words or life?*

Paul concluded this section with a sharp and perhaps even crude statement telling just how he felt about the Judaizers (vs. 12). Yet crude as it may be, this statement came out of Paul's belief that circumcision had no religious significance for Christians and that when it was forced on Gentile converts, it amounted only to bodily damage.

C Right and Wrong Uses of Freedom (5:13-18)

You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love.
—Galatians 5:13

The threat of the Judaizers was the biggest problem in the Galatian churches, but it was not the only one. Between 5:13 and 6:10 we see that the Galatians had a problem with immorality, too. Presumably this had been a problem for them much longer than the problem caused by the Judaizers.

Many of Paul's churches in Gentile territories had a problem with immorality. Coming out of pagan cultures, converts had a difficult time adjusting to Christian morality. The Galatians seem to have been particularly troubled by selfishness and disregard for one another.

Having stressed Christian freedom strongly, Paul felt he had better make sure the Galatians knew this freedom was not a license to sin. They were not to use their freedom to indulge their sinful nature but to serve one another in love (5:13).

Note the irony in Paul's argument. He had urged the Galatians not to become slaves to the law. They were free in Christ. But free for what? Free to become slaves of one another! The word

Flesh & Spirit

One of the most frequently used words in Paul's Greek vocabulary was *sarx*, literally "flesh." It occurs 17 times in Galatians.

Paul gave the word a number of meanings, such as "body" (Gal. 2:20) and "flesh" (3:3). But its seven occurrences between 5:13 and 6:8 are all in an ethical context. That's why the NIV translates the word as "sinful nature."

By giving *sarx* an ethical meaning, the apostle did not mean that the human body is evil. Instead, he meant that ever since the Fall, human nature is corrupt, or sinful.

Paul often placed "flesh" in opposition to "Spirit." That's because when the Holy Spirit comes into a person's life, He begins transforming the person's nature from one that is dominated by sin to one that desires to please God.

"serve" in verse 13 is a strong one often used of slavery.

Next, Paul stated that when Christians love and serve others, we actually are fulfilling the essence of the law, which is to "love your neighbor as yourself" (vs. 14; compare Mark 12:28-31). Paul meant that God's people are closest to pleasing Him and keeping His commandments when we love our neighbors as much as we love ourselves.

The Galatians needed this reminder of the importance of love, since they were "biting and devouring each other" like wild beasts (Gal. 5:15). We don't know the causes of strife in the Galatian churches, but the strife was serious enough for Paul to warn the Galatians that they might destroy each other.

Still today, disputes within a church fellowship, if not resolved in love, can seriously damage the spiritual welfare of the church's members.

It's not easy to go from fighting one another to loving one another. But that is possible if we walk by the Spirit (vs. 16). The Spirit makes it possible for us to resist our sinful nature, which leads us to cause strife and to commit sins.

We may want to do good, but if we obey the wishes of our sinful human nature, we will not do good (vs. 17). We can do good only if we live by the Spirit. Our sinful nature and the Spirit are in opposition to each other with different goals.

When we are led by the Spirit, we do not do the evil prompted by our sinful nature, and neither are we under the law (vs. 18). Presumably the Judaizers had told the Galatians that if they did not obey the law, the only other option was to obey their own sinful nature. Paul said there is a third option. We can obey the Spirit.

Ask Yourself . . . *How good am I at hearing the call of the Holy Spirit?*

d Vices and Virtues (5:19-26)

Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.

—Galatians 5:24, 25

Until now, Paul had talked generally about how it's wrong to indulge one's sinful nature and about how it's right to live by the Spirit. Now he got specific about what he meant by indulging the sinful nature and about what he meant by living by the Spirit. He also described the negative consequences of indulging

the sinful nature and the positive benefits of living by the Spirit.

According to Paul, the acts of the sinful nature are "obvious" (vs. 19). This probably means that it is plain to see that these acts are wrong, even without the aid of the Old Testament law. Also, it is obvious that these acts spring from the sinful nature.

Paul listed 15 sinful acts to represent all the ways people do evil (vss. 19-21). The representative nature of the catalog is made clear by his addition of "and the like" at the end (vs. 21). Many sinful acts did not make Paul's list, but that makes them no less sinful.

Paul may not have intended to list the 15 sinful acts in any particular order. But they seem to fall into four categories. The list includes three vices of sensuality (sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery), two vices associated with heathen religions (idolatry, witchcraft), eight vices of interpersonal conflict (hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, envy), and two vices related to the misuse of alcohol (drunkenness, orgies).

Ask Yourself . . . *Have I recently committed any of the "acts of the sinful nature" Paul listed?*

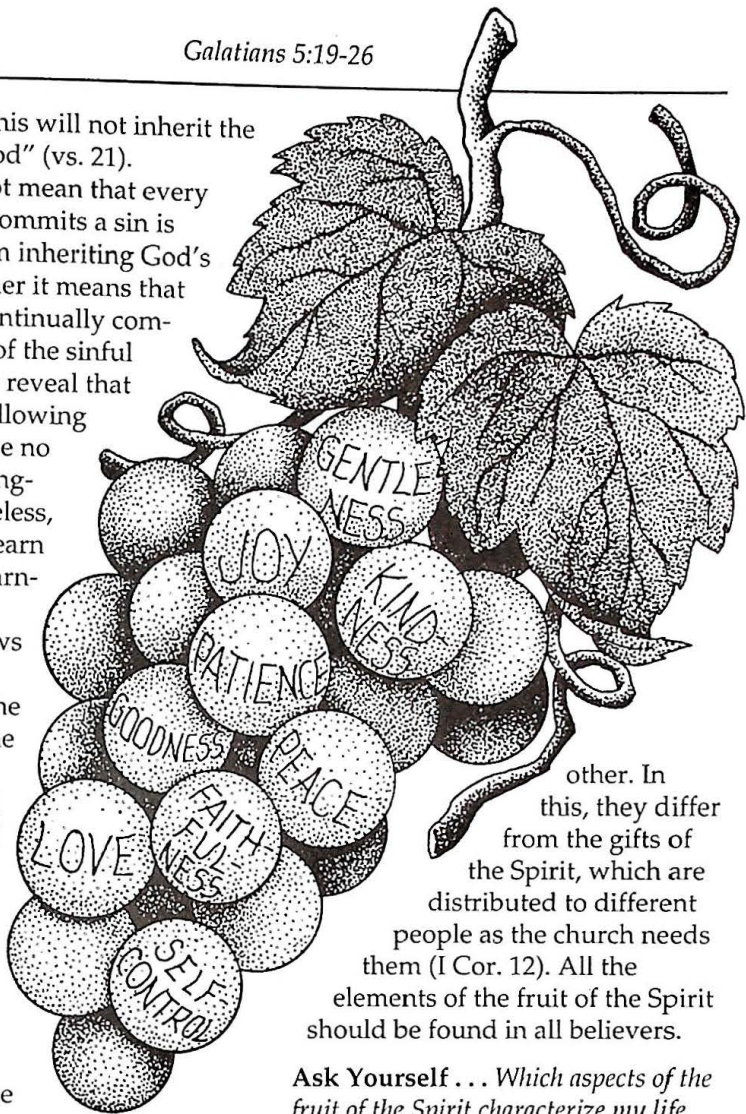
The acts of the sinful nature that Paul listed are highly varied. But they all are alike in arousing God's wrath. So Paul warned his readers about the consequences of these acts. As Paul had told the Galatians earlier when he was with them, "Those

who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God" (vs. 21).

This does not mean that every believer who commits a sin is prevented from inheriting God's kingdom. Rather it means that people who continually commit these acts of the sinful nature thereby reveal that they are not following Christ and have no place in His kingdom. Nevertheless, believers can learn from Paul's warning how seriously God views human sin.

To balance the list of acts of the sinful nature, Paul presented a list of fruit of the Spirit (vss. 22, 23a). This list, too, is representative rather than complete. The items mentioned are some of the effects appearing in the lives of those in whom the Spirit of God dwells.

Paul used a singular word for "fruit." He could have said "fruits," but he didn't. He may have wanted to suggest that the aspects of the fruit of the Spirit develop and grow together like a bunch of grapes. They are not separate pieces of fruit existing independently of each



other. In this, they differ from the gifts of the Spirit, which are distributed to different people as the church needs them (I Cor. 12). All the elements of the fruit of the Spirit should be found in all believers.

Ask Yourself . . . Which aspects of the fruit of the Spirit characterize my life right now?

The law contained a curse against those who failed to keep it. But that curse does not apply to those who are bearing the fruit of the Spirit, because they are thereby fulfilling the law (Gal. 5:23b).

Non-Christians are not able to bear the fruit of the Spirit because they do not have the Spirit. They are still ruled by their sinful nature and act in

keeping with that nature, seeking to gratify their passions and desires.

But Christians can bear the fruit of the Spirit. We receive the Spirit when we accept Christ, and our sinful nature (in one sense) dies at the moment we believe (vs. 24). That's because Christ earned the right to break sin's power over us when He hung on the cross, and He does just that for us when we believe in Him.

In another sense, of course, the Christian life is a daily process of putting our sinful nature to death. We cooperate with God by letting go of our past sinful lifestyle and taking up a holy way of living.

Similarly, although we already live by the Spirit, we need to diligently keep in step with Him (vs. 25). We are subject neither to the law nor to our own sinful nature but to the Spirit. Marching by His side and not straying, we can be sure our progress is just what God wants it to be.

Paul gave a few specific examples of what he did not mean by keeping in step with the Spirit: being conceited, provoking others, and envying them. Probably these were particular problems in the Galatian churches. They are also some specific kinds of sin that we should avoid.

7

Free to Do Good to All

Galatians 6

a Carrying Burdens (6:1-6)

Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

—Galatians 6:2

Paul had told the Galatians that their freedom was not given to them so that they could indulge their sinful nature. Instead, they were freed to bear the fruit of the Spirit. But "love," "patience," "kindness," and the rest are more than mere words. They are characteristics of attitude and behavior that must be lived out in a world of hard knocks and murky predicaments.

Consequently, in the first ten verses of chapter 6 we find a number of specific instructions about Christian living, combined with warnings and encouragements. The instructions do not spell out all that is expected of those who live by the Spirit. But they do provide some representative examples that can serve as models for us as we make our own decisions.

Probably Paul chose to give the instructions he did because they related to specific problems in the

Galatian churches. Pride, selfishness, and self-indulgence seem to have been common faults among the Galatians.

First, Paul dealt with situations in which believers are "caught in a sin" (vs. 1). The idea behind that phrase is not that the sins of people have been found out by others, but that the sinners let themselves be trapped or enticed by sin.

Once these people's sinning has become public knowledge, Paul said, "you who are spiritual" should help restore them. That is, other members of their church should support and guide those entrapped by sin as they recover from sinful behavior.

Restoration of church members who have sinned can mean different things depending on the situation. Here are some possible steps in restoration: (1) The restorers help those entrapped by sin to recognize the gravity of their offenses, come to a point of true repentance, and confess their sins privately and (if necessary) publicly; (2) The restorers help those who sinned accept God's forgiveness once the ones who sinned have genuinely repented; (3) The restorers

Two Kinds of **Weights**

In his practical instructions to the Christians of Galatia, Paul referred to two kinds of weights.

"Burdens" in Galatians 6:2 translates *bare* [BAR-ay]. This word referred to heavy weights. Paul used it of misfortunes that fall on us and threaten to crush us. He said Christians must help one another bear these burdens of misfortune until the weight has lightened.

"Load" in verse 5 translates *phortion*. This word referred to a traveler's pack. According to Paul, the "pack" all Christians carry is our responsibility before God for our own actions. No one can carry another's load of responsibility.

help the repentant sinners plan strategies to deal with the effects of their sin and to change their behavior; (4) The restorers help the reformed sinners move back into full participation in church life.

This process requires sensitivity on the part of the restorers. Its purpose is to draw sinners toward spiritual healing, not to make them feel bad. Therefore, restoration must be done "gently," not harshly or vindictively. Unless restoration is performed carefully, those who sinned can rebel and fall into worse sin.

This process can also harbor dangers for the restorers. By putting them in a position of moral authority, it may tempt them to feel superior. That's why Paul warned restorers to watch themselves lest they become proud, thus falling into sin themselves. We all have cause for humility.

Next, Paul broadened the area of Christians' concern for each other to include those who suffer all kinds of burdens (vs. 2). These may include grief, illness, and persecution—anything that may hurt or hinder

believers. The tense of the verb translated "carry" indicates that we are to keep on carrying each other's burdens as long as our help is needed.

Ask Yourself . . . *Which of my acquaintances is struggling under a weight that I can help bear?*

By helping to carry others' burdens, we fulfill "the law of Christ." Paul's meaning in this has been subject to many different interpretations. Perhaps he had in mind these words of Jesus: "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another" (John 13:34).

If there was a problem in the churches with believers not helping one another, it was probably due to the pride of those who considered themselves free of such burdens. That would explain why Paul warned against arrogant self-deception (Gal. 6:3). It's not good to imagine ourselves better off than we are.

Helpfully, Paul supplied a defense against pride: self-testing (vs. 4). From time to time it is healthy to assess ourselves honestly. Has our behavior been such that we have just cause to think highly of ourselves?

The real issue is not how we are behaving in comparison with others. What's important is how we look in God's eyes. By measuring ourselves against God's will as revealed in Scripture, we can gain a proper perspective on our failings as well as take satisfaction in what we have

achieved by His grace.

We all carry our own load (vs. 5), meaning we are each individually responsible to God for the way we live our lives. So if we are wise, we will be realistic about where we stand with Him.

Ask Yourself . . . *How often do I think about my responsibility before God for my actions?*

Verse 6 seems to have no direct relation to the verses that come before or after it. Probably Paul slipped in this counsel because Christian teachers in Galatia were not getting the appreciation they deserved.

The phrase "share all good things" bears close inspection.

First, the word "share" indicates that Paul wanted the Galatians to support their teachers because they wanted to, not because they had to. Elsewhere, Paul taught that supporting ministers is a duty (I Cor. 9:7-18). But here he was concerned with attitude; it should be one of willingness (compare 2 Cor. 9:7).

Second, we should note that the phrase "all good things" (Gal. 6:6) is general enough to include both material support, such as a salary and gifts, as well as immaterial support such as prayer and respect.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if Paul's counsel in verse 6 were no longer needed? But it is still needed. Many faithful pastors and other church leaders today are forced to do their work with too little pay and too little cooperation from those whom they serve.

b The Law of the Harvest (6:7-10)

A man reaps what he sows. Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.
—Galatians 6:7b, 8

Restoring sinners gently, carrying others' burdens unselfishly, and supporting teachers generously do not come naturally to us. Our sinful nature says, "Look out for number one. Don't trouble yourself for others. Get them to serve you."

Serving others requires unselfishness and dependence on God's Spirit. But those who don't do the hard work of Christian living had better not kid themselves that God will bless them (vs. 7).

People who perform the acts of the sinful nature rather than bear the fruit of the Spirit won't be rewarded, for "God cannot be mocked." We've learned that parents, teachers, and bosses can sometimes be tricked into giving us what we don't deserve. But that's never true of God. His justice is perfect.

Further—

more, Paul said, there's a simple relationship between how people live and how God judges or rewards them (vs. 8). A farmer who sows barley cannot expect to harvest wheat. And no more so can those who obey the callings of their sinful nature expect to receive eternal life from God. They will earn eternal destruction instead. Happily, however, the opposite of this truth is that if we live by the Spirit, we have eternal life.

Paul feared that the Galatians, who had started well in their Christian faith, were losing enthusiasm for Christian living. The Judaizers' false teachings and the Galatians' own unethical living had weakened their spiritual vitality. So Paul portrayed the reward awaiting the faithful—namely, an intimate and unending relationship with God—as an incentive to renew their efforts at doing good (vs. 9).

This incentive is one we sometimes need too. The longer our Christian lives stretch on, the more likely we are to suffer fatigue and to hear the voice of discouragement whispering in our ears. The apostle Paul him-



self must often have thought, *I can't go on* and *What's the use?* But he persevered to the end, and, with God's help, we can persevere as long as necessary too. The Christian life is not a sprint but a marathon.

Ask Yourself . . . *When was the last time I felt tired of always trying to do what is right?*

God provides strategic opportunities for us to do good to others (vs. 10). We should try to discern these opportunities and eagerly act on them. Helping unbelievers is an excellent way to witness wordlessly to God's goodness. But if anything, we should be more eager to help other Christians, since we are all one family. We should do good to our fellow Christians "especially."



C One Reason to Boast (6:11-15)

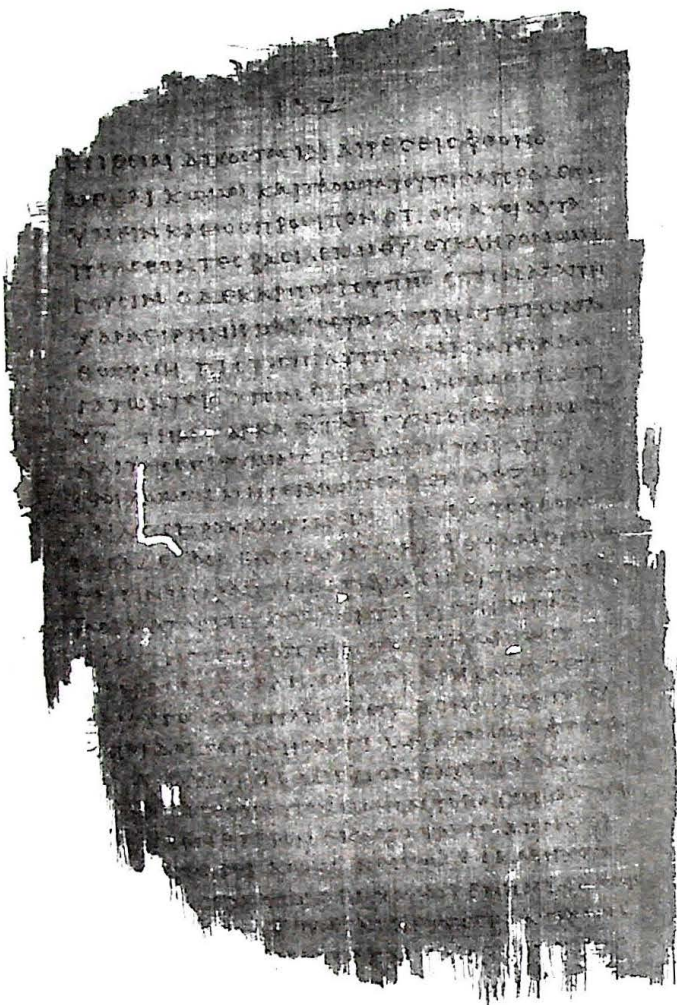
May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.
—Galatians 6:14

With verse 11 of chapter 6, the conclusion of the letter begins. At this point Paul took the pen in hand, bent over the scroll, and wrote the remainder of the letter himself. Under Paul's direction, a companion of his had written everything that came before. This was not unlike the common practice in Paul's day of hiring a professional secretary to write a letter from dictation.

In his other New Testament letters, Paul (it is believed) penned only the signature or a short closing statement. Paul probably had a couple of reasons for personally writing a portion of his letter to the Galatians. First, his handwriting would prove the letter had come from him and no other. Second, he may have hoped his writing would help convince the Galatians his words were important.

This concern for emphasis may also have been behind Paul's writing with "large letters" (vs. 11). Scholars say writing with oversize letters in ancient times was equivalent to the modern practice of underlining or capitalizing words for emphasis.

Writing with his own hand, Paul



The oldest existing manuscript of Paul's letters, designated p46, was made about A.D. 200. Though this page of p46 shows Galatians 6:10-18 (as well as Philippians 1:1), it does not reproduce Paul's original "large letters."

Galatians that they were promoting obedience to the law for the Galatians' own good. But Paul said the Judaizers' motivation was a selfish one. They wanted to "avoid being persecuted" by their fellow Jews (vs. 12). Furthermore, they wanted to be able to "boast" to

Jews (vs. 13).

returned for a final time to the main issue of the letter: the danger from Judaizers. Paul contrasted the Judaizers' motivation (vss. 12, 13) with his own motivation (vss. 14, 15). The Judaizers probably had told the

Paul had been willing to endure persecution from the Jews of Galatia (Acts 13:45, 50; 14:2, 5, 19), but the Judaizers were not willing. They

were trying to enforce Old Testament laws so as to "impress" local Jews (Gal. 6:12). In this way the Judaizers hoped to escape Jewish persecution.

It is always a mistake to dilute the Gospel, even for reasons of self-preservation. When we are tempted to abandon God's truth, let us hold firm and trust in God for our safety.

The Judaizers in Galatia had another intention more blameworthy than self-protection. They wanted to boast to fellow Jews about imposing the Old Testament law on Gentiles (vs. 13). Presumably the Judaizers believed this "success" would raise their own status among people who shared their views.

This ambition was as hypocritical as it was selfish. While trying to impose the law on Gentile Christians, the Judaizers were violating it themselves. In a general sense, of course, all people fail to live up to the law (3:10, 11). But here Paul was probably referring to the Judaizers' use of specific tactics to get around the law, like those described in Mark 7:9-13.

Legalists are much the same today. People who try to impose unnecessary rules on others are often the worst violators of the rules.

The Judaizers wanted to boast about having their way in Galatia. But if Paul carried his point with the Galatians, he would not boast about it. In fact, he hoped never to boast about anything except the cross of Christ (Gal. 6:14).

While the Judaizers found the cross an embarrassment (vs. 12),

Paul gloried in it because by the cross he had died to the "world," and the "world" had died to him. In other words, Jesus' death enabled Paul to be at a distance from sin.

Like all believers, Paul was a new creation through his salvation by grace. This salvation is what matters most—not whether one obeys unnecessary rules (vs. 15). This was Paul's final word on the matter, and it's a powerful one.

Ask Yourself . . . *If I am not a new creation, why shouldn't I ask God for forgiveness and for saving grace right now? If I am a new creation, does my salvation mean as much to me as it should?*

d **A Promise of Peace and Mercy (6:16-18)**

Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule—to the Israel of God.

—Galatians 6:16

Paul had begun the letter with a wish of peace (1:3), and he closed it with the same wish (6:16). In the latter case, though, he combined peace with mercy.

"This rule" was a reference to all Paul had said in the letter about trusting in Christ rather than trusting in the law, and about living by the Spirit rather than indulging the sinful nature. If the Galatians would reject the Judaizers' false gospel and renounce the immoral practices of

their past, then they would know peace and mercy.

Interpreters differ over the meaning of Paul's phrase "the Israel of God." Some say it referred to all people of God. Some say it referred (ironically) to the Judaizers. Some say it referred to Jewish Christians.

After offering a benediction of peace and mercy, Paul interjected a personal appeal (vs. 17). He knew his letter might stir up controversy, so he asked to be spared personal abuse.

He believed he deserved that much respect because he bore "the marks of Jesus" on his body. These marks were the scars from the beatings, stoning, and other tortures he had endured for preaching the

Gospel. These marks were far more meaningful to Paul than the mark of his circumcision.

Ask Yourself . . . *Am I respectful toward those who have suffered for Christ's sake?*

Paul's personal appeal, which was preceded by one benediction, was followed by another. In the second benediction (vs. 18), Paul once more mentioned grace. He could never forget God's grace, which alone is sufficient to meet the needs of sinful humanity.

In his final words Paul called the Galatians his "brothers." Despite all they had done to disappoint him, they were, in his heart, still family to him.

Ephesians

Unlike the Letter to the Galatians, which attacks errors that had crept into some local churches, the Letter to the Ephesians encourages believers to expand their concept of what

God designed the universal church to be. This letter contains language that is majestic and positive. It describes the church as a place where a little bit of heaven is brought down to earth.

Author

Some scholars have questioned Paul's authorship of Ephesians; however, their arguments are unconvincing. As E.F. Scott noted, Ephesians is "marked by a grandeur and originality of thought which seems utterly beyond the reach of any mere imitator" (Moffat New Testament Commentary, p. 136).

To be sure, God's Spirit guided the author of this inspired epistle;

and it seems most reasonable to take the text at face value in its claim to be conveyed by the apostle Paul (Eph. 1:1; 3:1).

In addition, there is a great deal of evidence—perhaps dating as far back as A.D. 95—of this letter's wide circulation. And as early as the second century, the letter's acceptance as being authored by Paul was unquestioned.

Date and Place of Writing

Many authorities date the writing of Ephesians during Paul's imprisonment in Rome, about A.D. 60-62. Paul's references to himself as a "prisoner" (Eph. 3:1; 4:1) and an "ambassador in chains" (6:20) seem to point to this time and place. In Rome, Paul was kept under house arrest, but he had the freedom to receive visitors and to write and send letters (Acts 28:30, 31).

It was during this time that Paul sent Onesimus (Philemon's run-

away slave, recently converted to Christianity) bearing his Epistle to Philemon. It seems likely that along with Onesimus, Paul sent a friend and fellow evangelist named Tychicus (Tich-ih-kuss), who carried a letter to the Colossians along with a more general letter to other churches in the area, including the Ephesian church. Ephesians is probably this same letter that Paul said the Colossian Christians should read "from Laodicea" (Col. 4:16).

Recipients of the Letter

Even though verse 1 states that the letter is addressed to "the saints

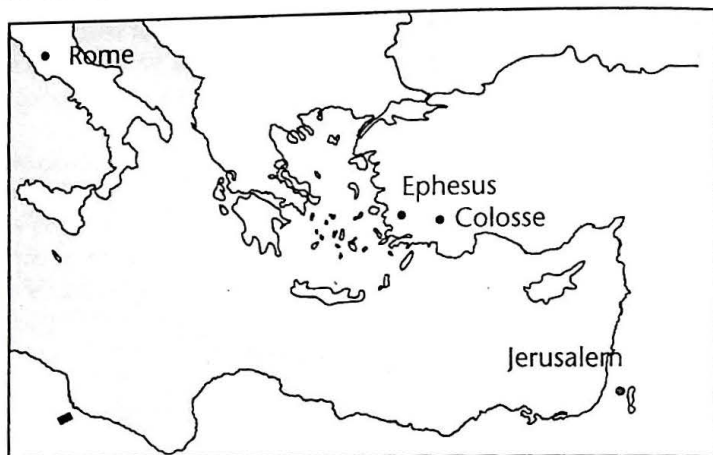
in Ephesus," it is very likely that Paul intended for the church there

to read it and then pass it along to several other churches in the area.

During Paul's lifetime the city of Ephesus was past its prime, due in part to soil erosion and the silting of its harbor. Yet Ephesus remained one of the five leading cities of the Roman world. Commerce was active, and travelers by land and sea passed through Ephesus every day.

The city boasted many fine structures, including a huge temple dedicated to the goddess Diana.

Paul found Ephesus an excellent location for establishing a church that could, in turn, help establish other churches in western Asia Minor (now Turkey). He ministered for roughly three years in Ephesus (Acts 18:19-21; 19:1—20:1, 13-38).



Occasion and Purpose for Writing

While under house arrest in Rome, Paul had the leisure to write many letters, some of which are included in the New Testament. He seems to have written letters to the churches of Ephesus and Colosse, as well as to Philemon of Colosse, at about the same time. Paul's companions Tychicus and Onesimus could have dropped off one letter at Ephesus on their way to delivering the other two in Colosse (Eph. 6:21, 22; Col. 4:7-9; Philem. 10-12). Paul didn't want his imprisonment

to come between him and the Christians he loved.

The Letter to the Ephesians contains two distinct, though related, parts. Chapters 1—3 remind the readers of their privileged status as members of Christ's body, the church, which occupies an important place in God's plan for the universe. Chapters 4—6 appeal to the readers to live in a way consistent with their godly calling rather than conform to the ungodly society in which they live.

8

God's People and God's Plan

Ephesians 1

a Paul's Greeting to the Ephesians (1:1, 2)

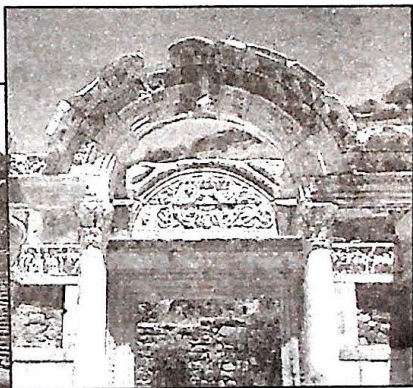
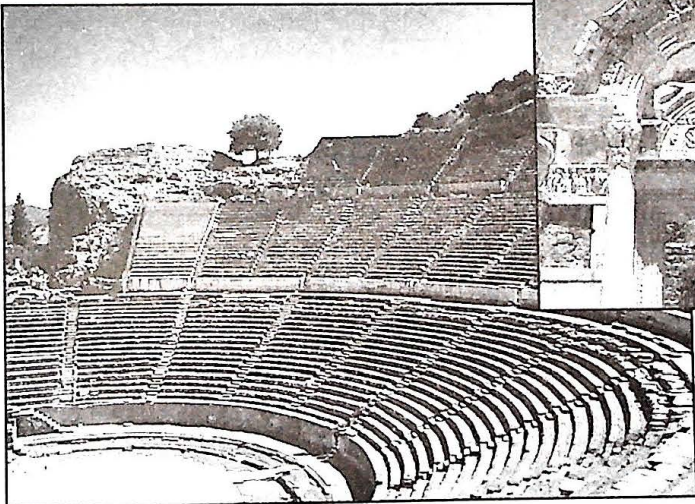
Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. —Ephesians 1:2

When Paul wrote the Letter to the Ephesians, about a decade had passed since he had written the Letter to the Galatians. Much had

changed. Paul was no longer an evangelist on the move; he was a prisoner in Rome. And the church he was now writing to was not opposing him and his teaching; it was a basically sound church that was ready to receive advanced teaching in theology and ethics.

Because of different circumstances, the Letter to the Ephesians is different in many ways from the Letter to the Galatians. Yet the two letters begin similarly. Writing to

Ruins of the Roman theater in Ephesus. It could seat twenty-five thousand spectators.



Hadrian's Temple, Ephesus.

the Ephesians, Paul named himself, named his readers, and wished them grace and peace. We see this same pattern in the Galatian letter.

Just as he did in the Galatian letter, Paul here identified himself as an apostle. Although Paul was always ready to admit his unworthiness to receive grace, he never underrated his role as an apostle, or ambassador, for Christ since it had been given him "by the will of God" (Eph. 1:1).

As verse 1 states, this epistle of Paul's is addressed to "God's holy people in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus." However, Bible scholars have noted that this letter probably was first sent to the church in Ephesus, and then passed around to other churches in the area. (The general nature of most of the letter's teaching may indicate that from the first Paul meant for the letter to be read by more than one congregation.)

Whoever Paul wrote to, he called them "God's holy people." Paul was not addressing certain Christians who were holier than others; he was addressing all his readers. All Christians are holy because Christ has set us apart as His own special people and has made us holy with His own righteousness.

Paul also called his readers "the faithful in Christ Jesus." They were faithful in the sense that they had expressed faith in Christ for their salvation and also in the sense that they were faithfully following Christ.

Ask Yourself . . . *How faithful am I as one who's a part of God's holy people?*

The apostle concluded his greeting with a blessing on his readers (vs. 2). He wished them "grace and peace." The essence of the Gospel is the grace of God given to undeserving people. Peace is the harmony felt by those in a restored relationship with God.

b Praise for Spiritual Blessings (1:3-10)

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.
—Ephesians 1:3

Ordinarily in his letters, Paul immediately followed up his greeting to his readers with thanksgiving for them. In this letter, however, he delayed the thanksgiving. After the greeting he praised God (vss. 3-14).

Paul praised God for the spiritual blessings He has given to Christ's followers (vs. 3). God has blessed us, among other ways, by choosing us (vss. 4-6), by redeeming us (vss. 7, 8), and by revealing His plan to us (vss. 9, 10).

God often blesses His people materially as well as spiritually, but Paul here chose to focus on spiritual blessings (vs. 3). These blessings are certain, since they have been secured for us in "the heavenly

realms." They flow from God the Father, through Jesus Christ, to us.

The first spiritual blessing Paul mentioned is that God "chose us" (vs. 4) and "predestined us" (vs. 5). These terms are parallel but have different shades of meaning. Just as God chose the Jewish nation to be His own and to receive as an inheritance the promised land, so He chose Christian believers to be His own people and to receive the inheritance of eternal life.

God chose believers "to be holy and blameless in his sight" (vs. 4). To be holy means to be distinctly different from the world so that God can use us for His purposes. Our holiness is the result of our having been chosen, not the reason we were chosen. To be "blameless" means to be free of the immoral and selfish lifestyle that marks people apart from God.

God also predestined believers "for adoption to sonship" (vs. 5). Through Jesus Christ, God's Son, we become sons or daughters of God. Under Roman law, adopted sons enjoyed the same privileges as natural sons. Similarly, believers are reckoned by God as His true children and as recipients of all the benefits that go with that status.

This grace is almost more than we can comprehend. That's why Paul said our adoption is "to the praise of

his glorious grace" (vs. 6).

Ask Yourself . . . *When was the last time I thanked God for making me His child?*

Predestination

Predestination is a major theme in the New Testament, especially in Paul's writings. Yet Christians have developed quite different ways of understanding it.

According to one common view, people are so corrupted by sin that they are unable to respond to the offer of salvation in Jesus Christ. Those who believe can do so only because God chose them for salvation. God gives them grace, thus leading them to believe.

According to another popular view, God supplies all people with enough grace to accept the offer of salvation, though not all choose to make use of that grace. God predestines some for salvation in the sense that He foreknows which people will choose of their own free will to believe.

Despite the greatness of our having been chosen by God, this spiritual blessing is not the only one we receive. Paul also mentioned the blessing of redemption (vss. 7, 8). Through redemption God makes His choosing effective in our lives.

The word translated "redemption" (vs. 7) refers to a ransom. It was used in ancient times of buying back one who had been sold into slavery or had become a prisoner of

war. It also described the freeing of a person from the penalty of death.

Because we were born with a sinful nature, God was not attracted to us because of any goodness He saw in us. In spite of that, He rescued us from our state of separation from His holiness. This He did by sending His Son to become the sacrifice for our sins. By His blood, Christ ransomed us from slavery to sin and from the sentence of death under which we languished.

Closely related to redemption is "forgiveness." The Greek word Paul used had a variety of meanings, including "to send off," "to release," "to give up," "to pardon," and "to hurl." When we receive the effect of Christ's redemption through faith, God releases us from the penalty of our sins and hurls our sin debt far away from us.

Along with forgiveness are "wisdom and understanding" (vs. 8). Before we believed, we did not have spiritual insight. But since believing, we can see how things really are and can get an idea of how God wants us to live.

Another spiritual blessing Paul listed is our ability to know the "mystery of his [God's] will" (vs. 9). For Paul, a "mystery" is a truth that was once hidden but has now been revealed through Christ. In this case, Paul was referring to God's plan "to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ" (vs. 10).

The Greek word translated "bring . . . unity" means to sum up. In Paul's day, when a column of figures was summed up, the total was

placed at the head of the column. In a similar fashion, at the end of history everything will be seen to add up to Christ.

From eternity, God has intended to give Christ possession of all things. But from our viewpoint within history, we can see that God set His plan in motion at just the right time—when Christ came into the world the first time. And He will bring His plan to a glorious conclusion at just the right time—when Christ comes into the world a second time. On that day our sorrows will be over, our conflicts will be at an end, our weakness will be replaced by strength.

C All Believers Chosen by God (1:11-14)

You also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation.

—Ephesians 1:13a

Previously (vss. 4, 5), Paul had mentioned God's plan for believers. Now he returned to that theme. According to Paul, the early Jewish believers in Christ, including Paul himself, had been part of God's plan (vss. 11, 12). But Gentile believers, such as the Ephesian Christians, were included as well (vss. 13, 14).

The apostles and other Jews were "the first to put our hope in Christ" (vs. 12).

The majority of Jews rejected Jesus, but a remnant of that generation of Jews formed the nucleus of the Church. Through them, the Gospel went out to all the world. Those early Jewish believers were walking testimonies of God's glory.

With verse 13, Paul changed pronouns from "we" to "you." He was now referring to the Ephesian believers specifically. Although Jewish Christians had been chosen for their role in starting the Church, this should not make the Ephesians feel like outsiders. They, too, were included in Christ. Jewish and Gentile believers formed one united Church, the Body of Christ.

Paul noted the stages of development by which the Gentiles had become "included in Christ." It is the

same process through which anyone is born again. First, the Gentiles had "heard the message of truth" when Paul or others had preached the Gospel to them. Then they "believed" the truth they had heard. Lastly, they had been "marked . . . with a seal," which is the Holy Spirit.

By calling the Spirit a seal, Paul may have raised a number of images in his readers' minds. At that time, seals were put on documents to guarantee their genuineness. They were also attached to goods during transportation to indicate ownership and ensure protection. Sometimes they represented an office in the government. Any of these uses of seals might symbolize a part of the Holy Spirit's work in the lives of those who follow Christ.

But for Paul, the Holy Spirit is not only a seal. He is also a "deposit" (vs. 14). In Paul's day a deposit was a token payment or first installment assuring a seller that the full purchase price would follow. At the end of time believers will receive the full installment of eternal life from the riches of God's grace. In the meantime, the Spirit's presence in our lives assures us of coming glory.

This giving of the Spirit is also to "the praise of his glory" (vs. 14; compare vs. 12).

Ask Yourself . . . *How aware am I of the presence of the Holy Spirit in my life?*

Paul's Writing Style

The language of Ephesians (particularly the first half) is richer and more effusive than the language in other letters by Paul.

Paul's style is demonstrated in this phrase: "The plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will" (Eph. 1:11). The phrase contains an inclusive term ("everything") and several synonyms ("plan," "works out," "purpose," "will").

This style suits Paul's subject of God's grand plan for believers, the Church, and the universe.

d Paul's Prayer for the Ephesians (1:15-19a)

Ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God's people, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers.

—Ephesians 1:15, 16

Having praised God for His spiritual blessings centered in Christ, Paul finally got around to the traditional thanksgiving part of his letter. Paul told the Ephesians that he thanked God for their faith and love (vs. 15). Then he told them of two spiritual blessings he was asking God to give them, and described what those blessings could do for them (vss. 17-19a).

Though Paul had founded the Ephesus church, he had not seen the Ephesian believers for a few years. In prison, however, he could receive mail and visitors. Through one or both of these means Paul had received good news about the Ephesians' spiritual health (vs. 15). Specifically, he mentioned their faith in Christ and their love for fellow Christians. Paul gave God thanks for the Ephesians (vs. 16).

In addition to praying about the Ephesians, Paul prayed for them. One of the best ways Christians can help one another is to pray specifically and regularly for each other's needs. If our fellow believers are hurting, we can ask God to comfort and aid them. If they are doing well,

like the Ephesians, we can ask God to bring them to an even higher level of maturity.

Ask Yourself . . . *Do I pray for others as much as I pray for myself?*

Paul mentioned two prayer requests for the Ephesians. He wanted the Ephesians to have "the Spirit of wisdom and revelation" (vs. 17), and he wanted "the eyes of [their] heart [to] be enlightened" (vs. 18). These two requests amount to about the same result. Paul wanted God to give the Ephesians heightened insight into spiritual truth.

The Ephesian believers already had the Holy Spirit as a result of their faith in Christ. But Paul prayed that the Spirit would give them more wisdom and understanding of spiritual matters (vs. 17). This request shows us that spiritual insight requires more than just intelligence or hard work or a method. It is a gift of God.

Paul told his readers what wisdom and revelation by the Spirit could do for them: help them know God better. Spiritual insight isn't an end in itself. It's a means to deepen our relationship with the Lord.

As his second request, Paul prayed for God to enlighten the eyes of the Ephesians' hearts (vs. 18). In Jewish thinking, the heart was the center of faith and feeling, as well as the source from which words and actions spring. Thus Paul's request was for the Ephesians to have an inner awareness of God's truth.

If the eyes of the Ephesians' hearts had better vision, they could focus

on the hope, riches, and power of God. The "hope to which he has called you" is eternal life with God. The "riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people" probably refers to believers' receiving citizenship in heaven. The "incomparably great power for us who believe" (vs. 19a) includes all the ways God freely and powerfully acts to achieve His purposes in our lives.

e The Exalted Head of the Church (1:19b-23)

God placed all things under [Christ's] feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way. —Ephesians 1:22, 23

Knowledge of God's power was the third benefit of clear spiritual vision that Paul listed for the Ephesians. Paul went on to describe that power as it was demonstrated in Christ's resurrection and exaltation (vss. 19b, 20).

When Christ died on the cross, His enemies thought they had heard the last of Him. How wrong they were! With an explosion of God's power, Christ broke through the barrier of death when He rose from the grave.

For 40 days Christ ministered on earth to His followers. Then He

ascended to heaven and assumed His place at God's right hand. When a person of power and importance—such as a king—wanted to honor someone, the important person would let the one to be honored take up a position at his right hand. Indeed, Scriptures often draw upon the cultural perception of the hand being a symbol of power and authority. Clearly Paul meant that Christ received from the Father the highest honor and authority.

Christ's authority extends over all spiritual beings. Paul was undoubtedly referring to these beings when he wrote that Christ is "far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come" (vs. 21).

Speculation about spiritual beings was common among first-century Jewish and pagan religious leaders alike. Many of them came up with quite elaborate theories about these beings, arranging them in orders and assigning them powers.

Paul knew perfectly well that many of these theories were far off base. But people believed them, and of course there really are angels. So Paul said, in effect, "Call spiritual beings by whatever name you wish, now and in the world to come. No creature stands as majestic in power as the Lord Jesus!"

Christ's authority is not merely over spiritual creatures. It is over every bit of creation. Paul expressed this truth by saying that "all things [are] under his feet" (vs. 22; compare Ps. 8:6) and that He is the "head

over everything" (Eph. 1:22). Next time we are up against a problem that seems unbeatable, we should remember that we serve a Lord whose authority encompasses everything.

Ask Yourself . . . *How might it help me to meditate on Christ's authority?*

Frequently, Paul referred to Christ

as Head of the church, His Body. He did so here (vss. 22, 23), but changed the picture a bit. Christ is Head not only over the church but over everything.

Amazingly, Christ's headship over all things is "for the church" (vs. 22). Did you catch that? Christ exerts His great power for our good—yours and mine!

Kinds of Angels in the Bible

The two basic divisions of angels are good angels (or "angels") and evil angels (or "demons"), who rebelled against God. Within these two divisions, the Bible mentions these individuals and orders of angels:

- *Angel of the Lord.* At crucial points in Jewish history, a figure called the Angel of the Lord protected or guided God's people. Many scholars believe this was the Second Person of the Trinity—Jesus Christ.
- *Angel leaders.* The archangel, or leader of the good angels, is Michael. His counterpart among the evil angels, the archdemon, is Satan. God's chief messenger is Gabriel.
- *Cherubim.* Angels in this order have some human and some animal features, along with multiple faces and wings. The cherubim function as guardians and as bearers of God's throne chariot.
- *Seraphim.* Members of this order of angels are generally human in appearance, but have six wings. They are servants at God's throne, praising Him and sometimes acting as His agents.

2

God's People Alive in Christ

Ephesians 2

a Spiritual Death (2:1-3)

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.
—Ephesians 2:1, 2

Having ended his prayer of thanksgiving, Paul went into more detail on the themes he had already introduced. Chapter 2 of Ephesians repeats some of the ideas from chapter 1.

In the first 10 verses of Ephesians 2, we find again the subject of salvation. According to Paul, salvation produces a spiritual resurrection. Before salvation, the Ephesian believers had been spiritually dead. Because their sin separated them from God, they had been insensitive to Him and could not please Him. But when God forgave their sin, they had come to life spiritually. They were in union with Christ and began learning obedience.

Paul addressed the Ephesian believers specifically when he

declared, "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins" (vs. 1). Soon after, however, he made it clear that Jewish believers had been no better off in this respect than Gentile believers (vs. 3). All people, no matter their race or religious background, are spiritually dead without Christ.

Remembering what we were like before coming to faith in Christ can be a painful exercise. But it can also be useful in refreshing our gratitude for what Christ has done in our life. Perhaps this was Paul's reasoning when he told his readers that before they became Christians, they had lived in sin and had followed the leading of the world, the devil, and the flesh.

Ask Yourself . . . *What was I like before I met Jesus?*

Before being made alive, the Ephesians had committed "transgressions and sins" (vs. 1). The word translated "transgressions" refers to acts by which one crosses over the boundary line between right and wrong as set forth in God's law. The word translated "sins" refers to those attitudes and actions

that prove one has fallen short of God's standard.

The Ephesians "used to live" (vs. 2) in these transgressions and sins. The word translated "live" means "walk about." Sinfulness was the district in which the Ephesians had usually traveled.

Furthermore, before the Ephesians began to follow Christ, they had followed the "ways of this world" and "the ruler of the kingdom of the air." The "ways of this world" are aspects of the lifestyle pursued by those who do not know Christ. The "ruler of the kingdom of the air" is Satan.

Christ had broken Satan's grip on the Ephesian believers. But Paul reminded them that Satan was still at work in the non-Christians ("those who are disobedient") all around them. After coming to Christ, we should never forget those who are still wearing the chains that have dropped away from us. We know the Good News that can set them free!

Paul and other Jewish Christians, as well as the Ephesians and other Gentile Christians, had at one time all been part of the great crowd of disobedient people in whom Satan works (vs. 2). Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians alike had previously followed the cravings and desires and thoughts of their "flesh." Thus Jewish Christians, as much as Gentile Christians, had been objects of God's wrath before coming to Christ.

Satan's Names

Biblical names for the arch-demon reveal his evil character. In the Old Testament, he is called "Satan," meaning "the adversary." In the New Testament, this "ruler of the kingdom of the air" (Eph. 2:2) is also called:

- "the tempter" (Matt. 4:3; 1 Thess. 3:5);
- "Beelzebul" (Matt. 12:24), meaning "lord of flies";
- "the evil one" (13:19, 38);
- the "enemy" (vss. 28, 39; 1 Peter 5:8);
- "a murderer from the beginning . . . a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44);
- "the prince of this world" (12:31; 14:30; 16:11);
- "the god of this age" (2 Cor. 4:4);
- "Belial" (6:15), meaning "the wicked one";
- "Abaddon" [ah-BAD-un] and "Apollyon" [ah-PAHL-yuhn] (Rev. 9:11), both meaning "the destroyer";
- "the great dragon . . . that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan" (12:9);
- "the accuser of our brothers and sisters" (vs. 10).

b Spiritual Life (2:4-10)

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—it is by grace you have been saved.

—Ephesians 2:4, 5

Sinners deserve God's wrath. He would be perfectly just to destroy them. But God is more than just; He is also loving and merciful and gracious. So through Christ, He raises the spiritually dead to eternal life, giving us honor and opportunities to serve Him.

Paul told the Ephesians that as believers in Christ, we are closely identified with the Lord. We share in His resurrection and exaltation.

Paul said God was motivated to make Christians spiritually alive by His "love" and "mercy" (vs. 4). The word translated "love" describes an unselfish giving to those who may not (as in this case) be worthy of the gift. The word translated "mercy" refers to a response of compassion toward those who may (as in this case) deserve punishment.

God made the Ephesians and all Christians alive with Christ by means of His "grace" (vs. 5). The word translated "grace" describes God's free action of doing something good for us even though we don't deserve it. We needed God's grace to save us because we were dead in our transgressions. We

were unable to save ourselves.

Not only were Christians raised from the dead spiritually as Christ was raised literally, but also we have ascended to glory spiritually as He ascended literally (vs. 6; compare 1:20). Christ's being seated in the heavenly realms indicates His authority and honor, which He earned. But we too are seated in the heavenly realms; we too have authority and honor by God's grace.

Of course, Christ's authority and honor remain superior to the Ephesians' and to ours. But the mere fact that our authority and honor can be compared to Christ's is astonishing enough. We should never cease to be grateful for what God has done in giving us far more than we deserve.

God's purpose in seating believers with Christ in the heavenly realms is to bring Himself glory (2:7). In every generation from Christ's first coming until the end of history, and then throughout eternity, God will be glorified as the results of His grace and mercy to His people are seen.

Paul wanted to make sure that his readers saw that our exaltation with Christ is for God's glory, not our own. That's why for the second time he pointed out that salvation is by grace (vs. 8; compare vs. 5).

But this time he added some information. God's grace is made effective in believers' lives by our faith. Salvation is a gift from God, and does not come from our good works (vs. 9). If we were able to earn our salvation, we would have cause for boasting. But no human effort to do good is adequate for winning salvation. So

none of us has cause for pride.

Though believers' good works did not produce our salvation, our salvation is intended to produce good works (vs. 10). The word translated "do" is the same word translated "live" in verse 2; it means "walk about." While unbelievers walk about doing evil deeds, believers are to walk about doing good deeds.

Through grace, we are God's "handiwork" (vs. 10). He created us, and He created the jobs He wants us to accomplish. We need not live our lives aimlessly, but can seek to discover and fulfill God's plan for our lives.

Ask Yourself . . . What good works has God prepared for me to do in the coming week?

JEW & GENTILES

Jews are the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God entered into a covenant with these people to make them the channel through which His truth would be declared to the world.

Gentiles are all peoples other than Jews. Old Testament law permitted Gentiles to become members of the covenant community if they were circumcised and agreed to obey the law. But Gentiles never joined the Jewish faith in large numbers.

Some Jews considered themselves superior to Gentiles, not because of what God had done for the Jews but simply because of who they were. This prejudice carried over into the early church, as Jewish believers reckoned Gentiles as second-class Christians unless they adopted Jewish practices. Paul had to deal with this problem often.

C Remembering Prior Alienation (2:11-13)

Remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth . . . 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.

—Ephesians 2:11a, 12

After reminding the Ephesians of their former need for God to raise them from spiritual death to spiritual life by His grace (vss. 1-10), Paul reminded them of their former disadvantages in contrast with the Jews (vss. 11-13).

The Jews' privilege was due solely to God's grace in making a covenant with them. But many Jews identified their privilege with their circumcision, which was merely a sign of the covenant. They called themselves "the circumcision" (vs. 11) and used the insulting term "uncircumcised" of Gentiles, such as the Ephesians.

Paul reported this contemptuous term without himself meaning any contempt. In fact, Paul affirmed that, under the Gospel, circumcision holds no spiritual significance. As he said elsewhere (Rom. 2:29), true circumcision is of the heart.

Many Jews went too far in evaluating their privileges; nevertheless, it is true that Gentiles were under some disadvantages. Paul described the Ephesians' condition before they were made alive in Christ.

First, the Ephesians had been "separate from Christ" (Eph. 2:12). *Christ* means "Messiah." The promises of a coming Messiah had been made to the Jews, and so Gentiles did not expect Him.

Second, Paul's readers had been "excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise." Membership in the covenant community, the nation of Israel, was not a guarantee of salvation, but it was of significant value. God had made promises of blessing

to the natural descendants of Abraham and Isaac.

Third, they had been "without hope and without God in the world." God had not forgotten the Gentiles, but most Gentiles knew nothing about Him. Their pagan religious practices did not put them in touch with Him, and so left them with no hope of finding peace and eternal life with Him.

Ask Yourself . . . *What spiritual advantages did I have because of my family history? What disadvantages?*

Quickly, Paul turned from the dismal picture of the Ephesians' former condition to remind them that even though they once had been "far away" from God, they now had been "brought near" to Him (vs. 13). And the reason for this change in the Ephesians' status was again the grace of God in the sacrifice of His Son. The crucified Christ becomes the meeting point with God for all who receive Christ as Savior.

d **Made One in Christ (2:14-18)**

[Christ] himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations.

—Ephesians 2:14, 15a

When the Ephesian believers were reconciled with God (vss. 11-13), they were also brought together with Jewish believers (vss. 14-18).

Jews and Gentiles were still distinct groups. But as far as the church was concerned, Christ had merged the two groups (vs. 14). Previous religious and ethnic background don't matter for one's status in the church; all are equals.

Paul described this union as Christ's tearing down the "barrier," or "dividing wall of hostility," that once separated Jews and Gentiles. He may have been thinking of the wall at the Jerusalem temple mount that separated the court where anyone was welcome from the courts where

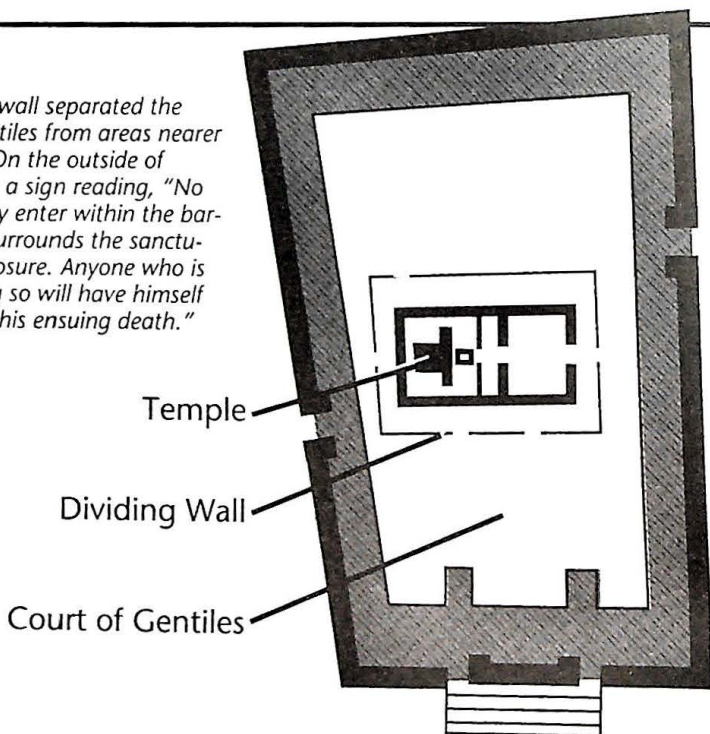
only Jews could go. Now in the Church, Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians could mingle freely.

Christ united Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians "by setting aside in his flesh the law" (vs. 15). The law of Moses had been given to the Jews, and because of that many Jews felt superior to Gentiles. But by dying on the cross, Jesus became the means of salvation for all people. So salvation by faith in Christ superseded the law.

Verses 15b-18 repeat many of the things Paul had already said, but in slightly different terms.

Paul personified Jewish believers and Gentile believers, and said Christ had made one new body out

A four-foot wall separated the Court of Gentiles from areas nearer the temple. On the outside of this wall was a sign reading, "No foreigner may enter within the barricade that surrounds the sanctuary and enclosure. Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing death."



of those two groups (vs. 15b). No longer were there Jews and Gentiles. A new body had come into existence: the Christian Church.

Paul also said that Christ's death reconciled Jews and Gentiles to God as well as to each other. Christ brought an end to the hostility between sinners and God (vs. 16) as well as to the hostility between Jews and Gentiles (vs. 14). Because Christ died on the cross, the hostility between people and God can die there too.

Since Christ Himself never personally conducted a ministry tour among the Gentiles, verse 17 must refer to the spread of the Gospel to Gentiles performed by the apostles and other Christians. But it should encourage us to see how closely Christ identifies with His people's service. When we minister to others, Christ Himself is ministering to them through us.

Through His early followers, Christ had "preached peace" (vs. 17), or spread the Gospel, to Gentiles ("you who were far away") and to Jews ("those who were near"). Jews had, in a sense, been nearer to God than Gentiles because they had Old Testament revelation and because Christ had ministered among them.

Through Christ, both Jews and Gentiles—indeed, all people—now have equal access to God (vs. 18). Note the mention of all three members of the Trinity in verse 18.

Ask Yourself . . . *Do I feel at peace with my fellow believers? Do I feel at peace with God?*

e A Holy Temple (2:19-22)

In [Christ] you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

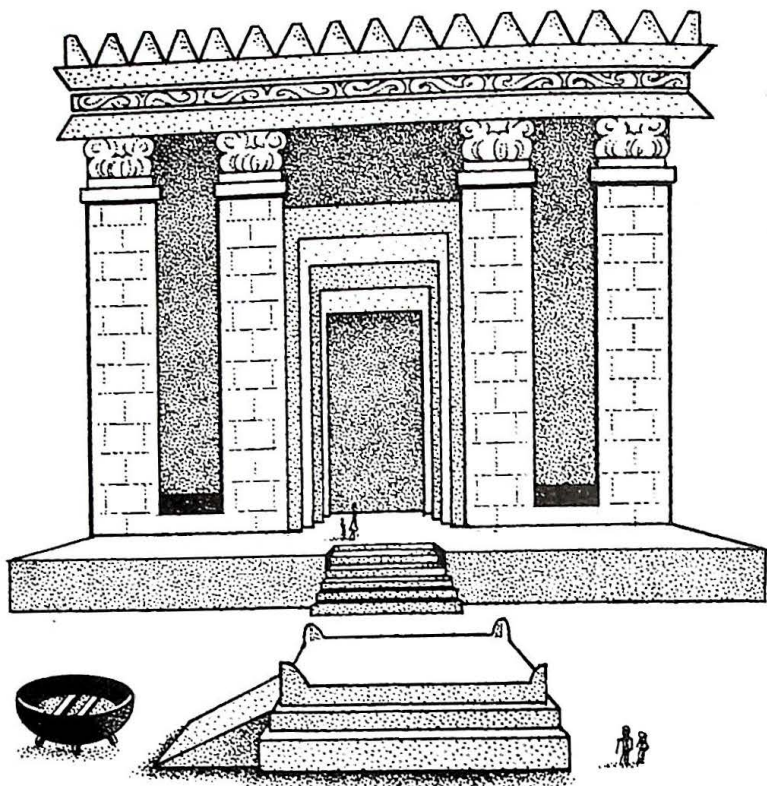
—Ephesians 2:22

After all he had written about the new status of both Gentiles and Jews in Christ, Paul now drew his conclusion. To do this, he used a construction metaphor. He said Gentiles and Jews form a single building with Christ as the cornerstone.

Paul told the Ephesians that they were no longer "foreigners and strangers" (vs. 19; compare vs. 12). The word translated "foreigners" (vs. 19) refers to transients who had no rights or privileges. The word translated "strangers" describes residents who, by the payment of a small tax, received protection but not full citizenship. Both terms indicate an inferior status: that was the standing of Gentiles before coming to Christ.

But now no longer inferior, the Ephesians were "fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household." In other words, like Jewish believers, they now were in a personal relationship with God.

Perhaps his mentioning of "household" led Paul to develop the picture of construction. God's household of believers is like a building that is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone" (vs. 20).



*This is the Jerusalem temple.
Paul compared believers to a temple.*

This means the church is based on Christ and the work He performed through the church leaders.

In ancient construction, a corner-stone joined two walls. Like this stone, Christ is that in which "the whole building is joined together" (vs. 21). And now we find out what kind of building Paul was talking about: a "holy temple." Ephesus was the home of a magnificent temple—one of the seven wonders of the world—dedicated to the goddess Diana. But most likely, the Jerusalem temple, rather than the pagan temple of Ephesus, was the model Paul had in mind. The growing

church is like God's temple rising as it is being built.

The word for "temple" that Paul used did not stand for the entire temple complex, but only for the inner sanctuary where God's presence dwelt. In keeping with this designation, Paul told the Ephesians that they, as well as the Jewish believers, were part of a dwelling—the church—in which God lives by His Spirit.

Ask Yourself . . . *If I were always to keep in mind that God lives in me by His Spirit, how might I want to change my lifestyle?*

10

God's People Knowing Christ

Ephesians 3

a Paul and the Mystery of Christ (3:1-6)

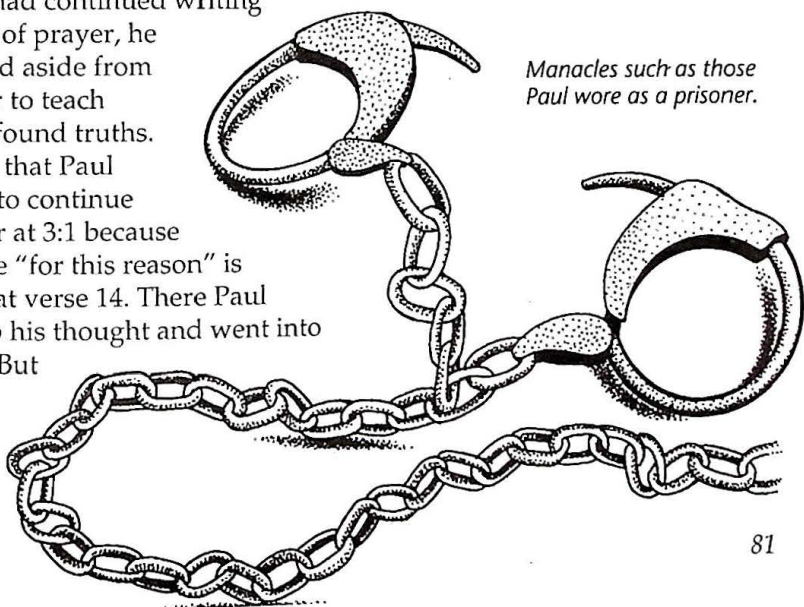
This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.

—Ephesians 3:6

The first verse of chapter 3 contains Paul's attempt to resume the prayer he had begun in the letter's opening chapter. Though all along he had continued writing in a spirit of prayer, he had turned aside from his prayer to teach some profound truths. We know that Paul intended to continue the prayer at 3:1 because the phrase "for this reason" is repeated at verse 14. There Paul picked up his thought and went into a prayer. But the first time, when he wrote

the word "Gentiles" (vs. 1), he turned aside from the prayer again. It seems Paul felt inspired to remind his readers once more that God had called him to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles (vss. 2-13).

Paul identified himself as "the prisoner of Christ Jesus" (vs. 1), even though he was a prisoner of the Romans at the time. It was for serving Christ by ministering to the Gentiles that Paul was in prison. Paul had been arrested in Jerusalem after being accused of bringing a Gentile—Trophimus, a convert from Ephesus—into the temple



Manacles such as those Paul wore as a prisoner.

(Acts 21:27-29). Later, he had been transferred to Caesarea, where he had been imprisoned for about two years. He had been taken to Rome because he had appealed to Caesar.

Ask Yourself . . . *Should I interpret all the ways that I may suffer as suffering for Christ?*

Paul used the expression "the administration of God's grace" (Eph. 3:2) to describe his mission. By preaching the Gospel to Gentiles, Paul had become a means by which God extended the message of grace to people who previously had been without hope for salvation. Paul himself had told the early converts of Ephesus about his role. Later converts would have heard about Paul from others.

Paul's calling to take the Gospel to the Gentiles had come to him "by revelation" (vs. 3). This refers to Paul's meeting with Christ on the road to Damascus. At that time Christ had charged Paul with taking the Gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 26:16-18).

Jews and Gentiles being unified as a Church had heretofore been a "mystery" (Eph. 3:3)—that is, a truth that had once been hidden but now was revealed. Then God made this truth known to the apostles and prophets of the early church so that everyone might hear of it (vs. 5).

Earlier in the letter, Paul had written about God's grace for the Gentiles (vs. 3; see 2:11-22). As the Ephesians reread those earlier parts of the letter, they could understand Paul's insight into the mystery (3:4). Paul

wanted his readers to appreciate his insight, not so that they would admire him, but so that they would accept his teachings.

To us, it may seem obvious that Gentiles needn't become Jews to be acceptable in God's sight, but that's because we live after Paul. For the early Jewish Christians, who were raised with the idea that only Jews could have a serious relationship with God, this was a radical concept. Still, God had intended Gentile inclusion all along. Perhaps no one in the early church understood the change that had occurred in Christ as thoroughly as did Paul.

Verse 6 records Paul's definition of the mystery, using three parallel phrases. Through the Gospel, Gentiles were now "heirs together with Israel." In other words, Gentile believers and Jewish believers alike could inherit the kingdom of God. Through the Gospel, Gentiles are "members together of one body." That is, Gentile believers and Jewish believers were part of one united body with Christ as its Head. Through the Gospel, Gentiles were now "sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus." This meant both Gentile believers and Jewish believers could enjoy the promised covenant blessings.

Now that Gentile believers make up much of the Church, we may find it easy to forget our spiritual heritage is Jewish. But if we consider how Jews would have perceived a Gentile's spiritual status before the mystery was revealed, we should be all the more grateful for God's free

grace. It was unfathomable that a Gentile could be acceptable to God.

b A Servant of the Gospel (3:7-13)

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 the Lord's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ.

—Ephesians 3:7, 8

Paul continued in his delay of the prayer he had intended to resume (vs. 1) by describing his call to preach the Gospel (vss. 7-9) and by telling the reasons for the Gospel (vss. 10-13).

Paul's humility shone through in this passage. Here he presented himself as a "servant" of the Gospel (vs. 7).

Even his servanthood, he said, had been a gift from God. Paul had not earned it on the basis of his religious background or his knowledge of the Scriptures. Only by God's power had he been changed from an enemy of Christ into a champion of the Lord's cause.

The same is true for us all. If it weren't for an exertion of God's power on our behalf, we would still be servants of sin instead of servants of God.

Servant

The word Paul used to describe himself as a "servant" of the Gospel (Eph. 3:7) is *diakonos*, from which the English language got its word *deacon*.

Diakonos was used in the first Christian century to describe many different kinds of servants, such as messengers, stewards, bakers, and assistant helmsmen. John used it to describe table waiters (John 2:5, 9). In short, a *diakonos* was someone whose job it was to serve others.

Paul's humility showed up again when he called himself "less than the least of all God's people" (vs. 8). He may have been making a play on his name, which in Greek means "little." Paul saw himself as low on the scale of Christians because of his history as a persecutor of the church.

Recalling our sinful past can be damaging if we ignore God's grace in changing our lives. But a healthy

humility, like Paul's, is necessary for any believer who wants to be used by God.

Despite his previous persecution of the church, Paul had been given a dual commission by Christ. He was to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles and to help people see the "administration of this mystery" (vs. 9). This "mystery" (previously hidden plan

of God), as Paul already had stated, was the inclusion of Gentiles with Jews in one body in God's strategy of salvation.

Ask Yourself . . . *What are the top two jobs God has given me?*

Paul probed even deeper into the mystery of God when he described God's purpose in broadening the

family of faith to include Gentiles. God's intent was to display His wisdom to the "rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms" (vs. 10) through the Church. As we have already seen, these rulers and authorities are spiritual beings. Thus the Church is meant to be a mirror into which the angels may look and see evidence of God's wisdom.

God had planned all along to display His wisdom in this remarkable way. But His plan wasn't enacted until Christ came to earth and founded His Church. This was His "eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord" (vs. 11).

Paul described the wisdom of God as "manifold" (vs. 10). The unusual word translated "manifold"

Preaching the Good News

Several different words for "preach," "announce," or "declare" appear in the New Testament. The word Paul used in describing his calling to announce the good news of Christ to the Gentiles (Eph. 3:8) referred to preaching with the intent to evangelize. The word did not mean merely declaring facts, or making a speech based on learned knowledge. Rather it described proclaiming truth with power, sometimes accompanied by signs and wonders.

This kind of preaching was designed to bring healing (Matt. 4:23), joy (Acts 8:5-8), salvation (1 Cor. 15:1, 2), and regeneration (1 Pet. 1:23-25). The word carries both the offer and the power of salvation.

more literally means "many colored" or "many sided." It calls attention to the diversity and gem-like beauty of God's wisdom. No wonder the angels enjoy gazing upon it.

Only the perfectly wise God could take sinful creatures, who ought to cringe before Him in fear, and make it possible for them to approach Him "with freedom and confidence" (vs. 12). God has done just that by providing redemption through Christ and by applying that redemption individually to those who have faith in Christ. Believers in Christ are forgiven and cleansed of sin, and thus need not fear coming into God's presence, either spiritually through prayer or literally after death.

Since the extension of grace to the Gentiles is such a great act of God, the Ephesians should not have felt regret over anything that the apostle to the Gentiles had to go through in fulfilling his office (vs. 13). Paul's "sufferings" (literally "pressures") were a part of the price that had to be paid for the Gentiles to receive the Gospel. They should have felt honored that God considered them worthy of the trials Paul was undergoing in their behalf.

For nonbelievers, suffering is just suffering. But for believers, suffering can be of value to the sufferers and to others.

C A Prayer for the Believers (3:14-21)

I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name.

—Ephesians 3:14, 15

Following his teaching in verses 2-13, Paul finally resumed his prayer (vss. 14-21). This prayer contains requests for three spiritual blessings on his readers.

Paul repeated the phrase "for this reason" (vss. 1, 14), referring all the way back to his argument in 2:11-22. For the reason that the Gentile Christians had been brought into the Body of Christ, Paul prayed for them. He wanted them to have the full advantage of the spiritual privileges that could be theirs through Christ.

Paul described himself as kneeling in prayer (3:14). Normally, Jews stood with hands upraised when they prayed. But kneeling for prayer became a custom of Christians early in church history.

Of course, we may pray in any position. Yet careless body positions do not contribute to a spirit of prayer. Perhaps sometimes we should stand with head bowed in recognition of the honor of being admitted into God's presence. Or sometimes we may wish to fold our hands, suggesting that we have put away our other activities so that our hearts and minds may be wholly directed toward God. Or perhaps,

like Paul, we may choose to kneel as an expression of humility or lowliness.

Ask Yourself . . . *What position am I usually in when I pray?*

Since the Gentile Ephesians had become members of Paul's spiritual family, he appealed to the heavenly Father of them all to bless the Ephesians (vss. 14, 15).

God is not only the Father of Paul and the Ephesian Christians. He is the Father of everyone who believes in Christ—past, present, and future. A part of God's spiritual family is in heaven, while the other part remains on earth.

This family "derives its name" (vs. 15) from the Father in the sense that it is united by its relationship with God. In



Paul spoke of God's "unsearchable" and "glorious" riches (Eph. 3:8, 16). This drachma from Ephesus shows a honeybee, on the front, and a stag by a date palm, on the back.

Paul coveted spiritual blessings for the Ephesians—three blessings, in fact.

For his first request, Paul asked God to strengthen the Ephesians spiritually so that Christ might feel at home in their hearts (vss. 16, 17a). The source from which this strength would come is God's "glorious riches," or His limitless bounty of blessings. All who believe in Christ may have this strengthening so that Christ lives within us more fully, showing us which way to go and how to cope with our problems.

The second request (vss. 17b-19a) introduces Paul's longing that his fellow believers would be equipped to understand the love of Christ.

This could happen only as they themselves were "rooted and established in love."

Like trees whose roots are deep in the earth, or like buildings constructed on a firm foundation, the Ephesians needed lives based on love. The love referred to here is love in its broadest sense—a love for God that extends to include others in its scope as well.

When believers are rooted and

Greek, there is a play on words here. "Father" is *patera* and "family" is *patria*. Those two words make it even sound like the family of faith derives its name from the Father.

established in a love like this, they are able to grasp something of the love of Christ. In typical fashion, Paul piled up a succession of words in an effort to convey his

Trinity

God is one essence existing in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is the core of the church's doctrine of the Trinity. Amid much controversy, the church came to understand this doctrine of Scripture in the early centuries of its existence.

The doctrine of the three-in-oneness of God is nowhere fully formulated in the Bible. But the Bible provides ample evidence to support the doctrine. Many passages treat Father, Son, and Spirit as divine beings who are distinct yet equal.

Ephesians 3:14-19 is a prime example of a passage that supplies evidence for the Trinity. The names "Father," "Christ," and "Spirit" all appear in the passage. Furthermore, each of Paul's prayer requests for the Ephesians is associated with a member of the Trinity (vss. 16, 17a—"Spirit"; vss. 17b-19a—"Christ"; vs. 19b—"God").

ideas about Christ's love. Christ's love is tremendously "wide and long and high and deep" (vs. 18). Metaphorically speaking, it extends without limits in all directions.

This love "surpasses knowledge" (vs. 19). Yet paradoxically, Paul wanted the Ephesians to know this unknowable love. They could not intellectually understand Christ's

love, but they could experience it as Christ would dwell within them.

Paul's third petition, growing out of the first two, was that his readers "may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God" (vs. 19b).

Certain cults in the area promised people a fullness through intellectual enlightenment, but Paul prayed for the Christians' fullness in a

context of love. God wants us to experience all we can of Him as we grow in grace, stage by stage, from the moment of our salvation until the day we stand complete in His presence.

Ask Yourself . . . *If I were to ask three spiritual blessings for the people in the church, what would they be?*

Paul completed his prayer with one of the most beautiful doxologies in Scripture. It is the climax of the letter's first part. The remainder of the letter will deal with the application of the truths Paul presented in the first half of the letter.

In this doxology (vss. 20, 21), Paul referred again to themes he had already introduced, such as the abundance of God's gifts to believers, the power He makes available to believers, and the relationship

between Christ and His church. God's ability to meet the needs of His people far exceeds any request we can make in prayer, or could even hope for. The phrase "immeasurably more" that Paul used to describe God's ability to meet our needs is the translation of a word that can mean "above," "out of," or "around." God is able to do above, out of, and around all things we ask or think of asking!

All of this is brought about through divine power, which is present in the lives of believers. To such a God, Paul ascribed glory in the church and in His Son, who has made all these blessings possible.

Paul ended his prayer with a mighty crescendo of praise to God. Then, like the whisper of an orchestra's strings dying away, Paul added his "amen," meaning "so let it be."

11

God's People Growing in Christ

Ephesians 4:1-24

a A Worthy Life (4:1-6)

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.

—Ephesians 4:1

The second half of the Ephesian letter is mainly practical. Beginning with chapter 4, Paul taught his readers how they ought to live as members of God's family.

Paul began by reminding his readers of his status: he was a prisoner for the Lord (vs. 1). This status lent weight to his appeal. Since he had been faithful to the point of being imprisoned, they (who were under less pressure) could be faithful too.

Specifically, Paul urged the Ephesians to live a life worthy of the calling they had received. This calling, of course, was their calling by God to faith in His Son. Having been given saving grace, they should do no less than respond to God by living faithfully. This does not mean that they were to earn their salvation by leading a worthy life.

So that the Ephesians would

know what he meant by a life worthy of their calling, Paul mentioned four virtues that ought to be theirs: humility, gentleness, patience, and bearing with one another in love (vs. 2). Each of these terms is worth considering.

- The word translated "humble" was adapted by Christians to describe an attitude of lowliness.

- The word for "gentle" refers not to weakness but to submission to others for the sake of Christ.

- The word translated "patient" indicates the refusal to avenge wrongs committed against oneself.

- The phrase for "bearing with one another" refers to putting up with others' faults and peculiarities.

Ask Yourself . . . Which of the four areas—humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with one another in love—am I strongest in? Which am I weakest in?

The four virtues Paul cited can all contribute to the church's harmony. This goal was uppermost in Paul's mind. In his day, Jewish and Gentile Christians sometimes didn't understand one another. And Gentile Christians from different backgrounds or with different temperaments sometimes didn't

get along. Paul wanted to see all believers united and harmonious.

But unity is something we must work at. "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace," Paul wrote (vs. 3). Christians are united through the Spirit, but our unity can be damaged if we allow our relations to become hostile rather than peaceful. So add peacemaking to the list of virtues Christians ought to possess.

Ask Yourself . . . *Am I helping to keep unity in my church by preserving "the bond of peace"?*

After exhorting the Ephesians to preserve spiritual unity, Paul went on to show the role that unity plays in various aspects of the Christian faith.

First, Paul said, "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called" (vs. 4). The "body" is the church. Just as a human body has many parts but is one body, so the church has many members but is one church. Indwelling all members of the church is the Holy Spirit. As we already learned (1:14), the Spirit's presence in our lives is a guarantee of our common hope to live eternally with God in

An Early Confession in Ephesians?

Paul included quotations from a variety of sources in his writing and speaking. Some scholars believe Ephesians 4:4-6 came from a Christian confession used during Paul's day. As evidence, they point to its content and to its trinitarian construction of three groups each containing three items:

There is

- 1 one body and
- 2 one Spirit, just as you were called to
- 3 one hope when you were called;

- 1 one Lord,
- 2 one faith,
- 3 one baptism;

one God and Father of all,
who is

- 1 over all and
- 2 through all and
- 3 in all.

heaven. This became our hope and expectation when we accepted the call to faith.

Second, there is "one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (4:5). All Christians serve one Lord, namely, Jesus Christ. We serve this Lord because

we have made the same profession of faith in Him. And baptism identifies us with our one Lord Jesus Christ.

Finally, there is "one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (vs. 6). In a culture that recognized many gods, Paul affirmed that there is only one true God. He is the Father of all who believe in Him. In His relationship to His people He is both transcendent ("over all") and immanent ("through all and in all").

b Grace from the Ascended Lord (4:7-13)

To each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.

—Ephesians 4:7

Although there is one Church and there is to be unity in the Church, that doesn't mean all Christians are to think and act alike. Paul followed up his strong message about Church unity with an equally strong message about gift diversity. He said Christ supplies His followers with grace, making some Christians leaders who prepare the rest for ministry so that the whole Church may achieve unity and maturity.

When Paul said that Christ gives grace (vs. 7), he was referring to the grace by which believers are equipped, or enabled, to perform

ministries in the local church. We don't earn this grace; we are given it. Neither can we pick the kind of grace we will receive; Christ assigns it as He sees fit. We are to receive this grace thankfully and use it for God's glory.

Ask Yourself . . . *What enabling grace do I need from Christ?*

To support what he had said about Christ's giving grace, Paul quoted Psalm 68:18 (see Eph. 4:8). Applied to Christ, this verse shows how He has given gifts to His followers ever since His ascension.

Lest anyone doubt that the one who "ascended on high" (Eph. 4:8) was Jesus Christ, Paul added the explanation in verses 9 and 10.

Paul said the one who ascended had previously descended "to the lower, earthly regions" (vs. 9). Some see this as a reference to a preaching trip to hell made by Jesus between His death and resurrection. But more likely, this is a reference to His coming to earth from heaven. In other words, Paul was speaking of Christ's incarnation.

This one "who descended is the very one who ascended" (vs. 10). That is, Christ is not only a man who lived on earth. He is also the Lord whose home is in heaven.

Jews believed there were seven heavens, one on top of another. But Paul said that Christ ascended "higher than all the heavens." Now He fills "the whole universe."

Why did Paul quote an Old Testament verse, and then go into a lengthy explanation of it? Because

he wanted his readers to have a sense of the one who gives His followers grace. Christ is a universe filling figure, and it is He who distributes enabling grace to believers.

Ask Yourself . . . *What grace has Christ given me?*

All Christians have at least one spiritual gift. But in this context Paul focused on those who have received gifts to be leaders in the churches. He mentioned apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers.

The word *apostle* is used in various ways in the New Testament. In this case, Paul was probably using the word in a restricted sense to refer to a group of people (including himself) who had been chosen by Christ personally to found the Church.

The "prophets" Paul had in mind were probably not Elijah, Isaiah, and the other Old Testament proph-

ets. The church of Paul's day had its own prophets. These people delivered messages from God, and sometimes shared visions about the future. Before the New Testament was written, one way God had to communicate to the Church was through His special speakers.

The other three kinds of leaders have related functions. "Evangelists" in the early church were people who conducted outreach in areas where the church had not yet been established; they were pioneers for the faith. "Pastors and teachers" served already established churches in the wake of evangelists. Pastors shepherded congregations, and teachers instructed them. (These two roles could be combined in one person.)

In some churches today, the leaders are expected to conduct virtually all the church's ministry. In contrast to this, Paul described the role of

Spiritual Gifts in Paul's Letters

Romans 12:6-8

"prophesying"

"serving"

"teaching"

"to encourage"

"giving"

"to lead"

"show mercy"

1 Corinthians 12:8-10

"prophecy"

"message of wisdom"

"message of knowledge"

"gifts of healing"

"miraculous powers"

"speaking in different kinds of tongues"

"interpretation of tongues"

"faith"

"distinguishing between spirits"

church leaders as preparing the whole church for ministry (vs. 12). All Christians are ministers, not just the church leaders. Each of us has gifts and abilities that God wants us to use in serving others.

If church leaders perform their ministry of preparing others for ministry, and if others perform their ministries, then the church will become what Christ wants it to be. Each person will "reach unity" and "become mature" (vs. 13).

Unity is not the same as everyone being part of the same organization. Some people who are members of local churches are not actually members of Christ's Church. True Christian unity is founded on a genuine profession of faith in Christ and a personal knowledge of Him.

Paul described the maturity of believers as "attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ." Earlier, in 3:19, we read a similar

statement. Paul certainly did not think human beings somehow become equal to Christ. Yet we must ever strive toward the goal of full maturity.

C Growing Up in Christ (4:14-16)

Speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.

—Ephesians 4:15

Spiritual maturity was still on the apostle's mind. He told what mature believers are not like (vs. 14) and what they are like (vss. 15, 16).

Paul said that as believers more nearly attain the whole measure of the fullness of Christ, we are no

1 Corinthians 12:28-30

"prophets"

"helping"

"teachers"

"gifts of healing"

"miracles"

"different kinds of tongues"

"interpreters of tongues"

"apostles"

"guidance"

Ephesians 4:11

"prophets"

"pastors and teachers"

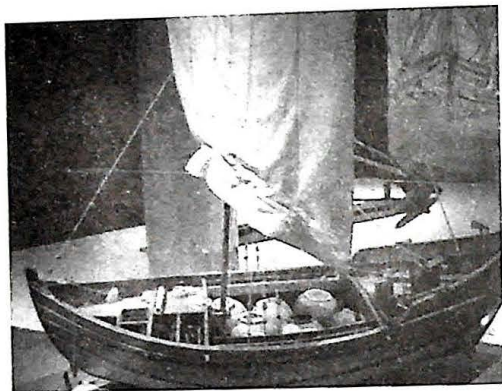
"apostles"

"evangelists"

longer like infants (vs. 14). We are growing up, spiritually speaking.

Then Paul abruptly shifted from the metaphor of human growth to the metaphor of ship travel. He knew that the spiritually immature tend to be vulnerable to false teaching. So he compared spiritually immature Christians being pulled one way and another by evil people to a ship being

"tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind." Paul knew all about being on a ship in a rough sea, having been afloat during a storm on his way to Rome (Acts 27).



Ask Yourself . . . *Have I ever felt sort of seasick from the confusing doctrines I've heard from false teachers?*

Unlike cunning and crafty people who scheme deceitfully, Christians are to speak the truth (vs. 15). Sound doctrine does not make people bob about dizzily like a ship tossed by waves and blown by winds. Instead, it provides them with the anchor of biblical teaching.

But telling the truth is not enough. A person can speak the right words with a wrong spirit. We must speak God's truth to people in love. And of course, we must obey the truth ourselves!

If we speak the truth lovingly and

in other ways become mature, then instead of remaining infants, we will "grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ" (vs. 15). What we will become like as we mature spiritually is no secret: we will become more like Christ. We can look at Jesus Christ as He is portrayed in the Gospels and see in Him what we ought to be like.

By calling Christ "the head," Paul was returning to his familiar analogy between the Church and a body. Christians make up the members of Christ's Body, with Him as our head. Paul

liked this analogy because it indicates the organic connection between Christ and Christians. The whole body is "joined and held together by every supporting ligament" (vs. 16).

Without the head, the body cannot function. The hands, feet, and other parts of the body would not know what to do without the brain. This represents the necessity of Christ to the Church.

It is from the head that the body grows and builds itself up in love. But each part of the body must also do its work. God has designed the Church so that it needs each one of us! We must find our role in the local church, and then perform it.

d Living Not as the Gentiles but as New Selves (4:17-24)

You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

—Ephesians 4:22-24

Between his discussion of the unity and maturity of the Church (4:1-16) and his specific instructions to the Ephesians (4:25—6:9), Paul told his readers why they needed changed behavior. First, he reminded the Ephesians of their former life (4:17-19); then he urged them to leave that life behind (vss. 20-24).

Paul was ready to “insist,” or testify, “in the Lord” regarding proper Christian conduct (vs. 17).

Both he and his fellow believers in Ephesus were in union with Christ. Thus Paul felt he must register a protest against Christians lapsing into pagan practices.

The Ephesian Christians were Gentiles, of course. But the “Gentiles” Paul described here were the unbelieving Gentiles. These people did not have the benefit of Old Testament revelation. Thus their thinking was futile (vs. 17). Or to put it another way, their understanding was darkened (vs. 18). This was because they were cut off from “the life of God,” making them ignorant of how He wanted them to live.

The Gentiles bore responsibility for their ignorance of God. They had allowed their hearts to be hardened. They could have learned about the existence of God from nature, and they could have learned about the proper way of living from the moral law God had planted within them. But instead, they had lost their moral sensitivity (vs. 19).

The Hardened Heart

When Paul spoke of the “hardening” of the Gentiles’ hearts (Eph. 4:18), he used the Greek word *porosis*, which comes from a word that originally described a stone harder than marble. Later, *porosis* was used for the chalkstone that can form in joints and produce a crippling stiffness. The word also came to mean the callus that forms where a bone has been broken and reset, becoming harder than the bone itself. Finally, the word was used to indicate something that had become so hardened that it no longer had the power to feel.

With the loss of moral sensitivity came a complete submerging in immoral behavior. The unbelieving Gentiles were sensual, impure, and lustful. Paul seems to have focused on their sexual sins, perhaps because prostitution was a part of pagan religion. But sexual sins were undoubtedly only one kind of moral failure on the part of the unbelieving Gentiles.

Ask Yourself . . . *Have I ever felt my heart hardening against God?*

Next, Paul began to describe the way Christians are to live. He wrote, "That, however, is not the way of life you learned" (vs. 20). The Ephesian believers had learned that the way of Christian living is nothing like the sinful self-indulgence of unbelievers. Indeed, the Ephesians had been presented with Christ when they had heard preaching about Him (vs. 21). And when they became believers, they had been taught the truth that is embodied in Jesus.

Furthermore, they had been taught three things they needed to do: "put off your old self" (vs. 22),

"be made new" (vs. 23), and "put on the new self" (vs. 24).

The "old self" (vs. 22) was the Ephesians' sinful nature, which gave rise to unholy ways of thinking and acting. This old self was deteriorating because of sin. So like worn-out clothing, it needed to be removed.

Putting off the old, deteriorating self was not enough. The Ephesians had also been called "to be made new" (vs. 23)—that is, to be remade morally. This, Paul said, would take place in the "attitude of [their] minds." Christians must undergo a continuing change of their thinking, under the influence of the Holy Spirit.

Related to being made new is putting on the "new self" (vs. 24). This is the righteous nature of Christ, which leads to holy ways of thinking and acting. The new self is "created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness." Through God's help, we can copy Christ's moral purity in our thoughts and actions.

Ask Yourself . . . *Am I more like Christ, in my thoughts and actions, than I was six months ago?*

12

God's People Living His Way

Ephesians 4:25—5:20

a Truth, Reconciliation, and Honest Labor (4:25-28)

Each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body. —Ephesians 4:25

As we saw last week, Paul taught his readers about putting off the old self and putting on the new self. But "old self" and "new self" are more than nice-sounding terms. So now Paul got down to specifics on what

he meant by acts of the old self and acts of the new self.

Verses 25-28 contain Paul's specific instructions in three areas: falsehood versus truth, grudges versus reconciliation, and stealing versus honest labor.

Christians must not speak falsehood but should instead speak the truth (vs. 25; compare Zech. 8:16). Of course, we must tell the truth to all people. But here Paul had in mind truth-telling among Christians particularly.

As a reason for speaking the truth, Paul mentioned that "we are all members of one body" (Eph. 4:25). Because of our close relationship as

Put Off

Put On

"Put off falsehood." 4:25 "Speak truthfully."

"In your anger do not sin." 4:26

"Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold." 4:26, 27

"Steal no longer." 4:28 "Work."

4:28 "Share with those in need."

Christians, the damage may be particularly serious when we lie to one another. We even hurt ourselves by doing this.

After denouncing the sin of falsehood, Paul turned to sins associated with anger. He quoted Psalm 4:4, which says not to mix sin with anger (Eph. 4:26a). Anger is not necessarily wrong in itself; we are right to feel anger against injustice or evil. But though not necessarily wrong, anger is dangerous. It can be motivated by wrong reasons and can lead to hateful actions. It can also turn into a grudge. That's why Paul warned against remaining angry with someone overnight (vs. 26b). We do best when we quickly move to reconcile with the person who is the object of our anger. Otherwise, we give Satan an opening, a place to drive in a wedge (vs. 27).

After discussing sins associated with anger, Paul moved on to the sin of stealing. In this case Paul may have had in mind a particular member of the Ephesian church—someone who hadn't yet broken his habit of thievery. The word translated "stealing" (vs. 28) is a general term covering all forms of robbery and misappropriation. Corruption and stealing were widespread in the Roman world, as they are in ours.

To the one who made a habit of taking what belonged to another, Paul said stealing must be replaced with honest labor. If he would work to meet his needs, he wouldn't have to resort to illegal or dishonest activities.

The fruit of honest labor can help

us avoid the temptation to steal. And as an added reason for performing useful labor, Paul cited the opportunity to "share with those in need." Anyone who has given away some of his or her hard-earned money to help those who are less fortunate knows the good feeling that comes from being able to do so. As responsible Christians, we work, not to amass a fortune, but to meet our own needs and to gather enough to share with those who lack.

Ask Yourself . . . *Which is the greatest temptation for me: telling lies, cherishing my anger, or taking what does not belong to me? What can I do about this temptation?*

b Imitating God (4:29—5:2)

Follow God's example . . . as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

—Ephesians 5:1, 2

In 4:29-32 we read about more issues involved in replacing the old self with the new self: unwholesome talk versus edifying talk and malice versus love. In addition, we read about how we ought to imitate God. This passage's first subject is "unwholesome talk" (vs. 29). This can include cursing, gossip, lies—any kind of damaging speech. Little

by little, this sort of speaking tears down both the speaker and the hearer.

Christians, therefore, should use speech that builds up others, such as words of comfort, encouragement, and affirmation. This kind of speech conveys a "benefit," or blessing, to the hearer.

Through unwholesome talk, as well as other sins, Christians "grieve the Holy Spirit." Paul warned against this (vs. 30). Grieving the Spirit is always a danger for Christians, since He dwells within us at all times. We have received the Holy Spirit as a seal (compare 1:13) until we receive eternal life in all its fullness. In the meantime, we hurt the Spirit (who is holy) whenever we sin (do something unholy).

Paul next stated in a flurry several

attitudes and actions that Christians must abandon (4:31). The word translated "bitterness" refers to brooding over insults and injuries, whether real or imagined. "Rage and anger" translate words that describe sudden outbursts of temper as well as long-term resentment. "Brawling and slander" come from words describing hateful shouts and insulting words.

Lastly, Paul condemned "every form of malice." The word translated "malice" literally means "base-ness"—that which is bad or morally inferior. This item, then, is actually a summary of the five evils he had just listed.

In contrast to having bitterness, rage, and the rest, Christians are to be kind and compassionate and forgiving (vs. 32). Based on Paul's

Put Off

Put On

Do not speak
"unwholesome talk." 4:29

Speak "what is helpful for
building others up."

"Do not grieve the Holy Spirit." 4:30

"Get rid of all bitterness, rage
and anger, brawling and slander
... malice." 4:31

4:32 "Be kind and compassionate
... forgiving."

5:1 "Follow God's example."

5:2 "Walk in the way of love."

use of the word translated "kind," we can see that he was referring to a sweetness and generosity of disposition. *Compassionate* comes from a rare word that may also be translated "tenderhearted." Paul illustrated what he meant by forgiveness through a reference to God's forgiveness of us at the cost of His Son. That's some example to live up to!

Ask Yourself . . . Which character trait—kindness, compassion, or forgiveness—do I most need to work on improving in my own life?

More than just in the matter of forgiveness, Christians are to imitate God in all aspects of His character (5:1). As children try to copy their parents, so we should try to copy our heavenly Father. And to imitate God means to "walk in the way of love" (vs. 2). Our whole life should be characterized by acts and signs of love shown to family, friends, and strangers.

Again Paul referred to Christ's example—this time to illustrate how we should love. Christ showed us His love by giving Himself up as a sacrifice for our sins. Just as Old Testament sacrifices of animals sent up a pleasing aroma to the Lord (see Exod. 29:18), Christ's death was a fragrant offering. It was an acceptable sacrifice to God because of Christ's perfection of love. His love is unselfish, pure, and active.

Ask Yourself . . . What is one definite step I can take to be more loving toward others?

C High Standards of Morality (5:3-7)

Of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a person is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.

—Ephesians 5:5

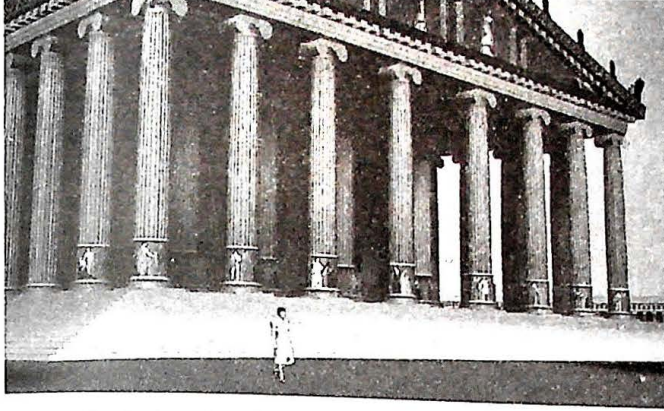
A life filled with God's love will not include the sins that the Ephesians saw in their pagan neighbors and that, indeed, they themselves had committed before coming to faith. In verses 3-7, Paul named some of those sins.

The Ephesian Christians were to have nothing to do with sexual immorality, impurity, and greed (vs. 3). These three sins were only some of the sins practiced by unbelievers in Paul's day. But they were serious ones then, and they are serious ones today. Sad to say, immorality, impurity, and greed even creep into churches today.

Paul followed up the first list of three sinful behaviors with another list of three behaviors unsuitable for Christians: obscenity, foolish talk, and coarse joking (vs. 4; compare 4:29). These kinds of speech are sinful because they harm both those who speak them and those who hear them.

In place of improper speech, the Ephesians were to give thanks to God. Thanksgiving is beneficial to all who speak it and hear it.

Next, Paul returned to the three



The massive temple of Diana in Ephesus was one of the seven wonders of the world. Yet the immorality tolerated and even encouraged by pagan religions was not so wonderful.

sins he had mentioned first: sexual immorality, impurity, and greed (5:5; compare vs. 3). It also crossed his mind to mention that greed is idolatry. The greedy, in effect, worship wealth; wealth occupies the highest place in their affections—the place God alone ought to occupy. Paul wanted to make sure his readers realized that greed and other sins are marks of people who will not enter the kingdom of God.

Evidently, Paul expected some people in the Ephesian church to say that his standards of morality were higher than necessary. Paul

called the arguments employed by such people “empty words” (vs. 6). The moral standards Paul taught were not his own but God’s, and God does indeed judge those who disobey His standards. Thus the Ephesians were not to be deceived by people with low moral standards or “be partners with them” (vs. 7) by joining in their sin.

In our day, empty words about freedom from biblical morality are spoken all the time. But Paul’s advice still holds. As attractive as the arguments for loosening the standards of morality may sound,

Put Off

Put On

Do not engage in “sexual immorality ... impurity... greed.”

5:3

Do not engage in “obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking.”

5:4

“Thanksgiving.”

“Let no one deceive you.”

5:6

- “Do not be partners with”
deceivers.

5:7

we must not be deceived by them. True freedom comes, not through disobedience to God's commands, but through obedience to them.

Ask Yourself . . . *Have I accepted biblical morality once and for all, or do I sometimes rebel against it?*

d Light and Darkness (5:8-14)

You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light. —Ephesians 5:8

Paul once more called upon his readers to remember their past without Christ. He told the Ephesians that before coming to Christ, they not only had lived in moral and spiritual darkness but also had been darkness (vs. 8). Now, after coming to Christ, they not only lived in moral and spiritual light but also were light.

Since the Ephesians had been enlightened and were themselves

Christ-reflecting lights, Paul made three demands on them. All three demands amount roughly to the same thing: the Ephesians were to shun evil and do good.

First, they were to "live as children of light." Presumably this means they were to follow the light of Christ to do what God approves. They were consistently to prove whose kingdom they belonged to—Christ's kingdom of light, not Satan's kingdom of darkness.

Paul added a parenthesis to provide examples of the conduct of those who live in God's light. He said that the "fruit," or product, of this light is "all goodness, righteousness and truth" (vs. 9). The word translated "goodness" refers to kindness, generosity of spirit, and moral excellence. The word translated "righteousness" describes justice and fairness. The word translated "truth" stands for genuineness and honesty.

As his second demand, Paul told the Ephesians to "find out what pleases the Lord" (vs. 10). In every situation that comes up, and every time we have a decision to make, we

Put Off

Put On

5:9 Produce "goodness, righteousness and truth."

5:10 "Find out what pleases the Lord."

Avoid "deeds of darkness." 5:11 "Expose" deeds of darkness.

should seek the Lord's will. Once we have discovered the Lord's will, we should decide to follow it.

Third, the Ephesians were to "have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them" (vs. 11). On the one hand, they were not to commit sins; on the other hand, they were to show up sins for what they are—disobedience of almighty God. Unlike light, which produces such fruit as goodness, righteousness, and truth, darkness is "fruitless," or barren. It produces nothing good.

Ask Yourself . . . *What is the ratio of light to darkness in my life?*

Sin is so shameful that Paul thought some of its shamefulness might rub off on Christians who talk about it unnecessarily (vs. 12). Yet this statement does not conflict with what he had just said about Christians exposing sin. It is God working through us who exposes sin. Like light shining into the darkness, God reveals sin so that people can see its true nature (vss. 13, 14a). Exposure by the light of Christ is just what sinners need if they are to be convinced of their need for change.

To support his point, Paul quoted a fragment of poetry, which appears to have been based on Isaiah 9:2 and 60:1. The immediate source of the quote is not known. It may have been from a chant addressed to Christian converts during their baptismal service. Whatever its source, the poetry shows that Christ shines His light so that sinners can see a way out of the darkness.

e A Wise and Thankful Life (5:15-20)

Be very careful . . . how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil.

—Ephesians 5:15, 16

Christ is continually available to light the path of life for His followers. Thus we are to make a habit of watching our conduct. To do otherwise would be unwise and foolish.

In Paul's day, immorality seemed far more common than morality. Consequently, the Ephesians were to grab every chance of doing good rather than evil (vs. 16). Life presented them with many confusing choices, but Paul believed that if they made the effort, they could come to know what God wanted of them (vs. 17).

Although immorality was widespread in the Roman world of the first century, it's hardly less widespread in our world today. Like the Ephesians, we operate as Christians in a difficult setting. And like them, we bear the responsibility to keep looking out for opportunities to do good, striving to understand the Lord's will for us each step along the way.

Ask Yourself . . . *Do I actively look for opportunities to do good?*

One kind of foolishness against which Paul warned is making oneself drunk with wine (vs. 18).

Put Off

Put On

Do not be "unwise."	5:15	Be "wise."
	5:16	Make "the most of every opportunity."
"Do not be foolish."	5:17	"Understand what the Lord's will is."
"Do not get drunk."	5:18	"Be filled with the Spirit."
	5:19	"Speak . . . with psalms, hymns and songs from the Spirit."
	5:19	"Sing and make music from your heart."
	5:20	Give "thanks to God."

Drunkenness is a sin in itself, and it often leads to other sins such as "debauchery" or wild living.

Paul set up an interesting contrast to drunkenness. Instead of putting ourselves under the control of alcohol, we should put ourselves under the control of the Holy Spirit—only He can quench the needs that so many try to drown in alcohol. At salvation, we received the Spirit, and at different times in our Christian lives we can yield anew to the Spirit's control. People dependent on alcohol or drugs need to know about the superiority of spiritual filling over any artificial "high."

Those who are filled with the Spirit desire to worship God. Paul associated worship with music. The Ephesians were to communicate among

themselves with "psalms, hymns and songs from the Spirit" (vs. 19a). The "psalms" were probably the Psalms of the Old Testament. The "hymns" were songs composed by Christians to honor God. The "songs" may have been called "from the Spirit" either to distinguish them from similar compositions by non-Christians or because they referred to spontaneous singing in the Spirit.

In addition to communicating with one another by music, the Ephesians were to "sing and make music" from their hearts to the Lord (vs. 19b). This is a way of giving thanks to God for all He has given us in Christ (vs. 20).

Ask Yourself . . . *What part does music play in my worship of God?*

13

God's People Submitting in Power

Ephesians 5:21—6:24

a Godly Submission in the Home (5:21—6:4)

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. —Ephesians 5:21

Paul concluded his warning to live wisely according to the Lord's will (vss. 5-17) with a fundamental Christian principle that sums it all up: submit. Indeed, it's "out of reverence for Christ" that we must do this (vs. 21). But because of our selfish human nature, we do not naturally want to submit. Who wants to yield or adapt to someone else? Yet for those who love and honor Christ, submission is crucial.

Paul illustrated Christian submission by pointing to three familiar, household relationships—between husbands and wives (5:22-33), children and parents (6:1-4), and slaves and masters (6:5-9). Then he concluded by ironically pointing to our position of power that comes through such submission (6:10-19).

Clearly when God led Paul to call all believers to submit to one another, human standards of superiority and inferiority were irrelevant. As

Christ Himself exemplified, submissively humbling ourselves is an act of unselfish love. So selfishly wielding our rights and personal status have no place in the context of Christian submission (see Phil. 2:1-8).

As his first example of godly submission, Paul lifted up how wives should relate to their husbands. Such submission is not merely for the sake of deference to another human's authority—it is "as to the Lord," meaning to do so is an obedient response to Christ's lordship (Eph. 5:21-22).

To further clarify, Paul used the analogy of Christ's being the head in relationship to His Body, the Church (vs. 23; compare 4:15-16). There's a beauty in how this comparison draws upon the purpose and promise of marriage, defined in Genesis 2:24—the two become one flesh. Though the head is invested with authority, it's inconceivable to think of a head and body acting independently . . . or that one is superior to the other. They work in harmony because they are one.

Ask Yourself . . . *What does this passage suggest about how I—a part of Christ's Body—relate to Him as head?*

The wife is not the only partner in a marriage who has a duty: husbands must love their wives (vs. 25). Verses 25-31 describe how Christ loves the Church, reflecting how husbands should love their wives. The word translated “love” in these verses is *agape* (uh-GAH-pay)—an unselfish and active concern for another. It is the perfect word, since Jesus’ love for us motivated Him to serve us, giving Himself completely for us (vs. 25).

The cleansing work that Jesus Christ provides for the Church is twofold. First, He died to deliver us from sin’s grip. In response to our faith in Him as our redeemer, He washed and released us from our sins, and the Holy Spirit imparted divine life to us (Titus 3:5). Now, and until we see Him face-to-face, Christ is sanctifying us—making us clean and holy (Eph. 5:26). He accomplishes this noble process by applying God’s Word to our lives (John 17:17). Because He faithfully continues this work, we can anticipate the Church’s triumphant entrance into heaven as the spotless, pure bride of Christ (Eph. 5:27).

This is how husbands are to love their wives! Christ’s example for husbands is one of humbling Himself and giving Himself for the Church, but also of seeing her as blameless and holy. And why does Christ love the Church so much? Because the Church is His Body (vs. 30). A person naturally loves his or her own body, and shows that love by taking care of it (vs. 29).

Significantly, what Paul describes here is not small act of submission in

itself: “husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself” (vs. 28). In essence, this is a call for husbands to submit their very identities to oneness with their wives.

This oneness of head and body is the essence and purpose of marriage. Paul quoted the Genesis reference, emphasizing how Adam realized that Eve was quite literally bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh (2:23). And it’s to this end that “a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh” (Eph. 5:31; compare Gen. 2:24).

Finally, Paul summarized his instructions on submission between husbands and wives (vs. 33): husbands, he said, are to love their wives as they love themselves, and wives are to respect their husbands.

The prospects for so many marriages today are bleak because the partners refuse to follow Paul’s God-inspired instruction. So many marriages have gone sour because wives refuse to give their husbands the respect God requires, and husbands have been too self-absorbed or inhibited to show their wives love. Submission is not optional for believers who claim Christ’s lordship.

But if husbands and wives serve Christ by submitting their desires and themselves to one another, their marriage can be the lifelong union God means it to be.

Ask Yourself . . . *How can I show godly submission to my spouse the next time conflict arises?*

How Can the 5th Commandment Be 1st?

In his discussion of children's obedience, Paul quoted the fifth commandment, calling it "the first commandment with a promise" (Eph. 6:2). Since the second commandment appears to have a promise too, Bible scholars have tried to understand what Paul meant by "first." Here are three suggestions:

- The second commandment's "promise" (Exod. 20:5, 6; Deut. 5:9, 10) is not really a promise but a description. This leaves the fifth commandment as the first one with a promise.
- The fifth commandment was first in the sense that it was the first one taught to children.
- The fifth commandment is among the first in importance.

Paul addressed his next example of submission directly to children. He told them plainly that it is crucial for children to submit to their parents in obedience (vs. 1).

As is the case with wives, husbands, and all believers (Eph. 5:21, 22), a child's submitting as God commands is a reflection of his or her submission to Christ's lordship.

Quoting the fifth of the Ten Commandments, Paul emphasized it comes with a promise of primary importance to children: "that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth" (Eph. 6:3). It is a principle that is observably true—obedience fosters self-discipline and safety, which does tend to bring longevity to one's life. Unfortunately, "obedience" has fallen out of favor in many parents' vocabulary—even among Christians.

As is the case in all of Paul's theology of submission, the application in the parent-child relationship is not

one-sided. After telling the children to be obedient, Paul turned to the fathers as parental head. Far from advocating the then-common practice of severe fatherly tyranny, Paul told fathers to consider their children's feelings and to provide for their spiritual training (vs. 4).

Today also, Christian parents need to avoid making unreasonable demands on their children, especially to the point of exasperation. And considering our natural human tendency to impatiently bully and control people who are weaker, choosing to hold our temper and respond in grace can be quite an act of submission. More so, responding reasonably and mercifully to unreasonable and unmerciful children is nothing short of supernatural submission . . . ask any parent!

Ask Yourself . . . *What part does God expect me to be taking in the Christian education of children?*

b Submission at Work (6:5-9)

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. . . . And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them.

—Ephesians 6:5, 9a

Christian submission is not limited merely to relationships within the family—Paul further illustrated how it affects every aspect of our lives, including how we are daily employed.

Nearly half the population in the Roman Empire was enslaved, most serving in private homes. God never ordained slavery, but as is evident throughout Scripture, He reached down to meet humanity where it was, even in its sinfully oppressive state.

And though hardly comparable to the injustices that are inherent in slavery, much of the way work was accomplished in society then would be analogous to certain dynamics in the workforce of today. Certainly Paul's instructions regarding how Christian slaves and masters were to relate in submission can be applied to modern work scenarios.

He spoke first to Christian slaves (vss. 5-8). It's probably safe to assume that slaves in the Roman world would have done their work grudgingly and out of compulsion. Most of them probably cared little if their efforts made their masters

prosperous or comfortable. They would likely do just enough work to keep from being mistreated.

Paul urged Christian slaves to adopt a far different attitude. They were not to pretend submission to their master's will, but were to be genuinely submissive. They were to obey with "respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart" (vs. 5). They were to obey whether under observation or not (vs. 6). And they were to "serve wholeheartedly" (vs. 7).

Once again, whether or not the object of submission deserves such respect is irrelevant. By submitting to their earthly masters, slaves were actually serving their heavenly Master—and He deserves their submission! So the slaves were to obey "just as [they] would obey Christ" (vs. 5), "as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from [their] heart" (vs. 6), and "as if [they] were serving the Lord, not people" (vs. 7).

By God's grace, none of us are slaves. But some of us may feel like such. We have to do our jobs to pay the bills, but we may not enjoy it. Nevertheless, in whatever position God places us, He calls us to do it as unto Him—our best for the boss!

And what are the benefits of working for such a Master? Often God rewards His people with good things in this life. But He always rewards His people, regardless of their earthly lot, in eternity (vs. 8).

Ask Yourself . . . *In light of future rewards, how can I remind myself while working that I am serving God?*

Slaves probably outnumbered

masters in the early Christian churches, but obviously there were some Christian masters. For one, Philemon of Colosse (to whom Paul wrote one of the New Testament letters) certainly was a slaveholder.

The focus in this passage was not on bringing about revolution or grand-scale societal changes. God's primary concern here, expressed through Paul, was on the personal level. So Paul instructed Christian masters to treat their slaves well.

Social change orchestrated by human efforts (even when just and right) are temporal and finite at best. Rather, the concerns God had Paul address have eternal ramifications.

The masters were to treat their slaves "in the same way," that is, the same way they'd like to be treated (vs. 9; compare Luke 6:31). For instance, masters were not to threaten their slaves, since they themselves would not like similar treatment.

Earlier, Paul had urged the slaves to obey their masters because of their future reward, which is given to faithful people regardless of social position. Similarly, he urged the masters to treat their slaves well because of the future judgment, to which all are subject regardless of social position. The masters were not independent rulers over their slaves. In fact, both Christian masters and Christian slaves had a heavenly Master to obey. And someday all will meet that true Master.

Ask Yourself . . . *Do I treat subordinates as I like to be treated?*

C The Battle Is Spiritual (6:10-17)

Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

—Ephesians 6:12

When we follow Paul's examining the practicalities of Christian submission, at home and at work, our natural tendency can easily be to relegate our responses to the purely physical—to the, "What should I be doing to change this?"

It's no accident, then, that Paul begins his transition into the epistle's conclusion with the words, "Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power" (vs. 10). There's a wonderful irony here: it's only in our living in submission to Christ's lordship that we can truly be strong and powerful. So while godly submission to husbands, wives, parents, children, and bosses is by the world's standards a sign of weakness, in Christ it is a proof of unfathomable power. To be sure, there's no way we could accomplish such by ourselves.

It's crucial for the Christian to understand that these issues of submission, along with all the spiritual concerns Paul has addressed in Ephesians, are not merely physical struggles. Paul pointed out toward the beginning of

this letter (Eph. 2:1-3) that the opposition we face is not merely relegated to what we can see and touch.

To be sure, Christians face opposition by the "ways of this world," meaning all society acting apart from God. Likewise, every human's nature, "our flesh," is sinful to the core. But in league with these two forces is a powerful spiritual force. So in closing, Paul focused on the spiritual struggles that assail us.

Christians today are engaged in a spiritual war no less fierce than the one that raged in the early years of the church. In fact, our spiritual battles are really the continuation of a war begun long ago.

Satan and his demons have adapted their strategies to current situations. But their goals have not changed. They want to prevent unbelievers from hearing the Gospel, they want to undermine the faith of believers, and they want to prevent Christians from contributing to God's work in the world.

In response, Paul called believers to "put on the full armor of God" (Eph. 6:11). As a prisoner in Rome, Paul was chained to a Roman soldier. Perhaps he even saw his guard as a model and familiar reference for his audience. In the following verses, he would repeat this analogy and further develop it into an extended metaphor (vss. 13-17). But here, instead, he explained why it is necessary to put on spiritual armor (vss. 11-12).

Paul used four words or phrases to describe the demons led by Satan. The words and phrases are translated by the NIV (1) "rulers," (2) "authori-

ties," (3) "powers of this dark world," and (4) "the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." It's evident that demons have a certain amount of power and influence at this stage in history. But of course, their power and influence are less than Christ's. Nevertheless, they are potent foes whom Christians are to take seriously.

The word translated "stand" was a military term for defensively holding on to a position, as opposed to assailing on the offensive—a concept that comes up again in verses 13 and 14. It is also consistent with Paul's earlier warning against various sins (Eph. 4:25-31)—failing to submit amounts to a breach in our defenses, giving Satan a "foothold" (vs. 27) in what is rightfully our Lord Jesus Christ's territory.

Ask Yourself . . . *Are there territories in my life that—though possessed by God—I am surrendering to Satan through unrepentant sin?*

As every Roman soldier knew, the time to put on his armor was not when the arrows began to fly. Before the battle, he prepared himself by taking up armor and weapons.

Likewise, Paul told the Ephesians not to delay preparing for spiritual battle. They should "put on the full armor of God" (vs. 13) right away. Then they would be ready "when the day of evil comes," that is, when Satan launches his attack.

In a sense, of course, life for a Christian is one long spiritual war. But this war, like every war, has changes in tempo. It includes surprise attacks, lulls, and sieges. We ought to take advantage of every

break in the action to strengthen ourselves for the challenges ahead. When we are feeling confident and encouraged, that is the right time to prepare for when we may be discouraged or tempted with sin.

Paul knew that with preparation, the Ephesians would "be able to stand [their] ground," so that when the battle was over, they would have lost no territory.

Having made his plea for preparedness, Paul began describing six pieces of equipment that the Christian should always be wearing (vss. 14-17). The first piece of equipment is the "belt of truth" (vs. 14). A Roman soldier's belt held his armor together. For Christians, our belt is "truth." This general term is not relegated to the truth of the Gospel; it includes how we live according to truth in all that we do, always acting with integrity and faithfulness.

Similarly, the Christian's "breastplate of righteousness" is more about righteous living (the process of Christ's sanctifying us, as Paul noted in Rom. 6:13 and 14:17-18) than the positional righteousness we obtained at salvation. As we draw on Christ's righteousness, we are able to live devout and holy lives. A righteous life is a crucial defense against Satan's attacks.



Illustration by Bob de la Peña

Aptly, Paul then called the believer to be fitted with "the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace" (vs. 15). Paul wrote similarly that this "peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:7). There is an unmatched peace that comes to believers, especially when their surefooted stability is set in the Good News of God's Word.

One of Satan's most potent attacks is against our trust in God—it was at the core of the Serpent's temptation of Adam and Eve, when he caused them to question God's trustworthiness in prohibiting the fruit (Gen. 3:4-5). So the fourth piece of equipment is the "shield of faith" (vs. 16)—faith like that of Job, who trusted God no matter how fast and furious Satan's flaming arrows of doubt and temptation rained down.

The fifth piece of equipment is the "helmet of salvation" (vs. 17), which suggests protecting our minds. In 1 Thessalonians 5:8, Paul seems to have further elaborated on what it is about salvation that protects our minds—it's hope. No matter how tragic and bleak a battle may become, God's assurance that we have the hope of ultimate salvation

gives us a remarkable capacity for mental and spiritual toughness.

The last piece of equipment is the "sword of the Spirit," which Paul clearly specified is "the Word of God." When tempted in the wilderness, Christ Himself used Scripture as a weapon against Satan (Luke 4:1-13). The Spirit can help us use God's Word against our same foe. And as Hebrews 4:12 indicates, nothing false can stand up to it.

Ask Yourself . . . *Are there pieces of God's armor that I'm failing to put on?*

d Submit Your Prayers in Grace (6:18-24)

Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. —Ephesians 6:18

Significantly, Paul concluded his description of spiritual preparedness by urging his readers to pray "in the Spirit" (vs. 18). It's a conclusion that is consistent with what Paul had begun—calling for submission to the one who is truly in control. Spiritual battles are not about how effectively we fight; they are about how we entrust the outcome to God. Only by our cooperating with God's Spirit in us will we see victory in our lives over the world, the flesh, and over Satan.

Paul further clarified how prayer should be practiced. First, it's to be frequent—we are to pray "on all occasions" and "always keep

on praying." Second, prayer in the Spirit has room for variety—we are to pray "with all kinds of prayers and requests." Third, prayer in the Spirit is well informed—we are to "be alert," on the lookout for needs. And fourth, prayer in the Spirit is unselfish—we are to pray not only for ourselves but "for all the Lord's people."

As an example of the Lord's people for whom the Ephesians could pray, Paul offered himself (vss. 19-20). It's worth noting that Paul did not ask the Ephesians to pray for his release from prison. Instead, he asked for prayers that he would be courageous in preaching the Gospel. Indeed, characterizing himself as "an ambassador in chains," it's clear Paul saw his imprisonment as a God-given opportunity to convey the Gospel to officials high in the Roman government—people he would not otherwise have had an opportunity to meet.

Ask Yourself . . . *When facing struggles, am I first inclined to draw upon my resources, or submit in prayer?*

Paul concluded with a typical apostle's benediction, although he varied it slightly from his usual form. "Grace" (vs. 24) is usually listed first in Paul's benedictions, but in this instance he seems to emphasize "peace," "love," and "faith" (vs. 23) first. Paul was deeply concerned that the Ephesian believers (or any church) be united and at peace with one another—submitting to the other's concerns and needs in love, thereby loving Jesus Christ.

The Ministry of Paul

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CONVERSION

VISIT
TO
ARABIA
AND
MINISTRY
IN
DAMASCUS

VISIT WITH
PETER IN
JERUSALEM

MINISTRY IN
CILICIA AND
SYRIA

FAMINE RELIEF
VISIT TO JERU-
SALEM, PRIVATE
MEETING WITH
APOSTLES

FIRST MIS-
SIONARY
JOURNEY

COUNCIL IN
JERUSALEM

LETTER TO
GALATIANS

CONFRONTATION
WITH PETER IN
ANTIOCH

THIRD MIS-
SIONARY
JOURNEY

SECOND
MISSIONARY
JOURNEY

CAESAREAN
IMPRISONMENT

FIRST
ROMAN IMPRIS-
ONMENT

LETTER TO
EPHESIANS

FOURTH MIS-
SIONARY JOUR-
NEY

SECOND ROMAN
IMPRISONMENT
AND MARTYR-
DOM

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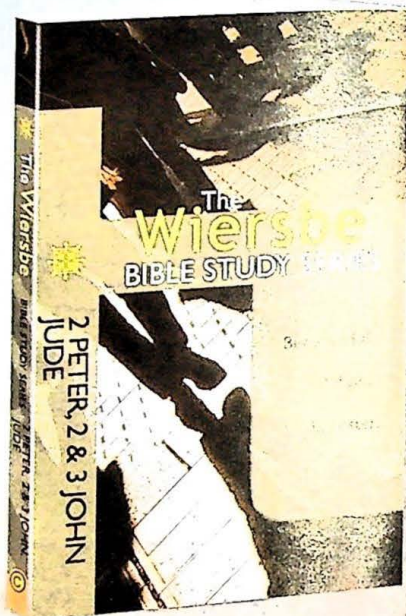
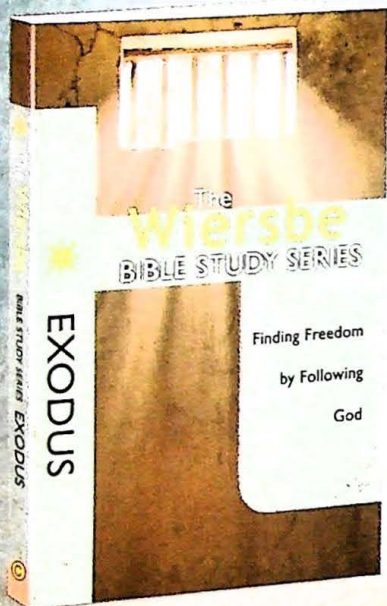
JUNE

2022/23	Philippians, Colossians	Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther	Revelation	Ezekiel, Daniel
2023/24	Mark	Psalms	Galatians, Ephesians	Job, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs
2024/25	Acts	Genesis	1, 2 Thessalonians, Jude	Joel, Jonah, Amos, Hosea, Micah
2025/26	Luke	Exodus	1 Corinthians	Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy
2026/27	Hebrews	Joshua	2 Corinthians	Isaiah
2027/28	Matthew	Judges, Ruth	1, 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon	Jeremiah, Lamentations
2028/29	Romans	1, 2 Samuel	1, 2 Peter	Nah., Zeph., Hab., Obad., Hag., Zech., Mal.
2029/30	John	1, 2 Kings, 1, 2 Chronicles	James 1, 2, 3 John	Proverbs

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ISBN 978-1-589196-12-2

