

OpenTheo

Ephesians: Chapter-by-Chapter Commentary

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Transcript

The Book of Ephesians was likely an apostolic encyclical, a circular letter sent to various churches in the region of Asia Minor. Unlike other Pauline epistles, it does not greet anyone, and besides Paul, only mentions the name of Tychicus, who is its bearer. There is no treatment of specific issues in a congregation, and it deals with the more general themes of the Gospel message.

It is possible that it is the letter referred to as the letter from the Laodiceans in Colossians 4.16. In Marcion's canon, the epistle to the Ephesians is referred to as to the Laodiceans. The form of verse 1 suggests that some reference to a place name was contained in the original. We might speculate that it was left blank in the master copy of the encyclical, and filled in differently for whichever church it was addressed to.

Presumably, the Ephesians copy of this more general encyclical is the one that has come down to us in Scripture. Some have suggested that the association with Ephesus might have arisen from the fact that Ephesus was a particularly important city for the early church. Paul visited it on a number of occasions, a few of which visits are recorded in Acts 18-20.

It was a larger city with a sizeable Jewish population. The careful reader of Ephesians will be struck by a number of close parallels between the letters of Colossians and Ephesians. There are several chunks that are substantially similar in both.

Almost the entirety of Ephesians chapter 1 is just two sentences, verses 3-14 is a single 202 word sentence, the longest in the entirety of the Pauline corpus. Paul begins the epistle in a very familiar manner. He identifies himself as an apostle of Christ Jesus.

He is someone sent on a divinely appointed mission. He wishes grace to them and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, a typical Pauline greeting. The sentence that comprises the entire rest of our section is introduced with the words, Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It is a statement of praise, adopting a form that could be found in synagogue worship and elsewhere. The opening clauses are all about blessing. Paul blesses God the Father, because God the Father has blessed us in Christ, and he has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.

The extent of the blessing is remarkable. Every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places suggests that there is no spiritual blessing that we lack. These blessings are spiritual, coming from the Spirit of God.

They are granted and enjoyed in Christ. Christ is the realm to which these blessings belong. God's blessings go all the way back to the very beginning.

God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world. It is important that we pay attention to what Paul is saying here. When we read such statements, we can often instinctively translate them into abstract theology.

Paul is teaching, we suppose, the doctrine of election, that God elected a certain set of individuals before the foundation of the world. But Paul isn't speaking about certain individuals here. He is speaking about us.

Election isn't about an abstract group of individuals of unknown identity in this place. It's about the Church. God chose the Church in Christ before the foundation of the world.

A further thing to notice is that this isn't just about some timeless way of salvation. The people who were chosen are not all believers throughout all ages, but the people of God formed in Christ in the fullness of time. The point that Paul is making here is that the in-Christ people that God has intended to form from the very beginning, from before the very beginning, has now, at this very point in history, been unveiled.

Now we see, revealed to the entire world, God's long-hidden purpose. God's choice of us was for a purpose, in order that we might be holy and without blame before him. We are a people who have been set apart to God, so that we might live renewed lives that bear the mark of his holiness.

Paul's statement about election here might remind us of the sorts of statements that we find in the Old Testament, in places such as Deuteronomy 7, verses 6-8. For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.

It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it is because the Lord loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh, king of Egypt. At the heart of the doctrine of election that Paul presents here, as in the case of Moses' account of election in Deuteronomy, is the great and utterly unmerited grace of God.

We were chosen, but there was nothing in ourselves to merit that choice, nothing that would distinguish us from anyone else so as to make us fitting recipients of God's goodness. Although many people focus Paul's doctrine of election upon individuals, I think this is misguided, especially at this point. The focus is upon the new Jew and Gentile people of God formed in Jesus the Messiah.

Moses' teaching about election was about God's choice of a body of people, not so much of the individuals that comprised it. And I think the same is true about Paul's. As we are in Christ, we find ourselves bang in the centre of the great story of the entire cosmos.

But that story was always about Christ and God's eternal purpose to form a people in him, rather than about God choosing a certain set of individuals and then determining that Christ would be the means to redeem them, as some have supposed. God's intent underlies everything else. God's purpose was not merely concerned with the end of our being a holy and blameless people before him, but with the means by which this would be achieved.

By God's will, he carries out his intentions and will bring them to their desired end. If election chiefly concerned the end of the purpose, predestination concerns the means. And the means is adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ.

Our status as a chosen and holy people is achieved as we are adopted through Jesus Christ, being made to participate in his sonship. The blessings that we enjoy are enjoyed in Christ, the beloved son. He is the elect one, revealed in the fullness of time for us, so that we might enjoy the status of sons.

And we have security in God's purpose and the sovereignty of his grace. God will realize his purpose, planned before the ages began, and he will bring it to a certain completion. And we are going to be beneficiaries.

Christ is at the heart of the entire purpose of God. In Christ we have redemption through his blood that has been shed for us. We were rescued by his cross.

Our debt was paid. We were bought back for God. In Christ we have forgiveness of our trespasses.

All the charges that were against us have finally been dealt with. All according to God's immense grace which he has lavished freely upon us. In Christ the mystery of God's will is made known, in a way that brings us into possession of deep wisdom and insight.

In Christ God's great plan for the cosmos, to unite all things in him, has been unveiled. In Christ we have an inheritance, or perhaps are an inheritance, God's own possession, by the secure operations of the God who works all things according to his will. God is going to fulfill his purpose.

He is not going to fail. And this will all be to the praise of God's glory. We were made participants in all of this when we heard the message of Christ, as we heard of his lordship and of his kingdom, and as we believed in him responding to that message.

We were sealed with the Holy Spirit, marked out as those who will receive the full inheritance. The Spirit is a down payment or a guarantee of a greater inheritance that still awaits us. Once again this is all to the end of God's glory.

Christ is at the very heart of this account of salvation. At every single step of the process of God's grace being worked out, it is in Christ. From the very beginning when we are

chosen in him before the foundation of the world, to the time of final realisation when all things are gathered together in Christ.

The entire portrait of God's cosmic purpose, of which salvation is just a part, is all drawn around Christ. Christ is the one in whom the will of the Father is being worked out. Do we want to know what God's will is? We must look to Christ.

Christ is the one in whom the will of God is revealed. Do we want to know who are chosen? The people who belong to God. Look to Christ.

If we are in Christ, it is in him that we will find certainty of our election. Do we want to know if we are loved by God? Look to Christ. He is the beloved.

If we are in him, then we have every spiritual blessing in him. We are granted by God's grace to participate in the love with which the Father loves him. And all of the work of Christ redounds to the glory of God.

It leads to the praise of the Father. Everything comes from the Father, from his purpose. It is achieved in Christ, by the Holy Spirit, the one who seals us.

And then it leads back to God the Father, in the praise of his glory that arises from all of these things. A question to consider. What difference does it make to draw our portrait of election around Christ? After the initial address, Paul's epistles commonly begin with a prayer of thanksgiving.

Ephesians, however, has an extended blessing of God in chapter 1 verses 3 to 14. The prayer of thanksgiving follows this in verses 15 to 23. In the initial blessing, Paul declared the centrality of Christ in the entire work of God in the cosmos, in history and in salvation.

Now he expresses his thanks to God for the faith of the recipients of the letter and his prayer for their growth in understanding of the truth of Christ. If this is an encyclical, Paul is probably writing both to churches that he has visited or planted alongside churches like the church in Colossae, of which he has only heard through men like Epaphras. However, whether he knew the believers in the churches personally or not, the news of the faith of the Christians in the region had reached him in prison.

Both their faith in the Lord Jesus and their love towards the saints have been reported to him and along with the incredible work of God in Christ that he has explored in the opening blessing, this provokes him to thanksgiving and prayer for them. The expression faith in the Lord Jesus could be read either as faith with the Lord Jesus as its object or as a reference to faith exercised in the realm of the Lord Jesus. I believe that it is more likely to be the latter, in large measure on account of Paul's more regular usage.

If we are to trust God and be faithful in difficult days, we must do so on the solid rock of

Christ. Our faith does not just look to Christ, it is built upon Christ. Their love for all of the saints has also reached Paul's ears.

Love, as seen elsewhere in Paul, is paramount. It is the virtue that holds everything else together. The love toward all the saints, more particularly, is the glue that will hold the people of God in unity.

Paul's prayer is, like so much of his teaching, deeply shaped by a Trinitarian grammar. The underlying structure of salvation and of God's work more generally is from the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit, to be saved as to be brought into fellowship with the Triune God. Whether there is a direct reference to the Holy Spirit in verse 17 can be debated.

It is possible that we should read this as a spirit of wisdom and of revelation, referring to the human spirit that is illuminated by the Holy Spirit. However, we might think of the description of the Messiah in Isaiah chapter 11 verse 2. And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. The Spirit of the Lord rests upon Christ, and those in Christ receive the Spirit of Christ.

The wisdom that we have is focused on the understanding that we receive of the work of God in Christ. It grants us a knowledge of the hope to which we have been called, and of his glorious inheritance. When Paul talks about the Spirit, he so frequently talks about the Spirit in relation to God's promised future.

The Spirit is the down payment of God's future. He is the guarantee of our inheritance. The Spirit is the spirit of adoption, anticipating the adoption that we await in the resurrection.

The Spirit is the one who opens our eyes to the hope to which God has called us. The Spirit is the one who seals us for future redemption. In the work of the Spirit in our midst, we have a reality-filled promise of God's future.

The Spirit will draw us to reflect upon and to long for God's future. The Spirit is the one by whom we groan inwardly with birth pangs of the new creation. The Spirit is the one who summons people into the future that God has prepared for them.

If we have the Spirit within us, we will be yearning, we will be moving towards God's future. The Spirit of wisdom that God gives us helps us to recognize the immeasurable greatness of God's power toward us. It helps us to recognize that we have been caught up in the purpose of our Creator, determined in Christ before the foundation of the world.

The Almighty God's plan from before all of the ages is playing out right now in our midst, bringing us salvation and new life. We aren't in some neglected backwater of the cosmos with a God who is unmindful or forgetful of us. We have, by a remarkable work of His

grace, been made partakers of the central purpose of everything, Jesus Christ.

God's power was most clearly manifest in the resurrection and the ascension, by which Christ was raised from the dead and placed above all other powers. The point here is not just one about their power. One could argue that God's might is more clearly seen in the act of creation.

What in particular do we see in Christ? We see the character of God's might and we see the purpose of God's might. Many people worry about the hiddenness of God, especially when we talk about things such as election, as Paul does in this chapter. We can wonder whether God's will is really a threatening reality, relative to which we can never know where we stand.

God is veiled and capricious and we don't know what His purpose for us is. However, God's true face is seen in the Lord Jesus. Much as a child can trust her parents with many things that she does not yet understand, because she knows their loving intentions and their good character, so in Christ the shape of God's great purpose and His face towards us are unveiled.

Do you want to know what God's purpose is for humanity? Look at Christ. Christ has been raised from the dead and seated above all earthly powers in the heavenly places. This is what God intends for us as His people.

And in Christ we also see His power to carry this out. The power of death could not contain Christ. No rule, authority, power or dominion stands over Him.

Whatever type of thing to which you could attribute might or rule, whatever category you could employ, Christ is supreme over them all. He is above every name that is named. Names have power but Christ's name is the greatest name of all.

Philippians 2, verses 9-11 Nor is there any temporal limit. Christ's supremacy is not just in this age, it is also in the age that is to come. All things are placed under His feet.

Paul is alluding to Psalm 110, verse 1 here, the great ascension verse, quoted more than any other verse in the New Testament. The Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool. But the clincher here, the chief point, is that the one who has all of this authority, power and dominion, has been given as head over all things to the church.

Paul's point here is not so much that Christ is also the ruler over all things within the church, much as He is over every other thing in the creation. Rather, it is that as the ruler over all things, Christ is given as head to the church. As head of the church, Christ is acting in a way that renders the church the special beneficiary of all of His work, of all of His authority, of all of His power and dominion and might.

That is exercised in a way that blesses and builds up His church. Paul's point is that Christ is the Lord of all and the church is His body. He rules all of these things in a way that leads to our good.

Indeed, as Christ's body, the church is the realm where the fullness of Christ is to be found. The church is the realm where the life of Christ is most fully being realised and expressed by the work of His Spirit. Christ operates over all things in the world, but He is present in a unique way within His church.

A question to consider. The meaning of the term head is often debated as Paul speaks about the husband as the head of the wife. How might consideration of how Paul speaks of Christ as the head of the church help us better to understand what this could mean? Paul began with his great blessing of God and prayer of thanksgiving in Ephesians chapter 1. Now in Ephesians chapter 2 he develops some of the themes of the prayer further, continuing one of the greatest surveys of the grand picture of salvation that we have in the New Testament.

Paul begins by examining the previous condition in which the recipients of the letter once existed. They were dead in trespasses and sins. The various shifts in the pronouns are significant here, although they have occasioned much debate.

Paul is probably especially focusing upon the condition of Gentile Christians prior to their conversion. They were spiritually dead and also outside of any relationship with God, alienated from and dead to God, both in their spiritual condition and in their exclusion from the covenant. This was a condition that they formerly walked in.

This death was their manner of life, a course of existence set by the general course of the world, all led by the prince of the power of the air, Satan himself, and by the spirits still at work in those described as the sons of disobedience. The spirit here is probably a reference not to Satan himself directly, but to the pervasive, insidious and insistent influence that he exerts. Paul describes the way that their former way of life was determined by the threefold forces of the world, the flesh and the devil.

They followed the general course of the society around them, under the rule of the devil, and subject to the passions of the flesh and the desires of the body and the mind and the general spirit of the age. In such suggested passages we get a sense of Paul's subtle and multifaceted account of sin, one that recognises various aspects to its operations in the world. Sin has structural, social and societal elements in the world.

It is part of the spirit of the age, it is part of the zeitgeist. Sin has a personal power and agency to it, as it operates according to the overarching rule of the devil and his demonic forces. Sin is also a matter of our ungoverned passions and desires, and our fundamental mindsets and the ways that these play out in everything that we do.

Sin is those vices that have taken deep root in us, those habits that have become second nature for us, those desires that we never controlled and that now control us. It is about the inappropriate and sinful loves that motivate us, and that drive us to pursue after certain things rather than the things that we ought to. When Paul talks about salvation, he draws his picture of it against such a background.

Salvation deals with sin at each of these levels of its operations. We are often in danger of exalting one or two of these dimensions to the neglect of others, and losing sight of the more rounded portrait of sin and our deliverance from it presented in scripture. The shift of pronouns from you to we in verse 3 is probably designed to include Jews in the picture, showing that all, Jews and Gentiles alike, were under sin's sway.

Into this seemingly hopeless situation breaks the action of a merciful God. Out of his incredible love, a love not occasioned by anything in us, he made us alive. We were dead in our trespasses, unable to contribute anything or to manifest ourselves as being of any inherent worth.

This all serves to underline the truth that we have been saved by grace. There are many aspects of divine grace that can be highlighted. We might think about the lavishness or the liberality of grace, or of the pure benevolence of the giver.

We might think of the efficacy of grace. Or we might think of the way that grace precedes anything that we have given. Paul has things to say about all of these aspects of grace at different points in his epistles.

However, for Paul, the one thing that most stands out about God's grace is the way that it is bestowed entirely without regard to the worth of its recipients. We were dead when we received his grace. Indeed, as Paul argues elsewhere, we were not only dead, we were also God's enemies at the time.

There was no reason whatsoever to show grace to us. To our death, God responded with resurrection in Christ. Our deliverance from death is given through union with him.

It is in being bound up with Christ and his destiny that we are delivered. Not only have we been raised, however, God has also made us participants in all that Christ enjoys as the ascended Lord of all. As he said earlier in chapter 1, verse 3, with Christ we have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.

His purpose for us isn't completed, though. In the ages to come, he intends to demonstrate the immeasurable riches of his grace and kindness. God wishes to manifest his character in his salvation of us.

People should be able to see the church and to learn something about God as his character is on display. This is a work in progress, though, with various stages yet to be revealed. We are awaiting coming ages for the complete unveiling.

There is much yet to look forward to. The recipients of Paul's letter are in the state of salvation purely by virtue of God's grace, and they stand in that state through faith. This isn't something that we have brought about ourselves.

It's a gift that we have received. Faith responds to God's free gift, not as something that merits it, or some trait that is worthy of it, or as something that is exchanged for it. Faith isn't really some sort of work.

It's not even a pseudo-work. It is a reception of a gift through a simple act of belief. As a result, boasting is nullified.

We brought nothing to our salvation. We contributed nothing to it. We didn't bring it about in any way.

It was purely the gracious act of God bestowed to empty hands. Our salvation wasn't and isn't a result of our works. However, it is for the sake of good works.

When we think of good works, with our often narrow focus on the question of whether we go to heaven personally, we can often think in legalistic terms of what good works entail, regarding them as strict observance of the law. Yet good works, as described in scripture, are generally described rather differently. Good works are far more expansive in their vision.

They are works that heal and repair broken situations, works that bring light and hope where there was once darkness and despair, works that fulfil the law by making peace, spreading the love of Christ, and manifesting the grace of God. Good works are not so much strict colouring within the lines as the painting of beautiful new portraits of Christ on blank canvases. They are creative acts.

We are God's great masterpiece, being created in Christ for a transformed way of life. It was always God's intention to realise his transforming purpose in us, that we might be a living testament to the greatness of his work. We, the very people who once were dead.

A question to consider. How does Paul's teaching here change the way that we relate to and perceive the Christian life? Paul began Ephesians chapter 2 by focusing upon God's work in the lives of his recipients in a more general fashion. Now, however, he focuses his attention more directly upon what God has done for them as a body of people, especially as Gentiles.

Once again, he describes their previous condition. Their condition was one of outsidership and otherness relative to the Jewish people of God. They were separated from Christ, detached from all of the blessings found in the Messiah.

They were alienated from the Commonwealth of Israel, cut off from the many benefits enjoyed by Israel as the people of God. They were strangers to the covenants of promise,

foreigners to the promises and to the bond that united God to his people and assured them of future blessings. In many ways, this second half of Ephesians chapter 2 is covering the ground covered by the first half of the chapter, yet on a higher level.

The first time around, our attention was focused upon the deliverance from spiritual death and entrance into new spiritual life, but now we are focusing upon our deliverance from alienation, separation and exclusion and our entrance into a new body of fellowship. The previous condition was one in which Jews and Gentiles, the circumcised and the uncircumcised, were divided from each other. Gentiles were cut off from the Messiah, who was the king of the Jews, not their king.

They did not enjoy the blessings enjoyed by Israel, who had the oracles of God entrusted to them, among other things. They were not included in the covenants. And they were without God in the world, they were not marked out by his name as the Jewish people were.

Paul is here describing a state of separation, a state of being excluded that is operating on several interrelated levels. New Testament passages such as this can be slightly perplexing to many readers. The close attention that the apostle Paul gives to addressing categories of circumcised and uncircumcised, Jew and Gentile, can seem quite foreign to us, belonging to a way of ordering the world and its peoples that has long since passed.

Furthermore, why such categories should have any bearing upon or relevance to the operations of God's grace is unclear. After this passage, Paul proceeds to argue that he has been entrusted with the revelation of a great mystery, hidden in ages past, which has since been revealed, the mystery that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. If this is the great mystery that the world has been waiting for, something about it seems anticlimactic.

From our vantage point, the revelation might seem a little like a damp squib. I suspect that much of our struggle to appreciate the significance of the mystery arises from our failure to recognize the centrality and character of the church in Paul's understanding of salvation. For Paul, the formation of the church as a concrete historical polity is not a sideshow in his account of Christ's work, it's a central feature.

In verses 11-12, Paul calls upon the Ephesians to remember their former state, that of uncircumcised Gentiles, aliens from the Commonwealth of Israel, etc. As Stephen Fowle highlights, the designation Gentile only made sense within Judaism or in relation to Judaism. Within these verses, Paul is calling upon the heroes of the epistle to reconceive their past, to regard their former identities in a manner that is only possible from an in-Christ vantage point.

The retrospective nature of this characterization is noteworthy. Few non-Jews would have considered themselves naturally to be having no hope and no God in the world, nor would they have thought of themselves as being alienated. Fowle writes, In fact, if Christians fail to grasp this, they may end up misperceiving what is involved in reconciliation today.

In the process of describing the Ephesians' former identity, Paul also unsettled Jewish categories. The word called, preceding both the uncircumcision and the circumcision, suggests that Paul questioned the legitimacy or the significance of these designations, an impression that is bolstered by the clause that follows, which is made in the flesh by hands. Made by hands is elsewhere used of pagan idols or shrines, Daniel 5, verse 4, Acts 17, verse 24, demonstrating their insufficiency to accommodate or to represent God.

In the New Testament, it is also used in reference to the Jerusalem Temple, where it draws attention to the transitory character of the edifice. Likewise, the term flesh in Paul is typically contrasted with the spirit and its efficacy in the New Covenant. In suggesting his contestation of these Jewish categories, Paul is probably subtly directing the attention of his hearers to a more fundamental circumcision of the heart by the spirit promised in the New Covenant.

Paul declares that the Gentiles who were once alienated are brought near through the blood of Christ, in verse 13. Some hearing Paul's argument to this point might be wrong-footed by the expectation that the Gentiles will have been brought near by being made members of Israel. They are brought near, however, not by being made members of Israel, but by becoming members of an entirely new polity, the Church.

Once again, that which affects our deliverance is the work of Christ. Here, interestingly though, it is the death of Christ that is more foregrounded, whereas in the earlier section it was the resurrection that was the focus. Paul's point here about what Christ accomplished in his cross is similar to that which he made in Colossians 2, verses 13-14.

Christ brings about peace, breaking down division. He deals with the law that locks the Jews up and locks the Gentiles out. Christ doesn't just bring peace, though.

As Paul puts it here, He Himself is our peace. Christ Himself holds together in His body God and man, and man and man. Those formerly divided are now united in the single body of the Messiah.

Some have seen here a reference to the dividing war between the outer and the inner area of the Temple, the latter being restricted to Jews only. This is likely somewhere in the background, especially as he goes on to talk about a new Temple being formed, but Paul's point is more general. This has all occurred in Christ's flesh, and it has occurred through the way that Christ deals with the law.

The law stood against both Jews and Gentiles in different ways. It locked the Jews up under its condemnation, while it locked the Gentiles out. The law is abolished as the law of commandments expressed in ordinances.

In Colossians 2, verse 14, a similar expression refers especially to the law as a set of ascetic regulations. It might be most appropriate to see this as an abolishing of the law as a system of flesh regulation. The law is, of course, fulfilled, as Paul makes plain in Romans 8 and elsewhere, but its fulfillment is a transformation.

It is no longer the caterpillar of commandments expressed in ordinances, but the butterfly of life in the Spirit. The obstacle of the law can be dealt with, of course, because the flesh and the condemnation that lies over it have been dealt with. The consequence is the peace of which he is speaking, peace between Jews and Gentiles and among men, and peace with God.

Enmity has been removed. Christ's message of peace, the message of the Gospel, has been declared to those who are far off, Gentiles, and to those who are near, Jews, and it has been declared to both alike. It is interesting to observe the way that Paul speaks of Christ himself giving this message.

Christ is so involved with and active with and identified with his messengers that when his messengers speak to us, it is as if he himself was speaking directly to us. The peace that we enjoy is one by which we both alike have access through Christ in the one Spirit to the Father. Once again, the underlying Trinitarian grammar of Paul's Gospel can be seen here.

We are already here getting an intimation of the argument that he will make in chapter 4 too, where the unity of the Church is closely connected to the oneness of God. The death of Christ overcomes not only the condemnation that Israel lies under, but also the division within the human race. In Christ, the quarantining of Israel from the nations has ended, and one new undivided humanity can be formed of the two.

The reconciliation of the divided humanity is accomplished as both Jews and Gentiles are reconciled to God, enjoying access in one Spirit to the Father. The human race is united as it draws near to God. Paul describes our state following the work of Christ in verses 19-22.

No longer strangers and aliens, but full members of the household of God, with all of God's other holy people. Paul infuses his architectural imagery with organic imagery. We are a structure that is joined together which is growing into a holy temple for God's dwelling place.

Verses 21-22 are parallel to chapter 4 verses 15-16, where Paul writes, Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into Him who is the Head, into Christ,

from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. Here the accent is upon the organic rather than the architectural imagery, but the parallel is illuminating. The notion of a living and growing temple body is not exclusive to Paul, but can be found in other New Testament passages such as John 2-19-21 and 1 Peter 2-5.

It is also implicit in the imagery of Acts 2 and the Day of Pentecost. This temple, this building in which Jew and Gentile are brought together in fellowship with God, is built up in conformity to Christ through acts of communication, speaking the truth in love, and acts of loving mutual service. It is this international body of persons that is the temple within which God now dwells.

This claim is absolutely integral to Paul's understanding of the Christian message. Essential to the progress of the building project is the establishment of loving communication and service between Jews and Gentiles. Even with the wall of division between them removed, the edifice of the new temple would risk being riven in twain by a huge crack, were such bonds between Jews and Gentiles not formed and maintained.

This, of course, is one of the reasons why Paul expresses such passionate concern about the situation in Antioch that he recounts in Galatians chapter 2, where Jews were withdrawing from fellowship with Gentiles. The eschatological temple is a feat of international relations springing up out of the overflowing grace of the gospel. As contemporary Christians reading these passages, we can fumble for conceptual rationales for the intensity of Paul's concern to hold Jews and Gentiles together.

The principles that most readily present themselves to the consciousness of readers informed by the tradition of Western liberalism are typically those of inclusivity, equality, and non-discrimination. Yet these principles have seldom fueled quite such an intense impulse towards the concrete outworking of unity between people groups, as Paul displays in these epistles. They can commonly focus our attention primarily upon individuals rather than concrete historical communities of people.

In focusing upon such categories, we risk missing the character of Paul's concerns and his understanding. Paul's point has less to do with an abstract principle of the equality of individuals and much more to do with the overcoming of divisions between peoples within the arena of history. The oneness he declares is not primarily a rejection of the significance of the differences between Jews and Gentiles, but his insistence that difference no longer presents a division or obstacle.

It has been traversed by the grace of Christ's gospel. Likewise, the unity he proclaims does not straightforwardly underwrite liberal values of inclusivity and non-discrimination. The inclusion and non-discrimination that Paul proclaims is not founded upon absolute moral principle, but upon a historical achievement.

It is a unity that has been brought forth from a prior situation of divinely established exclusion and discrimination. God had elected Israel and the Gentiles were excluded from that. The mystery is that God's purpose was that this discrimination and exclusion should one day serve the blessing of all.

The difference between Jews and Gentiles established by the Torah is of great importance to Paul, although he presents this difference in terms of its penultimacy to the new covenant order of the Church. The significance given to the difference between those who were aliens and strangers, and those who were citizens and members of the household, between those who were near and those who were far off, is a reminder that the Church is a polity forged through God's decisive action with distinct peoples in history. Differences are not necessarily expunged in this new order.

Love and grace are particularising, they address us all in our uniqueness, but the divisions they once established are traversed by the working of God's grace. As the new organic human temple is built up, it is a light to the world, a pattern of how things really ought to be, a foretaste of the future, where the nations give up the ways of war and join together as one to feast at God's table. A question to consider, what might it mean that the Church is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets? In Ephesians chapter 1, Paul described the long-purpose plan that God accomplished in Christ, and its cosmic scale and implications.

In chapter 2, he spoke of the way that it brought both Jews and Gentiles from death into life, and overcame their separation from God and from each other, as one new people is formed in Christ. Now in chapter 3, he turns to his part in the purpose of God. For a man who exalts his message over everything else, Paul can speak a surprising amount about his role as a minister in his epistles.

This is because for Paul, his role is not merely that of a commentator from the sidelines, or a messenger whose role is entirely incidental to the message that he bears. Rather, in Paul's understanding, his apostolic mission is a participation in the apocalyptic work of the gospel itself. Paul has a key role to play in the fullness of time, akin to the way that John the Baptist had a key role to play in the transition from the Old Testament prophets to the ministry of Christ and the new covenant.

In a like manner, Paul is one through whom the transition of the gospel to the wider Gentile world truly occurs. As in chapter 1, much of this chapter, from verses 2 to 13, is a long single sentence. It's a parenthesis.

Paul begins a thought in verse 1, develops his parenthetical discussion of his ministry in the next 12 verses, and then picks up and completes the thought in verses 14 and following. Paul describes himself as a prisoner of Jesus Christ. He conceives of his imprisonment as part of his service of Christ Jesus.

Indeed, he speaks as if Christ himself were the jailer. He is not just imprisoned for Christ Jesus, but is also a prisoner of Christ Jesus. And he is a prisoner on behalf of the Gentiles.

It is his service of the Gentiles that has occasioned his imprisonment. As Daryl Bach notes, there is a particular irony when we consider the false charge on which Paul was arrested in Acts chapter 21 verse 28. The claim was that he had brought a Gentile, Trophimus the Ephesian, into the temple.

While Paul had not in fact done this, the charge had an ironic truth to it. As Paul was bringing Gentiles into the house of God, in the new temple concerning which he teaches here and elsewhere, he now begins his digression explaining the nature of his ministry. He had been granted a stewardship of God's grace for the sake of the Gentiles.

His stewardship was a gift graciously given in order that he might be an active participant in God's giving of his grace to the Gentiles. In Galatians chapter 1 verses 15 to 17, Paul declares that his message was received directly from God, not through the mediation of any other apostle. But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia and returned again to Damascus.

The mystery that was made known to Paul and has been revealed through the apostles and the early church prophets is one that hadn't previously been known, but only became apparent in the fullness of time. At the heart of this message is the fact that God's purpose involves Gentiles as full participants and beneficiaries, not merely as those enjoying the offcuts of the blessings of Israel. A new body is being formed in Christ and Jews and Gentiles alike are members.

They are fellow heirs, both in line to receive the realisation of God's promise and needing to recognise their kinship together in the new family that this entails. They are both participants in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. In God's powerful working, he took one of the greatest enemies of his church and overcame him by his grace, making him who was once an enemy into his greatest servant.

In Paul, God manifested the extent of his grace so that Paul might be a fitting instrument and a worked example of the wonder of the grace of God in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul is a minister or a servant. He is one commissioned by his master, who now represents his master and acts in his master's name towards others.

Paul is keenly aware of how exceptionally unworthy he was of being set apart for such great mission. He is the very least of all of the saints. He makes a similar point in 1 Corinthians 15, verses 9-10.

His calling is to declare the unsearchable riches of Christ to the Gentiles, unveiling to the whole world the mystery of the creator God's purpose from before time began. Now, in the formation of the church, this mystery is being unveiled to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. What is revealed through this is the manifold wisdom of God, the mind of God that surpasses understanding.

The revelation is made to the great forces and powers of the cosmos, so that in the steady unveiling of God's purpose in the church, all of the angelic and demonic powers of the cosmos might be amazed at the greatness and majesty of God. It is all too easy to forget the presence and the importance of other forces and parties in the narrative of salvation. Yet Paul is often keenly aware of the way that God's work is addressed not just to humankind, but to the natural world and to the angelic powers.

The church is at the heart of this revelation of the wisdom of God. All of this is according to the purpose that God has realised in Christ Jesus our Lord. The church is being formed before the watching angelic forces, and as we saw back in Ephesians chapter 1, this is occurring as God's purpose before the foundation of the world.

It's a plan that centres on Christ. In Christ we now enjoy a new access to God's presence. Something that we can enjoy with confidence on account of either our faith in him or his faith.

The expression is ambiguous in meaning, although a robust theological case could be made for either. When we have a firm sense of God's purpose in Christ and its effectiveness, we will be much less troubled by seemingly threatening or contrary circumstances. Paul wants the recipients of his letter to have a confidence in God's purpose when they consider his imprisoned condition.

Paul, whatever his enemies and captors might plan for him, is exactly where the Lord intends for him to be. The Lord's purpose for him has not failed, and while he is suffering, he is suffering in the performance of his calling as the apostle to the Gentiles, and the outcome of it all, as he follows the pattern of Christ himself, will be the glory of the churches to whom he is ministering. They will be benefited by him.

Now Paul finally returns to the dangling half-started thought of verse 1, which preceded his long digression concerning his ministry. In what follows he shares his prayer for the readers and the hearers of his epistle. The, for this reason with which it begins, returns to verse 1 of the chapter, but verse 1 looks back to chapter 2, verses 19 to 22.

So then, you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. They are members of a new building,

and more importantly for Paul's prayer here, a new family, the household of God. Paul addresses the prayer to the Father, bowing before him in reverence, dependence, homage and fealty.

He describes the Father as the one from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named. Although it may be theologically attractive to translate this verse as the ESV does, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, and a linguistic case can be made for it, it seems most likely to me that it refers to the naming of the whole family in the heavens and on the earth, not every family. We all bear the name of the Father, are all members of a single household, and must acknowledge each other accordingly.

His prayer is that he might by his Spirit empower them within, returning to the themes of riches and might that he mentioned in his earlier prayer, in chapter 1, verses 15 to 23. God will enable them, in a supernatural way, so that Christ will reside in their hearts by an enduring faith that is brought about by the work of the Holy Spirit within them. Once again we should observe just how fundamental the Trinity is to Paul's understanding of the pattern of salvation.

The Father grants the Spirit, who is the means by which Christ abides within us. As we are rooted and grounded in love, as we grow out of the security of God's enduring love for us, a love from which our own love for God and our brothers can develop, one of the results will be understanding. God will give us the strength and the capacity to perceive things that we would not otherwise.

As a collective act of the people of God, Paul wants his readers to come to a grasp of the true scale of the love of Christ, that, as he goes on to acknowledge, surpasses any capacity of our understanding. The result will be that we are overwhelmed by a growing sense of God's unfathomable goodness, and, as this occurs, be filled with all of the fullness of God. Once again, Paul has in view a collective growth in knowledge and filling here.

This isn't just for solitary Christians, but is something that we grow in together, in fellowship with each other, and as we minister to each other. He concludes this section with a doxology. God's power and goodness exceed both our requests and our understanding.

In his work within us, he has a far more wonderful and glorious purpose and intention than we could ever hope to appreciate. The result should be the glory of God in the Church and in Christ Jesus, both in what he is doing in and making of us, and also in our joyful response of praise. This glory should grow with the passing ages, and never come to an end, as the glory of God is ever more fully and wondrously made known.

A question to consider. When we talk about salvation, we tend to focus upon things from

a very human perspective, thinking about what God's deliverance does for us. How might Paul's profoundly God-focused and God-centered portrayal of salvation in the book of Ephesians change the way that we think about things? In the first three chapters of the book of Ephesians, Paul presents the remarkable scope of the Gospel.

It starts at the dawn of history. It reaches its climax at the end of the age. It goes from the depths of the grave to the heights of heaven.

It overcomes the alienation of man from God, and the enmity and division between man and man. It's a great mystery, now revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ and his glorious Gospel. And in chapter 4, Paul speaks more directly about what this means for the life of the Church.

He describes himself as a prisoner, but a prisoner in the Lord. He wears his bondage as if a badge of honour. The physical constraints of human captivity placed upon him are spoken of in terms of his spiritual bond service to Christ.

He may be in prison, but he's in prison because he is captive to Christ. He then turns to address Christian practice in the light of the awe-inspiring reality of the Gospel that he's declared. We must live a life worthy of such a calling, act in a manner befitting of such a Gospel.

The calling isn't just the Gospel in some objective sense. It's the fact that we have been made part of this story by God's grace. God has called us.

He has elected us. We find ourselves in the middle of history, at the centre of God's purpose, a plan that has been intended from the beginning of all history. And now it is coming to fruition, in part, through us.

And in response to this, we must be characterised by complete humility, by gentleness, by patience and by bearing with one another. Humility is a virtue that would not have been seen as such by many within the ancient world. But humility is the only fitting response to the scale of the gift that we have been given.

We're called to gentleness. Gentleness is not prone to wrath. It's not prone to violence.

It's merciful. It's without jealousy. It is without malice and cruelty.

It's kind. In the same way, we're called to patience. Patience requires mastery of your spirit, the ability to endure, to be persevering, to hope.

We bear with each other in love. It's a posture that we take towards each other. It's informed by the previous virtues.

It's gracious. It's not vaunting over others. It believes the best of others.

It's hopeful for others. It's long-suffering with other people. It avoids censoriousness and condemnation.

And all of this is informed with love. We desire the best for each other and we commit ourselves to practical service and care for each other. The focus of this section is on unity.

The source of the unity that we have is the spirit and the shape of that unity is a bond of peace. This bond of peace is held together by the spiritual virtues that Paul has just described. And in speaking of the bond of peace, Paul is suggesting that the way of peace has a power to hold people together.

It is a bond. It's a glue. Paul now lists various facets of the unity of the spirit.

One body, one spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father. There are three sets here when you break it down and they can be arranged in a Trinitarian manner. The first one, the one body arises from the one spirit who grounds its unity in the one bond that he forms.

The spirit is the down payment and as such is also the one who guarantees the one hope of our calling. The second one is the oneness of the Lord Jesus Christ. That corresponds to the oneness of the faith that has him as its object, an exemplar.

And it's the oneness of the baptism in his name. We are baptized into his name, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, baptized into Christ. And then the third one is the unity of the Father.

The oneness of the Father establishes the unity of all creation under him and as the realm of his presence and his providence. But we can say more. Implicitly, Paul's argument depends upon the oneness of these three.

One God in three persons. The final verse of this section connects the theme of unity with the theme of comprehensiveness that has been prominent throughout the Gospel. God is over all and through all and in all.

And from unity Paul moves to discussion of the diversity of Christ's gifts. Here he gives a rather loose quotation of Psalm 68 verse 18 and shows how it can be related to Christ and his work. You ascended on high leading a host of captives in your train and receiving gifts among men, even among the rebellious, that the Lord God may dwell there.

The psalm speaks of the Lord's ascension from Mount Sinai to reign, perhaps through the story of the Exodus as he goes up into the land and reigns from Mount Zion. Here it's related to Christ's ascension in triumph. Christ has won the victory and goes up to the throne in power with captives in his train.

He gives gifts as a sign of his enthronement. The same notion that gifts are a proof of enthronement is expressed by Peter in his sermon on the day of Pentecost. Verse 33 of Acts chapter 2. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing.

To ascend, Christ had to first descend to the lower regions. This refers not, I believe, to Sheol but to the earth itself, the earth over against heaven. Christ first descended from heaven and then he ascended.

And in his descent and ascent, Christ moves through the entire order of reality, gathering it together in himself, uniting it. Christ is, we might say, Jacob's ladder. He is the conduit uniting heaven and earth.

He is the one that holds everything together. Christ's gifts take the form of ministries to his church. Apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers.

These ministries are focused upon teaching which instill the principles of true growth. Now elsewhere there are similar statements that are made. For instance, in 1 Corinthians chapter 12 verses 4 to 6. Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit.

And there are varieties of service, but the same Lord. And there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. In that statement there is a sort of Trinitarian structure again.

The gifts and their variety come from the Spirit. The services and their variety comes from the Lord. And the activities and their variety come from God, the Father.

Here the focus is especially upon the services connected to the unity and the gift of Christ. Apostles, prophets and evangelists primarily minister to the wider church and serve as founding ministries. Shepherds and teachers, meanwhile, are ministers to more specific congregations, guarding and instructing them.

There is some sort of a hierarchy here. A movement down from the head to the body. Establishing the sort of hierarchy that renders a body an ordered body.

However, these forms of service, while representing the authority of the head, are ministering to and for the sake of the body. So that it might be established, that it might grow and flourish. And the purpose of these ministries is to equip the saints for their own activity.

The whole church is to grow into maturity, not through the ministry of just a few members, but through its united work, through which the gift of Christ in the ministers has equipped it. Growing in such a way will lead to the unity of the faith. Faith is united.

There is one faith. And division is a sign of the church falling short in maturity or failing on account of sin. Divisions in the church are a sign that something has gone wrong.

That doesn't mean that divisions are wrong per se. The unity is not found in the church as it currently exists. The unity is ultimately situated in Christ.

And the more that we are conformed to him, the more that we will know unity. However, our lives are much mixed with error, with alien principles of society, and other things that prevent us from arriving at the unity of the faith. It should lead to the knowledge of the Son of God.

He is the one true object of our faith. And the more that we grow in that knowledge, the more that we will find unity with everyone else who is growing in that knowledge. This leads to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

Christ is the standard. We are being conformed to Christ through the ministries of the Spirit that he has given us. Part of the intent of this is that we might be children no longer.

God doesn't want us to be thrown to and fro by false teaching and by deception. We should have the wisdom, the clarity of understanding, the settled will, that enables us to be fixed and determined in our pursuit of the truth, no longer so susceptible to deception. We speak the truth in love.

And these are the two criteria of unity. Unity is found in the truth. Unlike lies, truth has a unity to it.

Truth is one. And the more that our lives are lived under the truth, the more that we will find that we have unity with other people who are living their lives in such a manner. Love, as well, is another principle of unity.

It's an expression of the communion of the Spirit. Any approach to union that does not hold both of these criteria, or any approach that pits one against the other or tries to subdue one to the other, must be rejected. We need both truth and love.

And we will also find in the final analysis that these things are one too. If you are not acting in love, then you are not acting in truth. If you are not acting in truth, you are not acting in love.

We must grow into the head, who is Christ. This growth occurs through the united work of the body. The joints here may be the ministers given to the Church by Christ, with each part being the members of the Church more generally.

The ministers given by Christ play critical roles, but every single member must be involved. Paul fuses architectural and organic imagery here. He speaks of a body being

built up.

And elsewhere, earlier on, he has used the language of a building being grown. In verses 19-22 of chapter 2. There is one gift of the Spirit, but there are manifold and diverse gifts of the Spirit. The unity of the Church is found in the one Spirit, but the practical realisation of this unity is found in the representation of the one gift, in the manifold giving of our individual gifts of the Spirit in love.

The unity of the Church, then, is not found in the gift that is given directly down, and the Church has no activity relative to it, and it's given to everyone in an undifferentiated manner. Rather, the unity of the Church is found in the way that God has equipped us to be participants in His giving process. He has given us the Spirit, but He's given us the Spirit in such a way that He has given us the Spirit to give.

And so each one of us has a measure of the Spirit that we might minister to others, that we might be means by which God gives to others. What we have received of the Spirit is not for our own sake alone, it's for the sake of everyone else. This helps us to understand why Paul speaks of the body being built up by itself.

The gift comes from Christ, the Ascended Lord, but it comes to us in a way that comes through the gifts of other members of the body. The unity of the Church requires the manifoldness of the Church. Paul's doctrine of the Church arises out of the ascension of Christ.

The Ascended Christ gives the Spirit by which He forms His body, in which He, as the Head in Heaven, is connected to His people on earth. As Christ ascends, the Spirit descends, and becomes the means by which Christ fills all things and gathers all things under His rule. It is because Christ has ascended that He can fill all things.

A question to consider. An important theme in this passage is maturity. How might we see the ascension itself in terms of this theme? Having spoken of the oneness of the people of God in the body of Christ, in the second half of Ephesians chapter 4, Paul turns to address the change in life and behaviour that should occur in Christians.

Like several other parts of Ephesians, we should notice the parallels between this section and corresponding sections in the book of Colossians, such as in chapter 3, verse 8 to 13. But now you must put them all away, anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its Creator.

Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free, but Christ is all, and in all. Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing

with one another, and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other, as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Being in Christ should entail a radical and far-reaching transformation of life.

Paul's teaching concerning the unity and character of the body of Christ, in which we are growing to maturity as we are formed by the Triune God, will lead to a radically different form of life from that characteristic of the Gentiles. The Gentiles have a form of life that is shaped by the futility of their minds. Their minds are vain and lacking in substance.

They are not acting in terms of the truth of reality in God's world. They are out of touch with the weighty and substantial things of life. Having rejected God, no matter how smart they are, they are unable to gain mental purchase upon the things that really matter.

Their understanding is shrouded in darkness. They may be living in the real world, but they are living in it as if under the cover of thick blackness, clumsily bumping into things, stumbling over unseen obstacles, and wandering about they know not where. They are alienated from God due to the ignorance and stubbornness of their hearts.

Their ignorance arises from a fundamental aversion and resistance to God. This resistance has led them to become callous and to surrender themselves to growing forms of wickedness as they willingly enslave themselves to their own desires. This couldn't contrast more with that which should characterize the Christian.

Paul describes the source of our new way of life as having learned Christ. This is a very strange way of speaking. In what other case would you speak of having learned a person? You might well talk about having learned about a person, perhaps, but that is not what Paul says here.

Paul gives us a sense of what he means by this in the clause that follows. We learn Christ by hearing about him, but more particularly by being taught in him. As Marcus Barthes powerfully expresses it, Jesus Christ is the headmaster, the teaching matter, the method, the curriculum, and the academy.

Learning Christ is unlike learning anything else, which is why Paul speaks in such an unusual manner here. The conclusion of verse 21 expresses something of this, as the truth is in Jesus, or since truth is in Jesus. Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life.

If we are looking for truth, a proper way of behavior, and a new source of life, then we will find all of this in Jesus. In him are truthful ways of life. From our knowledge of Christ as the truth, we learn to divest ourselves of the old ways of life that are contrary to him, ways of life that are no longer appropriate to us.

They belong to our old selves and are ill-fitting upon us now. They are corrupt and decaying on account of deceitful desires. The desires of this old self are themselves

mired in lies and falsehood.

They tangle us up in them in ways that we cannot easily understand or are not. They catch us up in the snares of death. The first step is to put off the old self.

Then we must be renewed in the spirit of our minds and clothe ourselves with a new and very different self, a new self that bears the likeness of God in righteousness and true holiness. Paul is intentionally alluding back to Genesis chapter 1 here. God is restoring and perfecting us in his image.

In Christ, humanity attains to its divinely intended form and destiny. Christ is the truth and the model of this humanity, and we must inhabit his life as the place where we learn how to live. One of the most immediate results of this necessary putting off and putting on will be our abandonment of the falsehood fundamentally characteristic of our old lives.

Such falsehood is not just an occasional feature. It's something that lies at the very heart of the character of the old way of life. In its place, we must have a commitment to the truth.

Paul makes a very similar point in Colossians chapter 3 verses 9 to 10. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. This practice in speaking of truth is informed and inspired by a new recognition of others in Christ.

We are not detached individuals, but we are people who belong to each other, members of each other. The golden rule has a deeper logic to it in the body of Christ. If we are members of each other, what we do to each other in the body of Christ is in some sense indirectly being done to ourselves.

Paul is likely quoting from Zechariah chapter 8 verses 16 to 17 here, which speaks of the appropriate behaviour for the restored people of God. These are the things that you shall do. Speak the truth to one another.

Render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace. Do not devise evil in your hearts against one another. And love no false oath, for all these things I hate, declares the Lord.

This of course is to be seen in the church, where God is restoring humanity after exile and renewing us in his image. Quoting Psalm 4 verse 4, Paul recognises the appropriateness and perhaps even unavoidability of some forms of anger. However, we must carefully hold our anger within bounds, lest it get out of control.

One of the ways to do this is to settle matters before we go to sleep. Unaddressed anger

can fester, it can cause breaches that cannot easily be healed. Keeping short accounts with God and our neighbours is a way to lessen the dangers in this area.

It also has the effect of closing off opportunities of which the devil will take advantage. He loves to use such openings to destroy relationships and render people bitter. We must accordingly deal with anger swiftly and without delay.

Paul's teaching concerning sin is not just basic instruction, it contains a lot of wisdom. Not letting the sun go down on your anger is a very practical way to deal with our tendencies to anger. His teaching is designed to limit Satan's opportunities.

With people tempted to steal, he encourages them to commit themselves to honest labour instead and to learn what it means to give as an alternative. As in the wisdom literature, Paul is especially attentive to speech. Speech can corrupt, it can serve as a channel of death and the tearing down of others.

In its place, Paul wants Christians to learn to speak in ways that build people up, in ways that are suitable to the season, and in ways that function as a gift that lifts up and strengthens those who hear us, so that they might be blessed by our words. Christ has given us his Holy Spirit, marking us out for final resurrection and giving us a reality-filled promise of what we are to expect. However, it is possible to live in a way that grieves the Spirit.

In Isaiah chapter 63 verses 9-10, to which Paul is likely alluding here, Isaiah speaks of the Holy Spirit being grieved and God turning to oppose his people as an enemy. There are several occasions in the New Testament where the genuine possibility of the most devastating loss is hinted at or stated. We must not be presumptuous in our reception of God's grace.

Paul concludes the chapter by listing things to be put away and contrasting attitudes and behaviours to adopt. The old divisive patterns of life of the flesh must be abandoned. These are forms of behaviour that led us to bite and devour each other.

In their place, we must adopt new ways of life that we have learned in Christ, patterns of life that he himself has modelled for us. These divine traits, kindness, tender-heartedness and forgiveness, would not be the most prominent virtues for many of Paul's Greco-Roman contemporaries, if they would have been considered virtues at all. However, in the Gospel, they are seen in Christ, and they are virtues that should be characteristic of those who have learned Christ.

A question to consider. The themes of truth and falsehood are prominent in this section. How does Paul's account of these things challenge typical ways of thinking about them? Ephesians chapter 5 continues Paul's presentation of the new form of life that should be characteristic of Christians, the sort of behaviours that they must put off, and the sort of

behaviours that they must put on.

In exhorting the heroes of the Epistle to be imitators of God, Paul is reinforcing the statement of chapter 4 verse 32. Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. God himself forgave us, and so we must follow in his example.

Paul's charge to be imitators of God is also a practical form that his earlier point about putting on the new self, created after the likeness of God, can take. Those in the image of God are his children, and the appropriate way to behave as such is to walk in the footsteps of our Father, imitating him. A true child's connection to the image of their father is not merely in the unchosen ways that they reflect their father's appearance, or even the ways that they naturally manifest behavioural traits or mannerisms that resemble those of their father, but also in their purposeful commitment to follow the pattern of their father and become more and more like him.

The good father gives his child a model to look up to and to follow, so that the child can take after his father, not merely in those unchosen ways, but also as a willing commitment. Paul's teaching here has much in common with our Lord's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, where Christ connects sonship with following the pattern of our Heavenly Father in Matthew 5, verses 44-48. as your Heavenly Father is perfect.

Christ, of course, is the Son, the one who is the image of God. He is the one in whom we see the Father fully and truly revealed. If we are called to imitate the Father, we will be taking the example of the Son himself, who faithfully does the works of the Father in all respects.

Those who see the Son have seen the Father. Those who see us should see something of God in our imitation of him, in the way that we manifest the image of God, in the way that Christ can be seen in us. Christ's model of walking in love is, of course, most fully seen in the sacrifice of the cross itself, in which, out of his love for us, he willingly gave himself up for us.

This was a pleasing sacrifice to God, because, among other things, it was a manifestation of mature sonship. If they are to act as true children of God, the people that Paul is writing to must abhor and totally reject behaviours that are at odds with or opposed to his character. Paul lists a number of the sins from which we must distance ourselves.

This distancing is to be seen in the way that such sins must not even be named among you, or, perhaps, must not even be hinted at among you. In the first case, the point would be that we don't merely avoid such sins, but also firmly resist the salacious preoccupation with such sins that one finds in many quarters, the sort of preoccupation that sells gossip magazines, that drives much online traffic, and that makes us hungry for reports of other scandalous sins. Even if we don't sin in these particular respects

ourselves, we have an appetite for, and a delight to hear of, the sins of others, finding it titillating to reflect upon people's sexual wickedness, for instance.

By contrast, the Christian community must be a place where there is no appetite for, or delight in hearing about such things. Not only are they displeasing to God, they have also become displeasing to us. The other possible translation is that Paul is referring to sins that are rumoured to exist within a community.

Christians must not just desire to be righteous, but to be transparently righteous, not giving any fuel to gossip. Paul begins by speaking of sexual immorality and impurity. These terms cover all sorts of illicit sexual behaviour outside of appropriate sexual relations in the context of marriage.

It doesn't matter whether or not it is consensual. If people engage in sexual behaviour outside of marriage, they are guilty of sexual immorality. This is one point where the teaching of scripture comes into direct collision with the values of modern society.

Impurity is another broad term. It refers to anything that is morally unclean, anything that stands opposed to holiness and the moral purity that should characterise us as God's people. Paul pushes against our society's norms in the way that he often foregrounds sexual immorality in his vice lists.

For instance, in 1 Thessalonians 4, verses 3-7. ...in holiness and honour. Not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God, that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter.

Because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. To sexual immorality and impurity, Paul adds covetousness, the avarice and the desire that drives so much sinful human behaviour.

Greed is diametrically opposed to what should be our willingness to give up things for others, as Christ gave himself up for us. Paul often shares the wisdom literature's close attention to sins of speech. The church should not be a place of obscene talk, foolish talk or coarse jesting.

All of these sorts of speech are shameful and dishonourable. We are the temple of the Holy Spirit, and to engage in such speech is utterly opposed to everything that we are supposed to be, as holy to the Lord. If we are the people of God, our speech must be congruent with this.

If we habitually use our speech in careless and foolish ways, consistently speaking with levity, not controlling our tongues, employing obscenities and filling our mouths with filthiness, not only will our speech be given very little weight, it will be a source of dishonour and corruption to everyone that we speak of and to. As the people of God, we

should be guardians of our tongues, knowing that people who do not weigh their words, control their speech and keep their lips pure will not be taken seriously. Our tongues routinely betray the character of our hearts, and impurity of speech is a characteristic expression of an unguarded heart.

The alternative to this is thanksgiving to God, a form of speech that is weighty and glorious. Like the prophet Isaiah, we should be acutely aware that we are people of unclean lips, dwelling in the midst of a people of unclean lips. We must seek the cleansing and purifying work of the Lord, so that we can bear his glorious name on lips that are suited for that purpose.

People who are sexually immoral, impure or covetous have no inheritance in the Kingdom of God. They lack the character of sons, and so they also lack the privileges and the promises enjoyed by sons. Somewhat surprisingly, Paul identifies covetousness and idolatry here.

Covetousness replaces God with the objects of its desire, and with our desire itself, which become our supreme goal and God. These things are not just unfitting and best avoided out of a sort of Christian propriety. They are fundamentally at odds with God, and God is fundamentally at enmity with them and those who give themselves over to them.

Such people are not the sons of God, but the sons of disobedience, and the fierce wrath of God will come upon them. Christians must be holy, maintaining distance from all such sinful behaviours, and avoiding aligning ourselves with people who practice them. We must not enter into communion with them.

Bad company corrupts us. Paul develops his point using the metaphor of the opposition of light and darkness, a common metaphor in Scripture and elsewhere. They were once darkness, and engaged in the unfruitful works of darkness, but now they have become children of the light.

However, Paul's point here goes further than he does elsewhere. He does not merely argue that we are now in the light, or even just that we are now sons of the light. Rather, now we are light in the Lord.

Our light-bearing is a participation in the light of Christ himself. We must conduct ourselves accordingly. Paul speaks here of the fruit of light, whereas later he will speak of the unfruitful works of darkness.

Perhaps Paul is thinking of the contrast between the character of light, which conveys itself to other things, with darkness, which lacks the power to act in such a manner. Light produces its fruit in things that are good, right, and true, in contrast to all of the practices and desires that Paul has earlier condemned. As children of light, we will be

eager to shine more brightly, bearing the light of the Lord, as we diligently seek to convey his character to others by discerning what is pleasing to him.

We must eschew the works of darkness, which stand opposed to everything that we are supposed to be, not participating in them. Light is at odds with darkness. Where light comes, the darkness is driven away.

There can be no truce between these two principles that are so fundamentally at odds. We don't just negatively avoid the unfruitful works of darkness. We positively expose them.

We bring them into the light, or bring the light to them. As we live as the light of Christ, our lives should expose the sinful character of the world that surrounds us by contrast. This will have the effect of exposing the darkness, which is seldom welcomed by the darkness itself.

The darkness does not want to be revealed for what it is, or to be expelled by the advent of the light. Certain persons and actions have a natural attraction to the darkness, and the cover and the secrecy that it offers. To such persons and actions, our presence as light will be deeply threatening and unwelcome.

As light-bearers, Christians transform the societies in which they live. Sins that are exposed for what they are will need to assume a different character. Either their power or appeal will be dispelled or diminished by the light, or they will become more high-handed in character, involving an explicit resistance to, an antagonism with the light.

The long-expected light of the Messiah has dawned in Jesus. The day is breaking, and we are to act as people of the day. Paul's teaching about darkness and light is not merely a teaching about timelessly opposed moral characters, but about the coming of a new age, where light is in the ascendancy and darkness will be driven out.

In this time between the times, we must be the light-bearers heralding a new dawn, manifesting the fact that the time has arrived for everyone to wake up. This point is more directly made in places such as 1 Thessalonians 5, 4-6. But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief.

For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness. So then let us not sleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober.

Christians are to be awake, alert, and mindful, characterized by the sort of sobriety that belongs to the day, in contrast to the actions of the night, as Paul expresses in Romans 13, verses 12-14. The night is far gone, the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.

Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual

immorality and sensuality, not in quarrelling and jealousy, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh to gratify its desires. Such circumspection in our behavior is characteristic of wisdom, as is close attention to what the will of the Lord is. We are to redeem the time, because the days are evil.

In times of wickedness, Christians are called to rescue the time from the rule of darkness and bring it under the rule of the light. Paul's point here goes so much further than many suppose, who think that it is merely a matter of filling our time with Christian activities, or even not allowing our time as Christians to go to waste, perhaps suggested by the translation making the best use of the time. By bringing the light of the age to come to bear upon our age, bringing the light of the longed-for day of the Lord to bear upon our dark times, wickedness is exposed and it shrinks back into the shadows, while others step forward into the light.

Time is not just quantitative, it is also qualitative. Our duty is to make the times that we live in, whenever they may be, daytimes, by bearing the light of Christ within them. A question to consider, where else in the New Testament do we see the metaphor of light and darkness explored? In the second half of Ephesians chapter 5, Paul moves from more general moral teaching to Christians, to teaching specifically directed to different classes of persons within households, to wives, husbands, children, servants and masters.

Here we find another example of the household codes of the New Testament. A very similar example of such a code can be found in Colossians chapter 3-4. Indeed, the very movement of Paul's argument here, from a discussion of God's indwelling through song, to a household code, is the same as we find there.

There is much in these codes that seems very similar to what one might find in non-Christian household codes of the time. However, while much might appear very similar on the surface, when one lifts the bonnet or hood and examines what is beneath it, one can observe that the engine and much else has been completely switched out. It works according to very different principles.

Paul contrasts being drunk with wine with being filled with the Spirit. Both are things that change your state. And he makes similar points here to Colossians chapter 3 verse 16.

In both cases he is talking about a form of being filled. And the parallels are instructive. Being filled with the Spirit is paralleled with the Word of Christ dwelling in you richly.

And in both cases this is achieved or expressed in the singing of psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. The expression of joy in our hearts, the way that the Word of God in the form of song conscripts our heart's desires and encourages us to be people who meditate and memorise the Word of God, who hold it within our hearts as something to delight in and to reflect upon. This, for Paul, is what it looks like to be filled with the

Spirit.

And in both cases continual and extensive thanksgiving is the purpose of it all. In continual thanksgiving the self continually renders itself back to God in gratitude for God's gifts. Verse 21 is a transitional verse.

It moves from Paul's teaching concerning being filled with the Spirit onto his instruction in the household code. There's a reference to submitting to each other. While there might be a sort of mutual submission, it clearly isn't symmetrical.

What it means varies by person and context. And Paul goes on to explore this in the sections that follow. The shape of what submission means for the child differs from what it means for the wife or the servant.

However, there may also be the suggestion that husbands, fathers and masters also need to exercise a sort of submission appropriate to the nature of their relationships, relationships where submission would not usually be included as an element. Their authority is not denied, but it may be radically reconfigured. Rather than lording it over others, they should act out of consideration for others, serving each other in love, following the teaching of Philippians 2, verses 3-4.

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. And of course, this follows the example of Christ.

Submission to others occurs out of reverence for Christ. This is not grounded in the natural claims of the other party so much as in honouring our Lord. Such mutual concern and privileging of the interests of the other party would completely transform the dynamics of the relationship, even when the essentially hierarchical structures are maintained and even positively affirmed by Paul.

Wives are charged to be subject to their husbands as an expression of their appropriate service to the Lord Jesus. The relationship here is not just about, or perhaps not even primarily about, the private relationship of the couple themselves, but about the broader posture of the wife to her husband within the life of the household and its surrounding community. She should honour and show deference to him in the way that she relates to him personally and privately and speaks of him to others.

Mature persons who are under the guardianship of others should be concerned to show them due honour and deference, to be responsive to them, and through encouragement and respectful candour to help them to fulfil their duties to us well. Paul is not here teaching a slavish obedience but a willing self-subjection. And he draws a parallel between Christ's headship and the husband's headship.

We should think back to Paul's earlier description of Christ's headship in chapter 1,

verses 20-23. 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.

We can easily think of headship, without recognising its character, more as something exercised over us on our behalf. We are to be subject to our head, but our head's authority is exercised in a way that strengthens us, rather than suppressing us. It makes all the difference that our head, Jesus Christ, is seated at God's right hand in the heavenly places, placed over all other rules, authorities, powers and dominions.

This authority is exercised in a loving manner on our behalf. As we submit to it, we are empowered by it. Paul draws a parallel between Christ being the head of the church and being its saviour as his body.

As the saviour of the body, he is the one who acts on its behalf and delivers it and provides for it. The husband has been charged to act towards his wife as Christ acts towards his bride, the church. Consequently, it is important that the woman or the wife respond to him accordingly.

The husband's position relative to his wife is not merely by virtue of his greater power, but also by virtue of the Lord's intention, and she must honour that. Husbands must follow the example of Christ. While Christ is clearly over the church, he willingly places the interests of the church ahead of his own and gives himself up for her.

He does not lord it over the church. Note that Paul never says that the husband is to exercise authority over his wife. Rather, the instruction is to love, an instruction that is repeated in three ways.

The wife should give in her willing subjection what many unworthy husbands were inclined to demand and to coerce, and the husband in his initiative of love should give what many wise would be desperate to obtain and would try to manipulate. Christ is not subservient to the church, but he manifests humility in the way that he acts towards her. He is the Lord of the church, but his lordship is one that ministers to the church.

He is presented as washing his bride. His bride is not perfect, but his loving gift of himself and his service of the church will bring out the church's beauty. Both wives and husbands should see themselves as loving servants of their spouse, seeking not to manipulate or to control, but through their respect and love accentuating and eliciting those virtues and those things that are good or glorious in their spouse.

The washing of water is a sort of washing of the bride to prepare her for her husband. Here Christ himself humbly performs this for his bride, and a reference to baptism should

not be difficult to recognize. The intense unity and intimacy of marriage should break down the competing interests that are so often pitted against each other within it, as Wendell Berry has powerfully expressed it.

Marriage, in what is evidently its most popular version, is now on the one hand an intimate relationship, involving, ideally, two successful careerists in the same bed, and on the other hand a sort of private political system in which rights and interests must be constantly asserted and defended. Marriage, in other words, has now taken the form of divorce, a prolonged and impassioned negotiation as to how things shall be divided. During their understandably temporary association, the married couple will typically consume a large quantity of merchandise and a large portion of each other.

The modern household is the place where the consumptive couple do their consuming. Nothing productive is done there. Such work as is done there is done at the expense of the resident couple or family, and to the profit of suppliers of energy and household technology.

For entertainment, the inmates consume television or purchase other consumable diversion elsewhere. There are, however, still some married couples who understand themselves as belonging to their marriage, to each other, and to their children. What they have they have in common, and so to them helping each other does not seem merely to damage their ability to compete against each other.

To them, mine is not so powerful or necessary a pronoun as ours. This sort of marriage usually has at its heart a household that is to some extent productive. The couple, that is, makes around itself a household economy that involves the work of both wife and husband, that gives them a measure of economic independence and self-employment, a measure of freedom, as well as a common ground and a common satisfaction.

Husbands should love their wives as their own bodies, recognising that they are one flesh with them. To love and minister to the needs of your wife is to strengthen yourself. The married couple are to recognise that fundamental unity.

The subjection of the wife to the husband is not the surrender of power to another party, but a willing yielding and deference to one by whom she is to be strengthened. The love of the husband is not the wasteful squandering of his strength and attention upon another party, the husband isn't what some have called a simp, his loving ministering to his wife is ultimately a building up of himself as one flesh with her. Throughout all of this, Paul cannot help but show the gravitational force that Christ and his redemption exerts upon his thinking, concerning this and all other matters.

Even when talking about husbands and wives, he is constantly talking about Christ and his redemption. Our relationships are modelled after Christ and ordered to the service of Christ. Indeed, Paul suggests that the fundamental text concerning marriage in Genesis

2, verse 24, is ultimately about Christ and the Church.

In Christ we discover that marriage was always a type of something greater, of the unity of Christ and the Church. The unity of husband and wife in marriage is not just a metaphor, but is a created type of the union of the son and his bride that comes at the very climax of history. A question to consider, Paul's vision of marriage is one of profound asymmetrical reciprocity, where husbands and wives stand in very different kinds of relationship to each other, yet both put the other before themselves, and in the manner proper to their positions, are able to serve each other in love.

What are some of the ways in which the biblical teaching here and elsewhere challenges many of our cultural notions of marriage? In Ephesians chapter 6, Paul concludes his household code and gives a final exhortation to the recipients of the epistle. The fact that Paul addresses children directly, with the instruction to obey their parents, is probably notable. Children, and there is little reason to believe that Paul isn't addressing boys and girls alike here, are not just treated as those to be dictated to and controlled by their parents, but as persons to be exhorted to a willing obedience.

The presence of such an instruction suggests that Paul expected children to be with their parents in hearing this epistle read. Christian teaching, and willing Christian obedience, is not just for adults. They are to obey their parents in the Lord.

One thing that we see in places such as the book of Acts, for instance, is the assumption that whole households would come under the reign of Christ, not just detached individuals one by one. Children are addressed as members of the Christian community, and Paul will go on to instruct fathers to raise them in the instruction of Christ. The expectation is that as such children are raised in the faith, they will grow into a full, willing, and mature ownership of the faith for themselves.

This is why honouring of parents and the faithful teaching of parents is so important. As in the Old Testament, these are the means by which children will grow into such mature, personal faith. Paul supports his teaching with a reference to the Fifth Commandment, underlining the importance of the promise attached to it.

Honouring of father and mother is seen in a particularly potent form in willing obedience to them. Such honouring of parents creates a firm bond between the generations that functions as the backbone of a people through its history. A people lacking such a healthy bond will not last long, but those who have such a bond will live long and prosper in the land.

Fathers, for their part, must encourage rather than frustrate or provoke their children. There is a reciprocity here. The father is the head of the household, but his headship is supposed to be something that builds up, strengthens, supports, encourages, and gives security and peace to everyone else.

An overbearing, abusive, or hypercritical form of fatherhood is opposed here. Fathers should direct and correct their children, but their strength must be exercised with gentleness and compassion. It must be something that supports and elevates and edifies their children.

From fathers, Paul turns to servants. They are called to obey their masters with fear and trembling, to show respect, to act with sincerity, and to act as to the Lord. This is not just acting as if to the Lord, but as to the Lord.

Their true master is not their earthly master, but their heavenly master, Jesus Christ. And so they act as one who will be seen by him, as one whose work will be judged by him. Whatever the cruelty or injustice of their earthly masters, they know that their heavenly master will see and honour their work as it is done in a way that glorifies him.

They are called to act for his honour and for his recognition, not for human attention. Such faithfulness could sometimes be costly. We can think of the story of Joseph, whose faithfulness to his earthly master, not as a people pleaser, but as one who was acting towards God, led to him being thrown into prison.

By being faithful to Potiphar and not sleeping with Potiphar's wife, he ended up seeming unfaithful to Potiphar. Yet the Lord, his true master, blessed him and raised him up. Servants are assured that whatever they do, they will receive back from the Lord.

And this is something that is true for people whether they are bond-servant or free. The Lord sees and rewards those who do good. And there's an important point about Christian vocation here.

So often we can idealise those situations where people are not alienated from their labour in any ways. They're doing exactly what they want in communities that they feel that they really belong in, in situations where they feel highly rewarded for their efforts. However, here Paul talks to people who are servants, who might be beaten on a daily basis, who might find themselves routinely dishonoured in their labours, prevented from enjoying ownership of their labour and its fruits, or from finding true belonging and identity in what they do.

While all these conditions of work are bad, and in an ideal society would be removed or minimised or even eradicated, for Paul it does not prevent people from knowing the dignity of serving Christ. Even the humblest servant can find honour in his labour as he does his work towards Christ and not to man. Paul now addresses slave-owners, introducing his remarks with a surprising expression.

Masters do the same to them. There is a symmetry between the way that masters should treat their servants and servants should treat their masters. It's very hard to believe we can think of this relationship between masters and servants as the most

unequal and imbalanced and asymmetrical relationship there is.

But Paul can see a symmetry because both people should be acting towards a heavenly master and treating their earthly counterpart, whether a master or a slave, in a way that recognises God's oversight of them. One of the effects of all of this is to place the social order that currently exists in the light of how we all stand relative to God on the same level ground. While many would have sought to drive the current order down deep into the depths of reality to claim its grounds in fundamental being, Paul does quite the opposite.

He presents a more fundamental reality that reveals the superficiality and transitory character of a society where there are masters and slaves. We should also recognise the contrast between the way that he treats masters and servants and the ways that he treats husbands and wives. Husbands and wives are related directly to the Gospel.

The relationship between husband and wife is an anticipation of the Gospel of Christ, the joining together of Christ and his Church. In the process, the fundamental goodness and divine intention of marriage is stressed. No such connection is made with slavery, however.

Paul makes similar points here to those he made in Colossians 4.1. Masters treat your bond-servants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a master in heaven. Masters are charged to stop threatening their servants. They must recognise that they too have a master in heaven.

By this reminder, Paul is reconstituting the institution of slavery by the golden rule. So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the law and the prophets, and by Christ's principle of judgment. For with the judgment you pronounce, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

Masters must act towards their servants as those who are themselves bond-servants of Christ, accountable to him, and answerable for how they treat other persons made in God's image. There is no partiality with God. The status of the slave-owner does not exalt him over others in God's sight, nor does it give him some greater dignity.

Christians are in a battle. We need continual strength, which ultimately comes from the Lord. Paul expresses all of this using the imagery of clothing ourselves with armour.

Such a metaphor is also found in 1 Thessalonians 5, verse 8. The parallels and contrasts suggest that the point is less specific identifications than the more general effect. Paul is also here drawing upon Old Testament imagery of the Lord clothing himself for battle, that we find in Isaiah chapter 59, verses 16-17. He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no one to intercede.

Then his own arm brought him salvation, and his righteousness upheld him. He put on

righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on his head. He put on garments of vengeance for clothing, and wrapped himself in zeal as a cloak.

The enemy is the devil himself, who is cunning, and a brilliant strategist. He can easily outwit and snare the careless, and render them useless. Paul began the epistle by focusing on the cosmic scale of Christ's victory, and his exaltation over all authorities and powers and principalities.

He returns to this here. We don't wrestle against flesh and blood. The image of hand-to-hand fighting devolves into wrestling.

We're wrestling against these things. In 2 Corinthians chapter 10, verses 3-5, he makes similar points. We are caught up in a battle that is so much greater than us, like hobbits in the war for Middle-earth.

There are dark, demonic forces, and Satan himself is at work. In the light of all of this, we need to be dressed in preparation. We need to wear the armour of God, so that we can withstand in the evil day and the night.

We face days of bitter testing and tribulation, times when the Church will not seem to be on the advance anymore, but will be hard-pressed on all sides, needing to hold its ground at all costs. The armour of God is the armour worn by the Lord himself, and by the Messianic warrior, as we see in Isaiah chapter 11, verses 1-5. The spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear. But with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth.

And he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins. Christ is the Messianic warrior whose victory over the principalities and powers was declared in chapter 1. To share in his victory, we must fight in his spirit, and with his armour.

We should also recognise the similarity between the clothing of God, his armour, and the clothing of the priest, who also has garments of salvation, a breastplate, and the like. In Isaiah chapter 61, verse 10, I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. The question of the character of the things that we are wearing is an important one.

Some lean to emphasise their character as Christian virtues. However, this might miss

the fact that the armour is the armour of God, and of the Messianic warrior, something that we must clothe ourselves with from without, equipping us for battle. This is part of what it means to clothe ourselves with Christ.

When God clothes himself with righteousness and salvation, along with vengeance and zeal, the point is not that God needs to be covered with righteousness, or that he needs salvation. God is clothing himself for, and even with these actions. God's righteousness is his redemptive work of setting things to rights, his delivering work of salvation viewed from a particular perspective.

When we clothe ourselves with these things, the point is less about personal virtues, and more about clothing ourselves for and with God's saving work, by what God has accomplished, and is accomplishing in Jesus. We are called to act within the act of the Messianic warrior, Jesus Christ, who has won the victory over the principalities and powers, and is now seated at God's right hand. We must fight his fight, clothed with him, both protected by and authorised by his clothing.

However, while the Isaiah text about God's putting on his armour is about offensive battle, the focus for us will be more upon defence. We must be alert in all of this, mindful of the many pitfalls and the perils. Our adversary is wily and cunning, and he will do anything to destroy us.

Before closing the letter, Paul requests a special prayer that the Lord would give him the words that he requires as an ambassador of the Gospel in chains. Paul is profoundly aware of his serving the Lord's mission. Unlike in his other epistles, Paul does not end with a long list of specific greetings.

This, it seems to me, is because this letter is an encyclical, a letter to be sent around several churches, rather than just to one. A question to consider, what are some very practical ways in which we can put on the armour of God in our daily lives?