

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Paul's City Epistles: Ephesians

Good morning and welcome to *Truth for Today*, where we are continuing with our series of six talks based on the letters written by the Apostle Paul to various cities where there were Christian churches. We have already dealt with Romans and Galatians so that I shall be talking about the letter that Paul sent to the church at Ephesus. A glimpse of the city itself is given in EM Blaiklock's book *Cities of the New Testament*, (ISBN: 9780720800630) where he writes: "Ephesus was already at least ten centuries old when Paul first trod the marble paving-stones of the fine street which ran from the harbour on the Cayster's mouth to the Great Theatre, where the land began to rise towards Mount Pion."

Blaiklock goes on to tell how the citizens of Ephesus had begun to worship Artemis, building a primitive temple that was destroyed by fire in 365 BC. Its successor was one of the wonders of the ancient world, so impressive was the architecture and size of this structure. The moral and spiritual stance of the inhabitants of Ephesus is summed up by one of the city's officials, as we read in Acts 19:35, using the English Standard Version of the Bible: "*And when the town clerk had quietened the crowd, he said, 'Men of Ephesus, who is there who does not know that the city of the Ephesians is temple keeper of the great Artemis, and of the sacred stone that fell from the sky?'*"

As only to be expected, the Gospel preached by Paul was rejected by the devotees of this idolatrous teaching, which resulted in the riot that we read about in Acts 19:21-41. Before we begin to look at the Ephesian letter, we ought to note that Paul summed up his task under God as "...to testify to the gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20:24). As we go through the letter we will note how great a debtor Paul was to the grace of God.

The themes that appear in this letter are not new, or novel, for they appear in other letters that the Apostle wrote. Some of what we learn this morning will have been taught in the previous two broadcasts and will, no doubt, reappear in the last three talks of this series. God's sovereign grace, as the motivating power of all His dealings with His people, is the subject of Ephesians 1:7-10: "*In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all his wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.*"

Ephesians 1:7-10, reveals how God will unite all things in Christ in the ages to come, because of who He is and what He accomplished at Calvary, when He suffered on the cross displaying the mercy, grace and righteousness of God.

Before we proceed to other aspects of the Ephesian letter, I want us to consider the importance of this word 'grace' and all that it stands for in the mind and heart of the Apostle. I am sure that Paul would have sung Newton's hymn, "Amazing grace", with great enjoyment, for God's amazing grace is at the centre of Paul's understanding of the Gospel. I trust that you do not find me patronising if I point out the essential meaning of 'grace', which is 'free giving', a very precious thought, for we are saved by grace alone. Vine in his "*Dictionary of New Testament Words*" writes, regarding grace, that "there is stress on its freeness and universality, its spontaneous character as in the case of God's redemptive mercy, ... thus it is set in contrast with debt (Romans 4:4 and Romans 4:16), with works (Romans 11:6) and with law (John 1:17)". Another definition, this time from Kite's "*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*" states that the basic thought is "free giving" so that "grace" is not just a quality in God, but its actualisation is evident at the cross and in the proclamation of the Gospel.

I have spent some time concentrating upon 'grace', because this is not only an important aspect in any overview of Ephesians, but, and I repeat, also in the whole of Paul's understanding of the Gospel. So intensely does he feel about grace, that it is mentioned twelve times in this letter alone! Do we appreciate the grace of God that has been manifested in the Lord Jesus as much as we should?

We move on now to another theme mentioned in Ephesians 1:7-10, which is the greatness and exaltation of the Lord Jesus. From Ephesians 1:10 we learned that in the fullness of time all things will be united in Him. Just what does this mean? This glorious prospect, according to the expositor Harry Ironside, is "a divine event, towards which the whole of creation moves, when God will head up everything in Christ" (see Ironside, HA: *In the Heavens: Practical expository addresses on the Epistle to the Ephesians*, ISBN 9781501070341). To expand upon this, we must note that Ephesians 1:10 stated that God's will is centred in the Lord Jesus. There will come a time when the Messiah will be

revealed and the messianic age ushered in. We are not yet in that time for the Lord has not yet come, but when He does, it will start a series of events that culminates in the universal recognition of the greatness and supremacy of the Lord. Paul enlarges on this at the end of Ephesians 1: *"...according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all"* (Ephesians 1:19-23).

I have no doubt that Stephen Thomson will take up a similar thought, when he takes us through the Philippian epistle next week. Suffice to stress again that our second major theme of Ephesians is the eternal exaltation of the Man who is called Jesus, who was crucified at Calvary, yet who rose triumphant from the tomb, manifesting a complete and utter victory over death.

As the letter to the Ephesians was more of a general letter to a group of churches, rather than to a specific church, there are no particular problems to be dealt with. Paul, therefore, details the normal Christian life that he expects the believers in Christ to follow. He introduces the thought of life in the heavenlies, as we learn in Ephesians 1:3: *"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places."*

Consistently, Paul maintains that the Christian's life is lived in another realm, with different values, for we are not earthly, but heavenly and we are called to life in the Spirit. We can only know the Lord Jesus in a spiritual way, which is not any whit less than those who knew Him in the days of His flesh. Paul longed for a deeper knowledge of his ascended Lord, as he makes clear in Philippians 3:8 and Philippians 3:10: *"Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ... that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death."*

Such an experience is open for all, as the believer has been placed in the heavenlies where Christ is. This is a realm where the spiritual is more important than anything else. Are we heavenly or earthly people?

Ephesians 2 repeats the theme of grace that was before us in Ephesians 1, but now the Apostle is also emphasising what we were before grace saved us: *"And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience - among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature the children of wrath, like the rest of mankind"* (Ephesians 2:1-3).

This description of what the Ephesians once were before grace rescued them is an important facet of biblical teaching. Nathan, the prophet, reminded King David that *"the LORD of hosts had taken him [David] from following sheep to be a prince over Israel."* Hannah, in her prayer, recorded in 1 Samuel 2:8 states: *"[God] raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honour."*

Many other scriptures could be quoted to illustrate how God has taken His people from spiritual poverty and destitution to bless them with all spiritual blessings. We must never forget what the Lord has done for us and where He has placed us, as Paul tells us and the Ephesians: *"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not the result of works, so that no one may boast"* (Ephesians 2:8).

This leads us on to another key thought of the Ephesian letter, but before I deal with this, can I remind you that you are listening to *Truth for Today*, where I now want us to consider "reconciliation", which is an important result of the death of Christ. Previously the Jews and Gentiles were alienated from each other; now, according to Ephesians 2:13-16: *"But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility."*

Please note, that the Lord Himself is our peace (Ephesians 2:14), for He reconciled Jew and Gentile when He died upon the cross, so removing the hatred that existed between these two groups. It was a difficult lesson to learn, especially for the Jew, yet Paul is insistent that the truth of reconciliation and the "one new man", or the "one body", composed of all believers, had to be lived out practically, as we can read in Acts 15. Though it is often easier for us to accept that we are reconciled to God, than reconciled to each other, we have to acknowledge that in the death of Christ all barriers have been removed.

Many years ago, I first heard the following amusing rhyme that contains more than a germ of truth:

*"To dwell above with saints we love
Will be grace and glory,
But to live below with saints we know,
That's a different story!"*

Anon

How easy it is to accept Paul's teaching in this letter in a theological vacuum, where nothing awkward confronts us. When we move out into the world and everyday life, we find it more difficult. We must recognise, however, that one of the keynotes of the letter to the Ephesians is that in Christ we are reconciled to God and to each other. As with all New Testament teaching the truth is there to be accepted and obeyed.

We must now move on quickly, or I shall run out of time before I have covered all the points I want to raise. My next theme concerns *"the one body"* that was briefly mentioned a few minutes ago.

The unity of the people of God is not only brought before us in the letter to the Ephesians, for Paul, and the other Apostles, consistently taught this truth to all their converts. I now quote Ephesians 4:4-6: *"There is one body and one spirit - just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call - one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all."*

The reasons why we Christians should ardently seek to preserve our unity are laid out before us in that quotation, and I can do no better than quickly mention some of them.

- *"One body"* describes the church seen on earth as a visible entity, with all national and religious divisions abolished;
- *"One Spirit"* indwells the one body and, apart from Him, the body cannot exist. The same Spirit that indwelt the disciples at that first Pentecost dwells within us;
- We all acknowledge the *"One Lord"* in whose name we are all baptised; and finally,
- There is one *"God and Father of [us] all"*, to whom we all pray and worship.

These unities mark all Christians.

While considering the universality of the church, where all members are received on the same ground as redeemed in Christ, Paul now shows how the ascended Lord endowed His church: *"And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up of the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and to the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ"* (Ephesians 4:11-13).

Whereas we could spend a considerable amount of time discussing this passage, I can only say that the *"one body"*, and the ministries that would nurture and protect the people of God and equip them for service, is an important keynote of the Ephesian letter.

As we approach the end of our time together, I cannot leave out the moral implications with which Paul closes all of his letters. Christianity, for the Apostle, was a life to be lived reflecting at all times the perfections of Christ, regardless of our previous culture. We have to recognise that we must leave our past habits and manner of life. Consequently, in Ephesians 4:17-18 he writes: *"Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to the hardness of their heart."*

All that was associated with the moral depravity and self-indulgent habits of their previous life had to go. The New English Bible uses a telling phrase when it translates this section as *"good-for-nothing notions."*

When the Ephesians became believers in the Lord Jesus, they had to begin a completely new life. According to Ephesians 4:23-24 they were instructed to: *"... be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness."*

From now on, they were to undergo a fundamental change to their manner of life and mental outlook. It must be emphasised that this was not produced by anything other than the power of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

What then would be these changes? What would they look like in the life of the believer? Paul sets them out in the rest of his letter, touching upon such matters as speaking the truth (Ephesians 4:15), doing that which is good, right and true, and seeking to discern the will of the Lord. In short, it is to live as a Christian, worshipping and serving the Lord.

We must now finish this overview of the Ephesian letter, as the clock has beaten us. What I wish to emphasise is the latter section of the letter, which is replete with practical Christianity. We have considered at length the wonder of the grace of God who has saved us and given us new life and hope. Our sins are forgiven and we are indwelt by the Spirit of God. Consequently, we should live a life that is pleasing to the Lord.

Many years ago, when I was an apprentice on day release at the local technical college, a fellow student was ignoring the lecture and writing out a sermon. Apparently he was a local preacher on trial with the Methodist Church. On asking him if I could read it, he refused and with a knowing smile said, "...you wouldn't understand it as this is theology". I pray that none of us will ever dismiss the words of Scripture as theology that is incomprehensible to our fellowmen. The blessings of the love of God are available to every believer and we should be following the injunctions of the latter part of the Ephesian letter in a spirit of gratitude and thankfulness because of all that God has done for us.

Good morning to you all and thank you for listening.

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