

The Mysterious Plan Revealed

An optimistic, conversational,
thought-provoking commentary on
Paul's letter to the Ephesians

First Edition (1.2)

C Clifton Jones

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Acknowledgments

This commentary is based on transcripts from Zoom shows presented in 2021 to 2024. Many thanks to all who attended and made the shows interactive discussions and not just sterile lectures. Greg and Mary only missed a show when they were babysitting family donkeys! Thanks to Bill for sharing his insights and poems. Thanks to Donna who brought perspective as a family and marriage counselor. And, thanks to Marcos for relating his journey into grace. Thanks, also, to Terri, Kim, Rhonda, and many others who attended and made these shows a success. Finally, thanks to Dino and other friends who did some honest and thorough editing.

Preface

An imperfect commentary

This commentary leaves a lot to be desired. Of this, I am painfully aware. But at the same time, I hope it will be encouraging to some people, especially those who are under the spiritual bondage of laws, rules, regulations, and control, which is widespread in our day.

I've spent the last fifty years carefully reading many systematic theologies, commentaries, and well-written books. So, I am very aware of how far I have fallen short of the high bar that's been set before me. My approach in this commentary is quite different from most of those I've read, admired, and benefited from over the years. The only complaint I have about most good commentaries is that they are difficult to get through. So, I've tried to write something anyone can read and relate to.

A conversational commentary

I've tried to make this commentary conversational. That is, I want readers to feel they are having a *conversation* about the subject at hand. For me, this means saying things using common, informal language – even using folksy and slang terms at times – just as most people do when talking with their friends. This makes my commentary a bit wordy, but my goal is for the reader to relax, enjoy the ride, and settle in for a journey through one of Paul's letters which he writes so passionately.

However, I've also tried to include some background information and explain words used in the original language – Greek. But this is a *comment-ary*, so I have commented as I felt it might be helpful and appropriate. It is left to the reader to look into things more carefully if so desired.

A thought-provoking commentary

I have also tried to be thought-provoking. This is more of my goal than having readers automatically accept what I write. I always encourage people to take Paul's advice and, "Examine everything carefully." You are always better off doing that than blindly trusting anyone. Always take everything you hear and read directly to God for his take on what is true. Your ability to do this (as granted to everyone by God) is greater than most teachers and writers want you to believe. God will never fail you. Trust him.

A verse-by-verse commentary

At best, I am a rank amateur when it comes to the Greek language. I took my first year of Greek from Darell Bock at Dallas Theological Seminary in 1982. I also completed a video course by Bill Mounce (as a refresher) about 30 years later. Then, as an attempt to get my second year of Greek under my belt, I worked through Daniel Wallace's excellent and thorough book, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*. So, I depend on those who have dedicated their life to being experts in this ancient language, and so I learn from them.

However, I do know Greek well enough to understand what they are saying when they weigh in on the New Testament writings. Translation and interpretation of any language is both an art and a science. One big thing I learned from Wallace is that all translators interpret, to some degree, when they translate.

From Mounce, I learned that “common sense is your best friend” when trying to translate any text.

So, though I depend on those who know Greek better than I do, I still check and double-check them against each other, use common sense, and do not just assume any translation is perfect. The Old Testament book of Proverbs says there is “safety in a multitude of counselors” and that certainly applies here.

Some translations are very literal renderings of the original New Testament text in an attempt to be as accurate as possible. Others are very loose and flexible, desiring to express the original author’s intent in English. There are disadvantages to each method and there is no perfect way to translate anything from one language to another. So, I try to combine all these principles into the text I use in my commentaries. I want it both readable and accurate, and sometimes these two goals are at odds with each other. So, the translation I use is a combination of many. However, I am convinced that if readers use common sense, read with the full context in mind, and seek God for understanding, pretty much any popular translation will be sufficient.

In my commentaries, every time a new portion of the New Testament text is introduced, I use a **bold** font so it will stand out. When you see this, a new portion of the New Testament text is introduced, followed by the comments of this commentary.

An optimistic commentary

Finally, and perhaps this is the most important feature of my commentary, I try to present God, life, and eternity in the most optimistic perspective possible. I do this simply because this is how Paul and all the other New Testament writers present God. This is not to say there is never anything harsh or severe spoken about God. There is! But as Paul once wrote, “Behold the goodness and severity of God.” He presents a balance of how to view God. Essentially, he is saying that God is *severe in his goodness*,

but that he is also *good in his severity*. And this is the key. The goodness of God, despite any severity that he allows and brings, always represents who God is and how he operates. He always acts in goodness and wants the very best for all humanity that he so loves and created in his own image!

Introduction

Of all the dreams, ideas, and goals that have been proposed and attempted since the beginning of time, what has been the greatest to ever enter the heart of hopeful humans? What do every movie watcher and book reader secretly hope and yearn for as they traverse through their visual journey? Isn't it, ultimately, that things will all work out somehow in the end? Isn't this in the hopeful heart of every growing child who's discovering the world around them, anticipating whether or not utopia or horror will be their fate?

Paul's letter to the first-century Ephesians contains many well-known themes that most students of the New Testament can cite from memory. Ephesians One lists all the *spiritual blessings in the heavenly places*. Ephesians Two tells of *salvation by grace through faith*. Ephesians Four encourages unity among believers. Ephesians Five discusses marriage as a picture of Christ and his church. Finally, Ephesians Six describes *the Armor of God* to be worn by followers of Jesus.

But what about Ephesians Three? Is there any memorable theme in that chapter of Paul's letter? Most people wouldn't be able to think of any. Yet, Ephesians Three may very well contain the greatest theme in Paul's letter ... and perhaps even the greatest theme of the New Testament itself. It is here, in Ephesians Three, that Paul reveals the *mysterious plan* that God has kept hidden since eternity past. It is a plan that brings about satisfaction of the deepest longings in every person that ever lived!

1. Every Spiritual Blessing (Ephesians 1.1-10)

Many people say that the first chapter of Paul's letter to the people in Ephesus is one big, long sentence. There's some truth to that because there's no punctuation in the ancient Greek language in which he wrote his letter. Actually, Ephesians One is a bunch of chained-together clauses that can leave readers a little overwhelmed. It's not because what Paul is writing is so complicated, even though many who read Ephesians often claim, "Oh, I can't understand Ephesians One." But that's not true. In reality, they can ... if they really want to.

What Paul wrote is basic, simple stuff, as we shall soon discover. But it's really *rich* stuff. It's like eating five chocolate eclairs or something else very decadent. We need only to break it down and take one step at a time. However, about the time we get through five or six bites of this amazing passage, we've gotta take another break. So, in this chapter, we'll march through it slowly and carefully, let it say many wonderful, encouraging things, and enjoy our journey.

You could read Ephesians One every day for a month and you'd still see something new in there every day. Try it sometime! Or, you might discover it relates to yet another aspect of life you never saw before. It is that rich. It's always worth reading the same good things over and over to discover just how rich they are. This is especially true of this opening chapter of this particular letter by Paul.

In this letter, Paul is writing to the people in Ephesus. Nearly all of his letters in the New Testament (plus the seven letters mentioned in the book of Revelation) are written to people living in areas surrounding the Aegean Sea. This is, essentially, modern-day Turkey and Greece. Paul's letter to the folks in Rome was the only New Testament letter that he sent outside this eastern region of the Mediterranean Sea.

Chosen to be an apostle (1.1)

Paul starts this letter by saying, **This letter is from Paul, chosen by God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus.** He usually starts his letters out this way, just as he did in Galatians, identifying *who* he is and *what* he is. Many New Testament books are anonymous, like Hebrews – we don't know with certainty who wrote it. Some in the early church claimed that Paul wrote it, but many others questioned its authority because it could not be tied directly to any apostle or disciple of Jesus. The Book of Hebrews was not fully accepted until the fourth century when all 27 New Testament books were identified by many to be the official writings of the church.

But in most of Paul's letters he identifies himself as an apostle, which just means “a sent one.” People often make too big a deal out of titles. I suppose it is valid to call Paul an apostle with a capital ‘A,’ because he was one of the apostles of Christ. However, he was not one of the original twelve disciples of Jesus. Paul came later, after Jesus had died and rose from the dead. He said, “I'm an apostle that came at a later time.” But still, he identifies himself as a *sent one* (apostle) of Christ Jesus. And so, believing he was sent out by Jesus, he went on his mission trips and started churches, unlike anyone else we are aware of. He was a driven man.

Paul's writings are the earliest writings in the New Testament. The Gospels are not, though most people mistakenly think they are. However, the actual events of the Gospels happened earlier than the events in Paul's letters. The four Gospels were written about 40 to 60 years after the events of Christ's life and death. Paul's letters were written only about 20 to 40 years after the time of Jesus. So, this is an interesting fact because, in some ways, Christianity gets its public start with Paul and his writings, not the Gospels. However, keep in mind that the events of the life and teachings of Jesus were being circulated verbally (and maybe there were some writings) long before the Gospels were written. As a set of writings, they didn't come about until quite a number of years after Paul. So, in many ways, it was Paul who kicked off Christianity in written form, did his mission trips, and wrote his letters. He kind of got things started and then the Gospels came along later.

Paul continues his letter saying, **I'm writing to God's holy people who are faithful followers of Christ Jesus.** Now, that doesn't mean that what he is writing is only for those people he is writing to. For sure, he is writing to them – they are his immediate audience. They are the people he knows are listening and paying attention. But what he's writing is for everyone – anyone who will read this letter, back then in his day or millenniums later as we are doing today. What he writes is for all humanity, because his message is the Good News about Jesus for all to hear about, believe, receive, and benefit from. We shall see more of this later in his letter.

This letter is more personal for the folks who are in Ephesus and who are faithful followers of Christ. There were, undoubtedly, some *unfaithful* followers of Christ among them, and even some who did not follow Jesus at all. There's always a variety of people hanging out in churches, then and today. They say they believe in God, but they're not always in sync with the main

message and activities. But that's ok. Everyone needs to hear this Good News about God's saving grace – his favor toward all humanity that is totally unearned by any of us. This is what grace means – *unearned favor!*

Today, there are people who aren't all that much involved in any church but are more faithful followers of Jesus than others who go to church and are deeply involved. It's about our relationship with God. It's not really about how involved we are in an institution, even though that is a good practice for many people. Just don't be fooled or distracted by focusing on the *institution* itself instead of the *persons* of God and Jesus. Never let any institution replace your relationship with your Creator. Let it just be something that, perhaps, enhances and reinforces your daily walk with God.

It's normal for people to go to a church, or some gathering of like-minded people, where everyone claims, together, what they believe. This is done in written form (creeds, doctrinal statements) and verbally (preaching, teaching, disciplining). There's nothing wrong with any of that. However, keep in mind that all the churches have a different *flavor*, where they view life, God, and eternity differently. So we all have a lot of choices. And each group sincerely believes that they are right (or, at least *more* right) than the other groups.

If we are part of such a group we do well to realize that it is all a matter of faith, highly personal, very subjective, and mostly our best guess as to what is true. This is the essence of humility – believing our strongly held convictions but doing so in a way that we do not become arrogant and assume we are right and all others are wrong. This mindset is at the heart of religion. Seek relationships instead, with God and with others, and leave the ultimate truth with God where it belongs.

So, Paul is writing to these folks in Ephesus, they are faithful followers of Jesus, and he adds, **May our God and Father of the**

Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace. And there's that word *may* – may it happen, maybe God will do this? I don't think he means maybe. He means that this is what he expects God to do and allow to happen. Paul is affirming that this is what God does. It's more about “may we be open and willing” to accept the grace and the love of God that's always there. It is always there. It's not a *maybe*.

Every spiritual blessing (1.3)

Okay. Buckle your seat belt because Paul gets lofty and extreme in this next part of Ephesians One. It's not so much *heavy* as it is *rich*. It's wonderful, encouraging stuff. It's the kind of writing where, after about five verses, you gotta take a breath and just kind of absorb it. We will move through it pretty quickly, but I encourage you to go back and read it again a few times this week, or next month, or whenever.

He starts out by saying, **All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ.** Do not miss this -- *every spiritual blessing!* Really? Every one of them? Notice they are blessings in the heavenly places. That's because they are *spiritual* in nature. We are not granted all material or physical blessings in life. We all know and see this every day. More importantly, we gain these spiritual blessings because we're united with Christ. That is the key. The blessings we get, are complete. It's everything that you can imagine ... and then some. It's every spiritual blessing *possible*. They are all ours in Christ, in Jesus, in who he is and what he has done for us.

So God is blessing us with a ton of stuff way beyond what we even know or imagine. And that's wonderful. Just think of what that means. You're probably asking, “Ya, what does it

mean?” Well, Paul's going to go on and start talking about what these blessings are. Just keep in mind that they are already ours. They're already there. How he's going to list what they are. So here's his list.

Paul first writes, **Even before God made the world, He loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes.** Note a couple of things here. God loved and chose even before He made the world. He loved us. Isn't that great? He didn't have to create the world and think, “Let me see if I'm going to love these people or not. Oh, they're not acting right. I don't know if I really want to love them. I know, I'll just love some of them. The better ones.” No, he loved his world even before He created it because that's who he is. He *is* love. He has to love. He doesn't have any choice! But that's OK because he wants to love all that he creates. How could he not? His only desire is to love people, fully, completely, and forever. He *wants* to love and he *does* love because that's who he is.

But notice, also, that He loves us in Christ. We will see this phrase *in Christ* throughout this whole section of his letter. This is really important because what is done for us by God (in the area of blessings) is done in Christ. It's not done in our faith, even though faith is involved. It's not done by being a chosen person. It's not done in being a Jew, or a Gentile, or a person that goes to church. These spiritual blessings are *in Christ*. Nowhere else. Okay? Not in our goodness, not in our works, not in a place where we gather with people – although that might be one of the blessings we experience. As Paul wrote above, “Before God made the world, He loved us and chose us in Christ.”

Now, keep in mind that none of us are without fault, right? We all know this. But when God sees us, he sees *past* our sins. He says, “I've taken care of that. I'm aware that you're sinning, but I don't dwell on it. And you don't need to dwell on it either.” If

you've fallen into sin, just do what John said to do in his first letter: "Confess your sins, and God will be faithful and righteous to forgive you."

Notice that John didn't say to repent. He didn't say to quit sinning or even feel sorry (though we usually are). John just said, to admit it. Just confess and say, "Yes, I'm a sinner, God, and I will be tomorrow and the next day. I don't even have to try, it's just my nature. I admit it." And God forgives. Actually, he's already forgiven us. What happens is that we sense, receive, and enjoy that forgiveness that we've *already* got through the death of Jesus and his resurrection.

Decided in advance (1.5)

Paul then adds to his list, **God decided, in advance, to adopt us into His own family by bringing us to Himself through Jesus Christ.** Look what He brings us into. He doesn't bring us to church. He doesn't bring us into an institution. He doesn't bring us to a doctrinal statement. He doesn't even bring us to the Bible. He brings us to himself, and that's the key. The key is your relationship is with God, right now, in real time. Your relationship is not with a book – good as the New Testament is. We're studying it right now, we're looking at it, we're reading it. It's wonderful stuff, but you can't have a relationship with a book and God didn't bring us to a book or an institution or a gathering. He brought us to himself. Isn't that great to know? It's really good to know that God *adopts* us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ.

This adoption thing in the ancient world was really interesting. People back in that day, who already had children would *adopt* their own children because legal adoption brought all the privileges of inheritance and status in the family. If someone was adopted into their family, even an outsider, they became full inheritors of everything in that family. So, people would adopt

their own children just to make sure they were covered. That's the idea here, God's inviting us in to enjoy the fullness of all the blessings he's already given to us in Christ.

Paul then adds, **This is what God wanted to do because it gave him great pleasure.** He wanted to do this because it was part of something bigger and better than he had in mind for us. He didn't just want to watch and see what happened. His whole goal in creating the world and working in people's lives was to bring us all to himself – everyone. How could he not want that? How could he ever quit wanting that? How could he ever give up and say “Uh, you know what, I'm tired of doing this. I once wanted to save everyone and bring them to myself, but I'm tired of waiting. I've lost my patience.” But this is not who God is. Paul wrote in his first letter to the Corinthians (chapter 13) that love is patient, kind, doesn't seek its own best interest, and doesn't take offense when wronged by others. And, God *is* love, so everything Paul wrote about love is true of God! What God did for us is what he wanted to do and it gave him great pleasure.

He wanted to bring us to himself. He wants to bring everybody to himself, and someday in eternity, he will. How could he not? He's not going to fail. He's not gonna try and say, “Oh well, I tried as hard as I could, but these darn stubborn people ... they're just more powerful than I am. So I'll just give up.” That's not God at all. He wanted to adopt us in Christ, and it gave him great pleasure to do this. God is not just an intellectual giant. Nor is he just a bundle of emotions, and he's certainly not just somebody who only makes decisions. He has a mind, emotions, and a will, like us, but all operating in perfection. God thinks, he feels, and he decides. And that's what we have – mind, will, and emotions – because we're made in his image. But he has these in perfection and in greater magnitude. He has greater intellectual abilities and his thinking is infinitely good. His emotions are always perfect, but they're also really strong, especially when he

loves us. He really loves us and always acts in our best interest to prove it. For God, it's more than just a feeling because love takes action and accomplishes something. That's God exercising his perfect will. So, these three things are perfectly combined in God. He thinks, he feels, and he decides. He feels things very deeply, but it's all in harmony with his knowledge. Then he makes decisions, he acts, and he exercises his will. So, loving us and saving us is what he wanted to do and it gives him great pleasure.

Corrective punishment

God doesn't take pleasure in punishing people. Now, he does correct us and he'll bring a kind of *corrective* punishment on us. But his goal is to correct us because he loves us. He doesn't take any pleasure in that, except the pleasure in seeing us turn away from things that destroy us, come back to him, and get our lives straightened out. But the point is that this is what he *wanted* to do. God would never just retaliate in pure meanness and not have any corrective purpose in what he's doing. He always wants to correct, and restore, and redeem, and improve us. He'll do whatever it takes, even if it means bringing some difficulty into our lives. He will do whatever he's got to do, simply because he loves us.

He never says, "Well, I'll just let you go your own way indefinitely." That's not love. Love says, "I'm going to double down on rescuing you and redeeming you." God's not saving us from himself and saving us from something horrible he wants to do to people in eternity! That is never his motive. He's saving us from ourselves. So, on the cross when Jesus died, God wasn't coming down and saving us from himself by beating up Jesus instead of us. No! He was saying, "I'm providing myself as *your* sacrifice. You're sacrificing me and I'm proving to you that I don't solve my problems with violence. I refuse to retaliate. I'll let you kill me in your anger. I've sent my dear son, the only person begotten by me, to take sin away from you. I don't bring

condemnation or retaliating punishment on you.” This work by Jesus on the cross gets misunderstood by a lot of folks. They mistakenly think God is punishing Jesus instead of us. This saving work through his son is what he wanted to do and it gave him great pleasure to save us from our sin, which we could never do!

When my parents disciplined me as a kid, they used to say, “This is going to hurt me more than it does you.” I don’t think I believed them at the time, but today after raising two kids, I know what they were saying. When I did spank my kids back in the 80s – I know that’s probably not kosher today – I purposely used my hand so I would feel the sting of how much it hurt. In that way, it hurt me, too. But what hurt me more was that I had to do it at all. I wanted them to be good, enjoy life to the fullest, and not behave foolishly. This, I believe, is what God experiences on a larger scale. But after I disciplined them, I always gave them a big hug and told them, “I love you, and I just want you to be a better person.” I’m not sure they fully understood, but they did understand that I loved them.

God’s love sometimes requires severe action on his part, or it’s not real love. Love always takes action in the best interest of the one loved, including discomfort or limitation. It is like a kid running out in the street. You would talk sternly to them and say, “Don’t run out in the street!” in a voice that indicates that you mean business. You wouldn’t just pat them on the head and say, “Do whatever you want, honey. It’s OK. I love you.” You would tell them, “I don’t want you to get run over by a car. So, I’m going to spank you, or discipline you, or ground you, or whatever it takes to communicate to them that their behavior is not acceptable! We would be saying, “It’s bad for you. It’s going to harm or destroy you!” So, that’s what God does. He says, “You have the kind of behavior that’s destroying you. I love you too much to not take action.” And so he steps in and does whatever it takes.

Grace poured out (1.6)

Paul goes on to write, **As a result, we praise God for the glorious grace he has poured out on us who belong to his dear son.** Okay, we praise him. Hey, God's given us all the spiritual blessings in the heavenly places, and Paul's already listed some of them and he's gonna give more. We praise God because he poured blessings out on us, and he did this because we belong to his son. We belong to him, he owns us (in a good way), he possesses us, and he's got us wrapped up in all of who he is. He has us in his hands, and he's never going to let go. That's just so good to know!

Good stuff, huh? I told you you'd need a break. It's like eating a chocolate éclair. It might be easy to think, "Oh man, can I take any more of this?" Yeah, you can. In verse seven, Paul says, **God is so rich in kindness and grace.** And rich he is! God is just so overflowing and full of kindness and grace. Paul continues and says, **God purchased our freedom with the blood of his son and forgave our sins.** That all happened on the cross. That's when he died, that's when he purchased us and paid the penalty that sin brings on us. He *took away the sin of the world*, says John in his Gospel. It's all been taken care of by grace for us.

I get this kind of response all the time from people: "Well, if you believe that, it means we can go sin and do whatever we want." And, actually, that's true. We can go and sin all we want, and God will not always stop us. Look around in the world today. God clearly permits sin – lots of it. Look at how much sin he allows today, all over the world, in and outside the church. He doesn't stop it, because he knows what he's going to do in the long run. He knows sometimes this is the only path people must take to understand grace and get to know him in a way that's better than anything else in life. Sometimes we have to go down

this path of being really stupid and foolish and keep on sinning until we get sick of it.

But then we ask, “Why am I doing this?” If God or others bring The Law down on us, it really doesn’t solve our problem. In fact, sometimes living under The Law makes us sin all the more. In Paul’s letter to the Galatians, he said The Law was a *guardian* and it could only keep us from sinning, somewhat. But not for the right reasons. When we try to live under The Law we operate in fear, guilt, and peer pressure. It might keep us from sinning somewhat, but not for the right reason. We’re just doing right because it’s in the Ten Commandments, and we believe God’s going to get mad at us if we break any of them. But grace is a much better reason to not sin. Under grace and living in it, we obey God and do things right because we *want* to, not because we *must*.

Once sin has run its course in your life (often God lets it and he doesn’t always stop it), then you are ready for grace. For most people, this takes time, often a great portion of our lives. I’m not saying it’s a good thing to sin – it’s always bad and destructive. But I am saying God is wise enough to want us to learn how to walk in grace and know what real love is, and this can take time. But God is never in a hurry to get things done right in our lives. Sometimes we’ve got to go be stupid, sinful, and selfish, long enough for grace to become the real answer. For some people it takes most their life. It seems to take forever for some people to finally say, “Hey God, I want to abide in you and live at peace. I want to enjoy the spiritual life that you’ve given me.” So, some just have to go down that path of sin for a long time. But God is so gracious and patient. He waits. He doesn’t step in and try to control them and hit them over the head with a two-by-four.

Now, I’m not saying God doesn’t correct us. Sometimes he steps in and says, “This has gone far enough. I know where you are in your mind, and it’s time for me to step in and bring some discipline because now you are ready. You’re right on the edge

and ready to understand love and grace. I've allowed you to traffic around in sin – as much as I hate what it does to you – but I know where we're headed with this. I know what I'm going to do in your life and I know that, ultimately, this is going to be the best for you.” So, God allows a lot, but he's rich in kindness and grace, and he “purchased our freedom with the blood of his son and forgave our sins!”

God purchased our freedom in Christ on the cross! It didn't happen on the day we believed. He didn't say, “Okay, you finally believed. I guess I'll like you and love you.” Instead, he says, “Welcome home. I already loved you. I already forgave you. This is what I do and how I operate. I'm so glad you've come to realize it. I've worked things in your life, and now you're working things out in your life, and you've come around. So, let's go from here and have you grow in grace.”

So, Paul concludes in verse nine, **He showed his kindness toward us with all wisdom and understanding**, He's not a selfish God who says, “Hey, it's all about me. It's all about how I feel.” That's what we would do and we tend to project such selfish attitudes back onto God. When God fulfills his own pleasure, it's the pleasure of seeing us do well, becoming free from sin, and having a relationship with himself. That's what his *good pleasure* is all about. Real love is all about the other person you love. It's not about yourself. God always acts in our best interest.

Revealing his mysterious plan (1.9)

Next, Paul says, **God is revealing his mysterious plan regarding Christ, a plan to fulfill his own good pleasure.** This *mysterious plan* is really interesting. When we get into Ephesians Three, we're going to see more of this. Ephesians Three is the kind of chapter that gets overlooked, but there are some really interesting ideas in it about God's mysterious plan fulfilled in

Christ. Throughout the Old Testament – all those years of people living and dying – there was a mysterious plan coming. It was just hidden from them. But it finally it came, and it has to do with Jesus – who he is and what he has done for us. “God’s revealed to us his mysterious plan regarding Christ, a plan to fulfill his own good pleasure.” God’s not making it all about himself because *his own good pleasure* is to benefit us! That’s what he takes pleasure in – our well-being and what is best for us, just like we do with our kids.

Then Paul says, **And this is the plan...** Here it is, are you ready for it? **God’s plan is that, at the right time, He will bring everything together under the authority of Christ, everything in heaven and on earth.** That’s pretty clear, and that’s pretty complete. That’s God’s plan. He will bring *everything* together, *everything* in heaven and earth. Wow! How do people who read the New Testament miss this? There’s a parallel verse in Paul’s letter to the Colossians (chapter 1). There Paul says that God will reconcile everything to himself. It says the same thing as he says here in this letter but with different words. There should be no doubt in the mind of any reader of the New Testament what God’s plan is – what he plans to accomplish.

So, God’s plan, his goal, his purpose, his intention is to bring everything into harmony with himself. Everything! Why wouldn’t he? How could he not, and still be God? Why would he do anything less? Why wouldn’t the *results* of what God does be just as absolute, unlimited, infinite, and universal as he himself is? His knowledge, his power, his presence, his love, and his wisdom are all universal and unlimited. And so is his saving work in Jesus. Didn’t Jesus die for everyone? Wasn’t it a universal atonement for sin? Why wouldn’t the *result* of what God does be just as universal and completely successful? It must be, or he is not really God – nor can Jesus be the *Savior of the World*.

His plan is executed *at the right time*, according to Paul. It's always a timing thing with God. Sometimes, it's about the right timing in our lives, and sometimes it's about different timing in other people's lives. Then there's *God's* timing for the whole world, which is the right timing for everything. God executed his plan at just the right time – how and when he chose. And his plan was to, eventually, bring everything together under the authority of Christ – everything in heaven and earth. That leaves nothing unresolved. It certainly does not allow for most of humanity to suffer in hell forever, or even for them to be annihilated.

Paul writes elsewhere that Christ is going to have everything submitted to himself and then go to the Father and submit himself (along with everything that was submitted to him) to the Father so that everything will be forever made right! Then Paul adds, “God will fill all in all.” He'll completely fill everyone – nobody's going to be left out or sent to hell forever because God will fill everyone, in every way, to the Nth degree, and we will all be one with him. It will be extremely good because God is extremely good and successful.

His plan lacks nothing and in no way fails. It is not anything less than perfect and complete, and yet most people read right over it. So, “at the right time, he'll bring everything together under the authority of Christ, everything in heaven and earth.” That doesn't leave anything or anyone out! When God saves, restores, and reconciles, he does a complete job. Check out the parallel verse in Colossians 1:20. This is a major theme for Paul.

2. Spiritual Wisdom (Ephesians 1.11-23)

In the last chapter of this commentary, we looked at the first half of Ephesians One, which was Paul’s list of all the spiritual blessings we have in Christ. It is so rich! This list is everything we gain from being *in* Christ. It is such an amazing list. A lot of people think it's too complicated and too “lofty” in what it claims. But if we just read it slowly and take it one line at a time, there's nothing in there that’s too complicated. There are a couple of things about *God's choosing*, but don't let that slow you down. Most of it's pretty clear. It's a great list of all these things we have because of what Jesus did for us on the cross to save us.

Chosen in advance(1.11)

Paul further reinforces and explains what he previously wrote, **Because we are united with Christ we have received an inheritance from God. For he chose us in advance, making everything work out according to his plan.** Pretty clear what God plans to do – make everything work out -- and he will not fail because he cannot!

Look at what it says in John 3:17, (a verse that nobody quotes like they do 3:16). “God sent his son into the world to save it, not to condemn it.” So, we know what his plan is. We know that his goal is to save the world and not condemn it. He's not going to fail. He will pull off his plan without a hitch, eventually, in his

time. But it's hard for us to see it and believe it because we see all this nonsense going on around us every day. It's easy for some people to think, "He can't be *that* big – to save the whole world?" But God's clear purpose was to save Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews) alike. That would be everyone. (Paul will expand on this in Ephesians Two).

Though Paul uses the word *we* (referring to himself and those he's writing to) he's really talking about everyone. He is talking *to* people who are aware of what he is writing and are believers, but he is talking *about* what all humanity inherits because of Christ. We know from elsewhere in Paul's letters, like in Romans Five, where he says, "Adam plunged all humanity into ruin, and Christ (as the second and final Adam) made all humanity righteous." This is God working to save his world. That's why Jesus is called *Savior of the world*. But here in Ephesians One, he's focusing on *us*, people who know Christ and walk with him.

"Because we're united with Christ, we have received an inheritance from God, for he chose us in advance, and he makes everything work according to his plan." That is so good to know! He makes everything, eventually, work according to his plan. It doesn't mean he steps in every second and takes care of every bad thing in our lives. Obviously, he doesn't. He doesn't always save us from ourselves, instantly and perfectly, at that moment. But he's always at work. He's always there. He's always governing us and keeping us on track. Sometimes he even lets us get off track and says, "I know, in my wisdom, the best way for you to learn is for you to reach a point of desperation. I hate to see it, but I know you won't ever understand grace, forgiveness, and love unless you go through these awful things you've brought on yourself. You also won't be able to really love others until you go through this and come out the other end a better person." So, it's something he lets people go through for a better purpose ... eventually.

This is hard for people to understand. It's hard to deal with difficulties and make any sense of them. When I see evil in the world, I think, *God, where are you and what are you doing?* But he always says, "I'm here, and I'm at work. You can either trust me or not, but I'm not going to change what I do and how I do it because I know I'm doing the right thing in the right way." At that point, I always realize that I've got two choices. Either God's smarter than me, or I'm smarter than him. Huh, let me think. Right? I must conclude, "Okay God, you're smarter than me," and then I leave it there.

God's Purpose (1.12)

Now, Paul focuses on God's purpose for us and the guarantee we have from his Spirit who indwells us. **God's purpose was that some Jews would be first to trust in Christ and bring praise and glory to God. But also, that the Gentiles would also hear the Good News that saves them.** Here he clearly defines what the Good News is. You can't miss it. **And when you believed in Christ, he identified you as his own by giving you the Holy Spirit whom he promised long ago. The Spirit is God's guarantee that he will give us the inheritance he promised and that he has purchased us to be his own people.** Though he's writing *to* these believers in Ephesus, he's really talking *about* all humanity. It's not that all humanity understands, right now, or even believes right now. But this was God's goal – that all will someday believe and understand. That's why Paul wrote that God's going to bring everything under the authority of Christ, that the Spirit is God's guarantee that he will give us the inheritance he promised and that he has purchased us to be his own people. That's a lot!

Paul adds, **He did this so we would praise and glorify God.** Paul uses this phrase *praise and glorify God* about three times

here in Ephesians One. He's saying that everything God does for us is so overwhelming that we can't help but praise and glorify him. This doesn't mean that God is saying, "Yeah, bring it on. Praise me, glorify me, that's what it's all about. When you praise and glorify me, I really feel like God!" He doesn't care about any of that. He wants us to praise and glorify Him because *we* need to, not because he needs it. He doesn't need glory and praise. God is totally self-secure. Right?

The Old Testament view of God

God isn't like a needy person who needs counseling. Sometimes when we read the Old Testament, it's easy to think that God needs anger management classes. I don't think the Old Testament always presents God accurately. It seems like it's a "conflicted view of God" by its authors. We all have an inaccurate, conflicted view of God to some degree. God loves us in spite of this and sees us as children who need his love, correction, guidance, and affirmation.

However, there is also plenty of really good stuff written about God by the writers of the Old Testament. Jesus acknowledged this when he quoted Psalms and Isaiah, his two favorite books. It seems that God ensured that all of these good and bad ideas about God would be preserved for us to see and sort out so that when Jesus came, as the gold standard of truth and revealed who the Father is, we could go back, read the Old Testament and say, "Okay, this is true about God and this is probably not (based on what Jesus had to say)."

This is all part of the mystery that Paul refers to – a mystery God revealed to him that he is now writing about. And the revealing of this mystery, hidden for ages past, allows us to sort out truth from error in the Old Testament and in our experiences in life! People in the Old Testament just didn't fully understand because they couldn't. They didn't have Jesus, who "brought

grace and truth,” (as John claimed in the opening of his Gospel). All they had was the Law of Moses, the history of Israel, a few poetical books, and some long, drawn-out, repetitious prophetic utterances. The truth about God, grace, salvation, love, judgment, and eternity are all delivered to us through Christ. Now we can look back at history and conclude, “That's not fully who God was. That's just who people claimed him to be. But this new information, revealed by Jesus and his followers, tells us more accurately who God is. He's a wonderful, loving savior and a *heavenly father* who always acts to correct us and discipline us, and never retaliates against us. We just needed new lenses to look at the Old Testament – a lens of grace, love, purpose, and of a God who had a plan to save his world.

So, we can go back and see things properly, and even sort out the things in the Old Testament that just aren't right. But they are recorded there because that's what men in that day came up with, honest and good-intentioned as it was, in their limited view before this hidden *mystery* was revealed in Jesus. So, everything recorded in the Old Testament isn't necessarily exactly the mind and thoughts of God. Sometimes it's the minds, hearts, and thoughts of men *about* God, and incorrectly so. And how do we know which parts are incorrect? By looking at Jesus, what he taught, and The New Testament writings, including Paul's letters. This is all given to us to explain the Old Testament. Someone once said, “The Old Testament is the New Testament *concealed*, and the New Testament is the Old Testament *revealed*.” Lots of truth in this.

If we try to read the Old Testament without the *lens* of the New Testament, grace, love, and an understanding of God's mysterious plan revealed, we're gonna really get messed up in our thinking and conclusions. The religious Jews, back then and to this day, have only the Old Testament. This is reflected in how messed up they were about who God was when Jesus came on the scene. They needed help and he brought it.

Look at verse nine again, carefully. It's an eye-opener if you stop and think about it. It says, "He made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure, which he has purposed in himself." God's purpose is rooted in himself, not in us, because as far as God is concerned, we died and were raised in the newness of life when Jesus died and was raised from the dead (see Romans Six for details). When we put on the mind of Christ, we learn all we need to know. "Present your bodies as a living sacrifice and a reasonable service," wrote Paul in Romans Twelve. You may think your life is not worth anything, but God is basically saying, "Bring it to me, leave it here, and put on the mind of Christ." And this *mind of Christ* is hidden in God waiting for us to discover and greatly benefit from. This is why Paul wrote back in verse 11, "We are united with Christ, and we have received an inheritance from God. For he chose us in advance, making everything work out according to his plan." He's not working things out based on *our* will and what *we* think ought to be done. God works everything based on the counsel of *his* will, according to his plan.

Love for God's people everywhere (1.15)

Paul now turns his attention to what we will experience as a result of all the spiritual blessings we have in Christ. **Ever since I first heard about your strong faith in Jesus and your love for God's people everywhere, I have never stopped thanking God for you.** Okay, he's thankful. He's telling them he's so glad they're out there doing what is right in their faith and love. They're an encouragement to Paul. They're making progress. Their faith is strong. Paul knows that there is always some deviation in how they live their lives and that people go up and down as they walk in the Spirit – just as we do today. But as a particular group of people, they were doing pretty good. It was a well-together church. Not all churches Paul wrote to, were! See his first letter

to the church in Corinth for an example of multiple problems. These folks in Ephesus had a love for God's people everywhere, and that's why Paul wrote, "I never stop thanking God for you."

Then he goes on and adds, **I pray for you constantly, asking God, who is the glorious Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, to give you spiritual wisdom and insight so that you will grow in your knowledge of God.** That's what God wants. Hopefully, that's what we want, too. He desires us to grow in our knowledge of him, live a better life, and have a better experience. God's into good things. He's not into how much he can beat us up for being bad! He's not a retaliator. He's a God of good gifts. So that's what he wants. That's what Paul's praying for, even though he knows that's what God already desires to do, and is doing it.

Paul is also praying that God will grant them "spiritual wisdom and insight." What greater thing could we have? More money, a better job, greater success, famous friends? Those things are stimulating, but they are also shallow and they are temporary! Paul wants this kind of wisdom and insight for them so they can grow in knowing who God is. Is there any other way? Of course, Paul already knows that God's going to give us wisdom and insight, so why pray for it? Well, I don't think he's thinking, "Oh, if I don't pray this, God's not going to do anything." Instead, think it's Paul's way of acknowledging to his readers that this is what God does. Plus, Paul may also be praying that God's timing will be right and that they would be receptive to what God brings to them. This is all part of what real prayer is. It's not just about trying to get what we want and when we want it. I can't imagine Paul thinking, *good thing I prayed that because if I didn't, they would all miss out!*

Confident hope (1.18)

Paul continues to build his list of spiritual blessings. **I pray that your hearts will be flooded with light allowing you to understand the confident hope God has given to those he calls his holy people – those who are his rich and glorious inheritance.** Again, he is sincerely praying about these things, but it's also his way of saying that this is how God operates. **I also pray that you will understand the incredible greatness of God's power for those of us who believe in him.** Notice it is not *our* incredible greatness or anything else, but the incredible greatness of *his* power for those of us who believe. If you can ever get your mind around the power of God, man oh man, you've got everything going for you. **This is the same mighty power that raised Christ from the dead and seated him in the place of honor at God's right hand in the heavenly realms.** That's the kind of power we have working for us daily in Christ. That's a lot of power! And **Christ is far above any ruler, or authority, or power, or leader, or anything else.** He is far beyond any church, any politics, any law or requirement... you name it. He's bigger than bad guys who kidnap you and put you in the trunk of their car (which happened to a missionary friend of mine in Brazil.) **Jesus is far above any ruler or authority or power or anything else, not only in this world but also in the world to come.** That's pretty darn all-inclusive!

Christ is head over all things (1.22)

Then Paul writes, **God has put everything under the authority of Christ and has made him head over all things for the benefit of the church.** Notice he's not just head of the church, he's head over all things, everything, for the *benefit* of the church.

By the way, the word *church* in Greek means “called out ones.” In one sense, though not in an active sense, the church is everybody because the word means those who are *called out* of the world. And who has God called out of the world? Everybody! We’re all called. Jesus said, “Come unto me all of you who are heavy burdened, and I will give you rest.” So, technically, everyone is in the church, though some are in a potentially active state, waiting for the day when they will be actively engaged with God, fully and completely. That day will come. All are in the church, in that they’re all secure in Christ and in what he did for all humanity on the cross. God has saved them all through Jesus; they just don’t all experience it... yet! So, Paul talks in terms of those who are in the church and out of the church because some experience it and some don’t. But in reality, in God’s mind and heart, the church (called-out ones) includes everyone. Keep in mind that God put *all things* under the authority of Christ.

Paul then adds to this, **And the church is his body. It is made full and complete by Christ who fills all things everywhere with himself.** Can it be any more complete? He fills all things everywhere with himself. If people went to hell, he’d have to be filling them while they’re in hell being tormented! That doesn’t make any sense. That’s why we never see, anything about hell and damnation in the writings of Paul. Paul’s letters to the Galatians and the Romans are both perfect books to warn people about going to hell if Paul ever wanted to do so. But he doesn’t, and he never does in any of his other eleven letters. Paul never warns anyone! He also never warns anyone about hell in Luke’s account of Paul’s missionary journeys in the book of Acts. Neither does Peter, John, Jude, nor the author of the book of Hebrews! Paul never uses hell as a threat because the gospel itself is not a threat. It’s a promise. It’s an *announcement* of the Good News about what’s already been done for us by grace so that we can only say *thank you* to God.

“The church is Christ’s body.” That’s so interesting. We are how Christ gets around (physically) in the world today! We’re his hands and feet, eyes and ears. And so, we call believers, collectively, *the body of Christ*. It’s not just a whole bunch of different people connected, it’s Christ’s way of getting around in the world. I have a friend who says this even includes sitting in a bar having a bible study over pretzels and beer, and not minding if people hear him and his friends. That’s all part of how the body of Christ gets around in this physical world ... through us! What a privilege. Then Paul says, “It is made full and complete by Christ who fills ...” and he’s the one that makes it full and complete. The body of Christ is made complete by each one of us, collectively and together, because he “fills all things everywhere with himself.” That includes everyone and everything. Yes, God’s salvation of his world is *that* complete!

Okay, That finishes Ephesians One. Do you now see that even if you take it one phrase at a time, it is rich like a chocolate éclair? If you take a few bites and then take a breath, you get a rich, spiritual sugar rush! It’s all great stuff. You could go back and read this all again in ten minutes. If you did you would find things you didn’t see the first time through. You would start connecting the first verse with the fifth, and then the tenth verse, seeing how it all fits together. Remember how Paul started out Ephesians One? “God has blessed us with *every* spiritual blessing in the heavenly places,” and then he listed them. This is our spiritual *Magna Carta* and *Declaration of Independence*. This is our *US Constitution*, with all the freedoms we’ve been given in Christ. If you ever get discouraged about life, read this first half of Ephesians One over and over. It will change your life!

Paul will be writing, later in this letter, about the mystery of Christ, where that came from, and how these things were revealed in Paul’s day and not sometime in the past. He will reveal how God took Jews and Gentiles and brought them together into one

group. This was God's plan; this was his *mystery*. It's about everyone, Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews). That's everybody and God brings them together into one new eternal group. It's hard to miss this unless you've been *indoctrinated* out of it. Education is looking at everything. Paul wrote in another letter, "Examine everything carefully and hold fast to that which is good." So, look into everything, just as he exhorts us to do. Quit bringing your biases and prejudices, although those are very hard to let go of. But the more you open your mind up and want to see what's there, the more you will see what actually *is* there! Only then can we leave some things behind that have been inserted into our thinking by well-intentioned people. Ephesians One is so rich, so good. It ends with telling how Christ completely fills all things. This is the "restoration of all things" that is spoken of in the Book of Acts.

Never going back!

So, we need to catch ourselves going back to our old, defeated life of bondage under some kind of law. This was Paul's theme in his letter to the Galatians. This can happen when we hear somebody preaching on the radio, reading a book, or talking to a legalistic friend. It only takes about two seconds and they've got us back living under the Old Testament Law. It's hard to explain to them how God isn't a retaliator, and instead, he is good. It is easy to listen to them and let them talk to our minds instead of letting God tell us about his mystery in the Good News about Jesus. Everything we need is in Christ, and God invites us to come to him.

But if we don't, God just says, "Okay, you want to learn the hard way? We can do that because I'm faithful to you. I'll wait until you work through whatever it is you need to work through, and I'll be here for you when you crawl out on the other end of your dark tunnel." So, we need only to say, "Okay God, I want

joy, peace, and freedom. And so, I'm gonna walk in love and I'm gonna walk in you. I'm gonna keep my eyes on you when I go out today." Or I can go out there and look at the world the way the world sees it, and then all of a sudden, I'm a basket case again. So, I try to love people who have not heard about Jesus and that he is God's answer to life's problems. But they look around and see people dying and other evil things and ask, "God allows that?"

God's desire is that we do good and walk in him – walk in the spirit. God brings good things into our lives, but he allows difficulty, too. In his wisdom, he allows such difficulty knowing if that's the path we have to take to get where he wants us to be, then he's okay with allowing hardship because he will make everything right in the end. Paul wrote in Romans Eight, "For those who love God, all things work together toward good." That's the way God operates. Now, this doesn't mean we should thank God for sin! True, he doesn't always stop it. He could – he's big enough. But he doesn't. He has some bigger and better purpose in allowing it and working through it! We can see this at work in the world today if we look closely. God does not stop sin. Instead, Jesus has paid for it. He has covered it with his blood. And so that's important. We are sons and daughters of God, right now. Jesus already paid for our sins 2000 years ago on the cross. That's Good News. All we really need to do is get our minds, our eyes, and our hearts focused on that. We need to walk in that reality because that's the solution.

A personal note

I always like to think of myself as a *presenter*, not a teacher, because if there's any teacher in this commentary, it's Paul. Ultimately, the real teacher is God, through his Holy Spirit. But as far as a *human* teacher, Paul's more of a teacher than I am because all I do is go through the New Testament writings, make a few comments, and try to be as faithful to the text as possible –

though I'm sure I fail to some degree. I try not to add anything, nor leave anything out, except for my opinions which you are free to dismiss as you come to your own conclusions. Context is everything – the immediate context of each passage as well as the greater context of each book and writer. I strive to understand that.

I gain a lot from writing, just as I sincerely hope you gain as much from reading what I write. But keep in mind that it is best to always take everything directly to God and ask him to show you what you are to understand and believe. Everything else, including what I write, is just input, data, ideas, and resources. I've learned a great deal in my 74 years of living from both good and bad experiences. But it all works together as lessons in life. I like to think that some of what I learn gets reflected in my writings and is somewhat beneficial to those who are readers... reinforcing, helpful, and encouraging.

3. Saved by Grace (Ephesians 2.1-10)

We are now ready to look at Ephesians Two. Ephesians One ended by saying, “The church is his body, and it is made full and complete by Christ who fills all things everywhere with himself.” Filling all things everywhere is as complete as it gets! God is not picking out a bunch of people and saying, “These are my favorites and the rest of you go to hell!” He really isn't. He fills all things, everyone, everywhere with himself. Now, it's true that many people don't respond to what God has done. They don't realize the unlimited salvation God has brought through Jesus. And that's okay. Ultimately, it's what God is doing, not us, that counts. They'll get there eventually because (as we saw) his plan and goal is to reconcile everything to himself.

Dead in sin (2.1)

So, Paul launches into Ephesians Two and says, **At one time you were dead because of your sin and failures.** And, indeed, were dead – all of us, completely. Oh, not physically dead but spiritually dead. In our natural, fallen state we're all wandering around aimlessly because we really don't know God.

In the next verse, Paul writes. **You used to live in sin just like everybody else in the world, obeying the devil, who is the commander of the powers of the unseen world.** We need not become arrogant and say, “Oh man, I’m walking with God. I’m not like those dirty rotten sinners out there.” All of us were like that at one time, we still are to some degree, and we are where we are today by God’s grace. It’s so easy to compare: “I was never a really bad person. I didn’t rob banks and I didn’t go around killing people!” But we’ve all hated people, and that’s committing murder in our hearts, according to Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount. We’ve all coveted, which is the same as stealing (in our hearts where it counts). The real sins are committed in our hearts, at the very core of our being.

So, there’s not that much difference, before God, between us and the people who act out their sin, publicly. We just keep our sin private which produces less collateral damage in the lives of others. But before we get on our high horse and say, “I didn’t do any of that stuff,” God says, “Well, you were just like that, at least in your heart, before you came to Christ and got straightened out.”

Those who refuse to obey (2.2b)

Paul continues, **It is the Spirit who is at work in the hearts of those who refuse to obey God.** Notice that Paul does not say that they *can’t* obey, only that they *refuse* to do so. No one can perfectly obey God, but we can *want* to, and we can seek him and respond to him in faith, and he will work with us and help us get that good relationship going. It doesn’t make us perfect, but it does make us *perfect in his sight*, even though we’re not actually perfect in our behavior. There are always some people who are seeking every bad thing imaginable. But God has the same plan, even for them! They’re just wounded, and sometimes broken people. They really are. We all are, to some degree! And what do

they need the most? When people come to me and say, “You know, Hitler needs to go to hell forever. He's the worst person in history.” I say to them, “Well, that could be.” But Paul already took that title (chief of all sinners) on himself. But then I also ask them, “What does Hitler *need* the most? Not what do you think he deserves? Not, what do you think God should do to him? What does he *need*?” He needs the same thing we all need, and that's to be changed, to be restored, to be redeemed, to be reconciled to God, and to have a relationship with him because he's made in the image of God and is of infinite value to him. This is why God sent his only son into the world ... to save it, not condemn it ... because he so loved his world!

Even Hitler is valuable to God – as much so as anyone else. We like to get categorical and say, “Well, we're not like those dirty rotten sinners, and I didn't do what Hitler did, so I'm kind of good with God on my own merit.” No, we're not. We really aren't! Hitler isn't going to be punished and tormented forever because of his sin. No. Instead, God's gonna fix him. Either he did before he died, or he's gonna do it in eternity. Perhaps something happens when we die that transforms us into new and perfect creatures ready to spend eternity with God. That would be the ultimate act of grace – unmerited favor from God. That old, fallen, corrupt nature that we now have will be gone forever, and God will say, “Welcome home! Yes, you were messed up. All the more reason for me to save you.” Those people who were the most messed up in this life might be at the front of the crowd, bowing their knee and confessing Jesus as Lord, because they understand grace better than anyone. Barging their way to the front might not be the pastors, and preachers, and singers, and people on the radio proclaiming the Good News. It may very well be the dirtiest, most rotten, most disgusting sinners in the history of the world that will be pushing their way up to the front row, falling on the ground, and saying, “God, you saved me from so much. I love you so much. Thank you so much!” That's the

picture I see. We'll be there too, and it'll be good, and we'll appreciate it plenty. But God will work in the hearts of those who refuse to obey him because he's at work in every heart.

Paul goes on. **All of us used to live that way, following the passionate desires and inclinations of our sinful nature.** It's hard for humans to avoid it. We all fall into sin, whether in big or small ways. We all have thoughts. We all have inclinations. Some of us just keep it under wrap and we don't have as much collateral damage in life. Our sin may not be as public, but we all have it going on in our heart, whatever it is: jealousy, wanting something we don't own, anger toward someone, even hatred and resentment – stuff that can eat away at us. Unfortunately, we often take out our frustration on those closest to us – the people we love the most. Our family, our friends, and church members. It's usually easier to be well-behaved around strangers! It's easy to love the people *out there*. I think it's because we don't know them. We don't know anything bad about them. They don't irritate us, except at a distance. We don't have to live with them. But the people we love, sometimes they can be very irritating, and we can be irritating to them. But this gives us a reason to love them all the more.

The anger of God (2.3b)

So, we have followed these passionate desires and inclinations of our sinful nature. Paul goes on and writes, **By our very nature, we were subject to God's anger just like everyone else.** Now, allow me to say something about God's anger. God gets angry, and it's okay because anger is a proper response in certain situations – for God and for us. For example, when God sees us sinning, if he did *not* get angry, there'd be something wrong with him. Sin is destructive, and when God sees it (or even when we see it), it is alright to become angry. (Later in

this letter Paul will discuss human anger in some detail.) The key to anger is *why*, and what is done about it. God does not hate us when he is angry with us. Quite the opposite – he loves us. That’s why he is angry! He is angry about our behavior *because* he loves us and wants the best for us. He says, “I don’t want that happening to you. So, it does make me angry, and I’m motivated all the more to save you from your sinful behavior.” It’s just like a good parent who is angry with their child because they are making self-destructive choices. Their anger is not because they don’t love them, it’s because they *do* love them! For whatever reason, Paul in the New Testament uses the word anger. But he also says (later in this letter) “Be angry and don’t sin.”

So, there’s a way to be angry and not sin. There’s also a way to be angry *and* sin, which is what we usually do, and we take it too far. It’s not the kind of anger that says, “I care about you and I don’t want bad things to happen to you.” It’s more like the kind of anger that says, “I’m mad at you, you’ve wronged me, and I want to wrong you in return.” That’s the wrong kind of anger because it is selfish and not rooted in love. God never acts in this kind of *pure retaliation* with no corrective purpose whatsoever.

Paul will also (later in this letter) say, “Don’t let the sun go down on your anger,” because he knows if you hold anger in and keep it going for more than about a day, it’s going to eat at you. It will own you. No one owns you more than the people you’re angry with. They own you endlessly – as long as you stay angry. This can go on for 10 or 15 years, sometimes for a lifetime, because that emotion of anger is so strong and consuming we can’t let go. So, Paul is saying, “Let it go!” However, when God is angry, his anger is always good and rooted in his love for us. Any anger we have should be temporary and of the same nature. So, God’s anger is rooted in love because he wants the best for people. He says, “I’m going to roll up my sleeves, and I’m determined all the more to bring you salvation and rescue you from yourself.”

God is rich in mercy (2.4)

So Paul then brings out the opposite of God's anger. **God is very rich in mercy. And he loved us so much that even when we were dead because of our sins,** (which is how he started this passage) **he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead.** Notice that God didn't give us life when we believed. He didn't give us life because we're Gentiles or Jews, or because we go to church, or because we read the Bible. He gave us our life back when Christ was raised from the dead. That's when we, in a sense, were *born again*. That's when we were granted a new, eternal life that we will someday receive in full. Jesus, though he was a human being, became the *second* and *last* Adam. He became the ultimate head of the human race (see Romans Five). When he was raised from the dead, guess what? He took all of us with him into newness of life. When he died, we died with him. We he rose, so did we (as far as being fully identified with him as the human race under his headship). Someday, everyone will be raised physically with new, perfect, bodies that will live forever just as they were designed to do. This is God's ultimate act of salvation. We have it now experientially, by faith. But we will have salvation fully and forever in eternity. This is how successful God is in saving the world that he so loves through Jesus, who is *Savior of the World!* Now, obviously, none of us were there, physically, at the time that Jesus died and rose from the dead. But we were all there in some sense. I don't know exactly how this works, but that's when it happened. (See Romans Six for details).

Paul then draws one of the big conclusions in his letter, a major theme in all his letters. **It's only by God's grace that we are saved!** Get this clearly in your mind. Paul starts out saying, (before he ever talks about faith or anything else) that salvation is by grace (unmerited favor). The word *saved* means *delivered* and we must always ask, "From what?" For Paul is always about being

saved (delivered) from sin, failure, wrongdoing... and from ourselves. It is by God's grace that we are saved from the consequences, the penalty, and everything else associated with sin.

What is grace? (2.6)

Notice three things that Paul mentions in identifying what it means to be *saved by grace*. This is really interesting. **For he raised us from the dead along with Christ.** The first thing about grace is that God *raised* us. Paul continues, **and he seated us with him in the heavenly realms.** Wow, we're already there? Maybe, somehow, outside of time, we are there and we don't know it. Science has discovered time to be a strange thing that does not always occur at the same rate. Things traveling very fast (near the speed of light) experience time at a much slower rate than things at rest. Theoretically, at the speed of light time does not pass! Is this the state of eternity? Who knows. But we'll find out, someday. Or, maybe Paul might say, "This is such a complete salvation, we're as good as sitting there right now with Christ."

So, God *raised* us, he *seated* us with Christ in the heavenly realms, and Paul tells us why, **because we are united with Christ.** So grace is God doing these three things for us in Christ: raising us, seating us, and uniting us. According to Paul, this is what God's grace is all about. If you want a definition of grace, this is it. But notice these are all things God does *for* us – things that we can't do for ourselves or earn them in any way. This is why Paul calls God's salvation an act of *grace* on his part, which is God's favor toward us that is totally unmerited on our part. We need to be saved, but we didn't earn it. God didn't say, "Okay, you believed, or you've gone to church, or have lived a good life, so I will reward you with salvation." No, it was completely by grace that God did these three things for us: raised, seated, and united.

To this explanation of what grace is, Paul adds, **So now, in the future ages, God can point to us as examples of his amazing grace and his kindness toward us in all he has done for us, as those who are united with Christ Jesus.** Man, that's great stuff, huh? Amazing! People back then and all of us today are shining examples of what God has done for all humanity in Jesus.

By grace, through faith (2.8)

Up to this point in Ephesians Two, Paul has been laying the groundwork for his big theme of salvation by grace that is so present in all his letters. Verses 8–10 are very well known in Christian circles, and rightly so. But they are often read in isolation from this whole chapter. In verse eight, Paul repeats his “saved by grace” idea, but now he brings in faith so we can know what role it plays in our lives. **God saved you by his grace, through your faith. Therefore, you can’t take any credit for your salvation because it is God’s gift to you. Salvation is not a reward for anything you have done, therefore no one can brag about saving themselves.** Notice all the qualifications Paul adds when he introduces faith (believing). There are four of them: we can’t take credit for our salvation, it is a gift from God, it is not a reward, and we cannot brag about it. Keep in mind the word *salvation* means simply to *deliver*. It does not mean “saved from going to hell.” Now, it could be that Paul did mean that, each reader must decide. But the Greek word used by Paul does not mean “saved from hell.” It just means “to deliver.”

Paul clearly says that salvation is *by* grace and *through* faith. The word *by* (by grace) has to do with the basis of salvation. The word *through* (through faith) has to do with the *means* of salvation – how salvation is received and experienced. Paul adds these four qualifies so we will know that our act of faith earns us nothing

with God. Salvation is *by grace*, and he defined what that means (previously in verses 4-7) as God raising, seating, and uniting us in Christ. It is all his doing. Our faith only allows us to experience what God has *already* done for us by grace.

When we believe, we start engaging with God. By what other means could we? We must first believe in order to have an active relationship with God. Therefore, we are *delivered* (saved) from sin and the consequences of it when we believe. But it is not our *act* of believing that saves us. Instead, it is the *result* of our believing that delivers us (saves us) from sin because we now walk with God in the Spirit and sin is greatly reduced in our lives! We are delivered (saved) from the entanglement of sin in this life because we believe and experience a relationship with God that protects us from ourselves as natural sinners.

So, we are saved *by* God's grace *through* faith. Once Paul introduces the role of faith in our lives, he also lets us know that we can't take credit for God's saving work, that salvation is a gift from God, that it is not a reward for anything we have done, and therefore we cannot brag about it. Paul has put caveats on what faith can and cannot do, and what works can and cannot do. That's why none of us can brag about being saved since it is the work of God alone (by grace) and not anything we earn!

Resulting in good works (2.10)

Paul goes on and says, **We are God's masterpiece. He has created us as brand new in Christ Jesus so that we can now do the good things he planned for us long ago.** We're not our own workmanship. We are God's masterpiece. We don't make ourselves complete by believing; we just get on board with what God's already done, and we realize it by believing. He's created us brand new in Christ Jesus – in his redeeming work on the cross – so that we can do the good things he planned for us to do. Even

the good things we do are a result of his working in us, so we cannot brag about them either.

Grace has always been around. God is a God of grace. He has been gracious from the beginning – always. It's just that grace became known and revealed through Jesus. John, in his Gospel said, “Moses brought the law, but grace and truth came through Christ Jesus.” Noah, Abraham, David, and all those in the Old Testament writings experienced grace from God. Grace is a free gift and they experienced it in Old Testament times, but most people probably didn't know it or understand it. It took Jesus, later on, to reveal God's grace so everyone could understand it. He demonstrated grace. That's what the cross was all about.

Those who hold to the idea that people must believe in Jesus in order to avoid hell and damnation by God often ask, “What about the people before Jesus in the Old Testament? How were they saved?” The answer is they are saved the same way we are today – by grace. It's always God's doing, before and after the cross. Jesus was said to have been slain (crucified) “before the world even began.” His saving work is eternal and outside of time as we know it. The author of the book of Hebrews said that Jesus made “one sacrifice for sin for all time.” This covers everyone who has ever lived!

So, Paul has defined what salvation by grace is, and what it's not. This is all in harmony with what Paul wrote to the Galatians. (See *Never Going Back!* another commentary in this *Common Sense Commentary Series*.) There Paul said, “If you accept a false version of the Good News (gospel), you're out of bounds and off track. Then he spends the whole rest of his letter explaining what the *true* gospel is, that it's salvation by grace and not by keeping The Law. He also asks the people of Galatia why they would ever want to go back under The Law or trust anything they do to save themselves (including their own act of faith) when God has done

it completely for them! Faith is our recognition of the salvation we already have from God by his grace. It is our way of saying, “Wow, thank you so much, God. Let me get involved with you in a spiritual journey through life!”

Sometimes, people get things switched around, and they turn their act of faith into a *work* that somehow earns them favor with God and, supposedly, prevents God from doing something horrible to them in eternity. But that's not what the Gospel (the Good News message) is all about. Paul said, “God is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so much that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead. It's only by grace that you've been saved.” Okay, that's his big point here, and he lists three things that are God's acts of grace for us that he accomplished in Jesus. He *raised* us from the dead along with Christ and *seated* us with him in the heavenly realms because we are *united* with Christ Jesus. Notice that these three things are things that God does for us. We do not do them. This is the essence of grace. He *raises* us from the dead, he *seats* us with Christ in the heavenly realms, and he *unites* us with Jesus. This is why Paul wrote previously, “Therefore God can point to us in all future ages as examples of the incredible wealth of his grace and kindness toward us as shown in all he has done for us who are united with Christ Jesus.” Notice Paul hasn't mentioned faith or anything else, other than these three things God has done for us in Christ. He's just saying that salvation by grace is something *God does* for us. Faith is what we do to recognize what God has done, and then we engage with him so we can be saved (delivered) from sin, ourselves, and trouble in this life we live.

An invitation from God

One of the mistakes religious people sometimes make is that they think the “good news” (the Gospel) is an *invitation* to accept

Jesus, and then you will receive God's grace. But actually, the good news was an *announcement*. This is what the word means in Greek (which is the language the New Testament was written in) – to announce something. God is announcing the salvation that he has *already* done in Jesus on the cross. He is not offering salvation, conditioned on belief. Well, except for the salvation (deliverance) from our entanglement in sin that comes as a result of believing and living in fellowship with God. But the ultimate salvation from our sin and being resurrected from the dead someday when God makes this happen ... that's the real and ultimate salvation and it is accomplished completely by God as an act of his grace.

However, there is an *invitation* aspect to the good news. Jesus said, "Come unto me, all you who labor and are heavy burdened, and I will give you rest." He invites everyone to come to him by faith and rest in him so they can enjoy all the benefits of what God has already done for them in Christ. This is very different from a "good news" message that says, "I've made all people *saveable* through Jesus. But you must do something. You must come and believe, and if you don't I will punish you by inflicting pain and suffering on you in hell, forever." That's not even an invitation, it's a threat! The true, genuine Gospel (Good News) is an *announcement* of what God has already done for all of humanity through Jesus on the cross.

Most people, when they hear *this* good news message by grace will look at you and say, "What? I've never heard that before. Don't I have to do something? It can't be that good and free. Nothing is, in this life!" But God's Good News is totally good because it is from a God who is totally good, all the time, and nothing but good. God invites all people to come, believe, and bask in the grace already provided through Jesus. This is the simple gospel of grace that Paul and all the other writers of the New Testament taught. "It is finished," said Jesus in his last words on the cross. It's a done deal. Once you understand this,

you're home free, and there is no better, higher, or safer place to be because you are resting in the grace of God and all he has done for you. It meets all of your needs.

We don't need to complicate it. When people discover that salvation is God's work for all mankind, they realize that God saved everyone (his world), simply because it needed saving and because he loves his creation. It's an ah-ha moment. We realize, "You already did this for me? I'm not saving myself?" It becomes clear that God's already on board with us and he always has been.

That's the story of grace. God has never been separated from us. We separated ourselves from him in our minds and hearts. And that's what's got to be changed – our minds need to be renewed. In chapter twelve of Paul's letter to the Romans, he explains it this way, "Let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think." When our mind is changed and renewed, guilt and fear go away, and then we're free because we're no longer in our fallen, clouded mindset. If you think you've got to keep on re-upping with God, earning his love, reading your Bible, and going to church, you've missed the whole message of *salvation by grace*. These are all good things to do, but none of them can, or will, ever earn us any favor with God.

Amazing grace

Sometimes, spiritual things are hard to sort out. There are so many religious systems in the world. But most of them (even within Christianity) are based on some kind of earning and not on grace. They all say, "You gotta do something to earn favor with God." This, they all have in common. But when you understand grace, it changes the way that you see everything. It's not just about reading your Bible and trying to please God. Instead, we should realize, "God does not require these things. So why am I doing them?" If you're doing them as a result of realizing you were saved by grace, and you are resting in it, then

great! But if you are doing these things as burdens, trying to win favor with God, it's the wrong reason because you can't. Everybody I know, when they finally come to realize the full implications of grace ask themselves, "Why did I wait so long?" It's because we didn't know any better! But when we finally know better, we realize, "I'm home. There's no other place to go. There's no higher place to be. There's no bigger God somewhere out there to be found. There's no greater salvation."

When God is motivated to do something by his amazing love for us he's not indifferent about it. He doesn't just wind everything up and walk away like the Deists believed. He cares very much. He's very much involved in everybody's life. He doesn't wait to get involved until we first come to him. He's working in everybody's life right now. I've met many people who have told me they look back and see how God was always working in their life. They often say, "I was aware of God's presence in my life, but I was not really resting in him while he was at work in me. God never told me, 'Oh, you're being resistant. I'm gonna abandon you.' Instead, he seemed to say, 'I'm gonna keep working in you till I accomplish what I set out to do.'" And he does this in everyone! He loves us in the midst of turmoil and trouble, and then comforts us after we mess up. God has a desire to correct, redeem, save, and restore because that's what is needed in our lives. And we know it's good. God's work is always restorative in nature.

God's grace is awesome and wonderful. It is amazing. It's amazing grace, for sure. We sing the song and sometimes we don't fully realize what we are singing. *Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now I am found, was blind but now I see.* If people are lost, who lost them? It is God who goes out and finds us. We do not find ourselves! Grace gets us through everything. It is always sufficient, no matter what we go through. It is always a light that is shining. God always has our back, but he sometimes allows extreme difficulties. However, he

is always there and he says, “What comes out at the other end is going to be something even better. Eventually, it's all going to get fixed and reconciled when I get done. People are going to be reconciled to each other because they're all going to be reconciled to me.” It's all going to be good. But right now, it is really hard for many people. That's why I keep bringing this message of grace, in the hope that people who hear it will gain from it, they'll understand it, and go beyond this imperfect commentary and find *peace with God* in the *God of peace*.

In the next chapter of this commentary, the second half of Ephesians Two, Paul starts a new section. He will start getting into the *mystery of God's plan* that he introduced in Ephesians One. It was a plan that God kept hidden in ages past. But it has to do with him saving everybody, Jews and non-Jews (gentiles). That's his plan – to bring them into one group so that there really is no Jew or Gentile, male or female, rich or poor, smart or dumb, young or old. Ultimately, God's salvation is complete. It's so full of grace and it's so effective and successful! God doesn't just *try* to save – he actually saves, he accomplishes, he gets the job done. How could he not and still be God and *Savior of the World*? This is so good to know.

4. All Humanity United (Ephesians 2.11-22)

My goal in this commentary is just to plant seeds and present the wonderful message of God's grace. My hope is that people will find freedom, true *spiritual* freedom in Christ, and enjoy a wonderful, daily relationship with God who so loves them. Grace is God acting on our behalf, through Christ, not based on anything we have done. He's done it all *for* us and nothing is required of us! However, believing is a good and wonderful thing that we choose to do. When we believe we engage with God and benefit from the salvation that he's *already* accomplished for us. But we never earn anything with God by believing. It's not a ticket to exempt us from going to hell forever. That takes a big load off of us. It's so wonderful to know and experience the grace of God in our lives – so freeing, so joyful, so peaceful – in spite of all the difficulties that come our way (and they do!). This is what I want to share with people so they can gain greatly from God's grace and live a life of peace in a crazy world.

You may recall that Paul wrote in Ephesians One, “God has now revealed to us his mysterious plan regarding Christ, a plan to fulfill his own good pleasure.” Realize that it is not just pleasure, it's a *good* pleasure. It's always good. That's how he works. He does good things. Even if he has to use difficult, challenging means to help us grow. Or, sometimes God allows us to go through hard

times, but it's always for a good purpose. “And this is the plan,” says Paul, “at the right time he (God) will bring everything together under the authority of Christ – everything in heaven and on earth.”

There is a parallel passage to this in Colossians 1:20. It says basically the same thing, that God’s going to reconcile everything himself – everything in heaven and earth. These are two of the most complete verses about God’s ultimate plan for this world. There’s really no wiggle room in them and they just mean exactly what they say, that he’s going to reconcile everything. He’s going to bring everything and everyone together. That’s his goal. That’s the kind of God he is. He’s a God who has a plan, it’s a good plan, it’s a successful plan, and he’s not going to fail. Then Paul goes on and says, “Furthermore, because we are united with Christ, we receive an inheritance from God, for he chose us in advance and makes everything work out according to his plan.” We will see more about this plan here in the rest of Ephesians Two, and then continuing on in Ephesians Three.

Living without God or hope (2.11)

Paul starts a new section of his letter in verse 11. Here he picks up, again, on his theme first presented in in Ephesians One about God’s plan that was hidden for ages – a plan of bringing all humanity (Jews and non-Jews) into one new group as a saved and fully restored humanity. **You Gentiles used to be outsiders. You were called ‘uncircumcised heathens’ by the Jews who were proud of their circumcision, even though it affected only their bodies and not their hearts.** That’s all rituals can do – affect the body and not the heart. They are just an outward expression. And that’s OK. For some people they are encouraging types of religious activities. But they are not the real substance of faith. They’re not the real thing. They’re just symbolic of some spiritual thing that is believed. Sometimes when

people engage in rituals – circumcision, baptism, the Lord's table, or anything else – they *can* miss the very thing it represents.

Paul continues, **In those days you were living apart from Christ. You were excluded from citizenship among the people of Israel. And you did not know the covenant promises God had made to them. You lived in this world without God and without hope.** That was true because the Gentiles were non-Jews and had no knowledge or experience of such rituals. Paul goes on, **But now, you have been united with Christ Jesus. At one time you were far away from God, but now you have been brought near through the blood of Christ.** Notice Paul does not say that their faith brought them near to God, even though this is experientially true. What *actually* brought them near to God was Jesus dying on the cross and rising from the dead. Our coming close to God, knowing Him, and being safe in his loving care was God's doing. He's the one who did it. This is what makes us at peace with God and brings us all together into one new group. However, everyone is not close to God, experientially, right now. Just because all humanity has been made one in Christ, and are reconciled to God on God's terms, it doesn't mean we all experience it or believe it. For many people that is something yet to come. When we believe we *feel* the nearness of God, but we haven't earned anything, we're just getting on board with what God already did for us by grace.

Breaking down the hostility (2.14)

Paul further explains, **For Christ Himself has brought peace to us.** How about that? We don't even bring peace to ourselves. We facilitate it, we welcome it, and we make it work in our lives by believing, but God's the one who brings us peace. **He united Jews and Gentiles into one people in His own body on the cross. He broke down the wall of hostility that**

separated us. He did this by ending the system of law with its commandments and regulations. There's nothing left for us to do except to believe, receive, and accept in our hearts and minds what God has already accomplished for us. God got rid of The Law. But actually, what happened is that Jesus came and *fulfilled* the law. He kept it fully for us. Jesus once said, "I didn't come to do away with the law. I came to fulfill it." He took care of any requirement God had for anyone in The Law. Jesus lived a perfect life for us. He died in our place. So, we're good to go. What a great deal we have in Jesus! Peter wrote about it being an *exchange of the just for the unjust*. Essentially, we traded places with Jesus. He took our sins upon Himself and placed his perfection upon us. We got what he had (his perfection), and he got what we had (our sin). What a deal! You'll get no better deal in life.

Paul continues by describing what we gain from all God has done to bring all humanity together in Jesus. **God made peace between Jews and Gentiles. This means everybody, Jews and non-Jews, by creating in Himself one new people from the two groups.** Everyone is included in what Christ did on the cross. Now, they might not experience it, they might not agree to it, they might not believe it, but they're all included because it's what God did for all humanity, Jews and non-Jews alike. This has been God's plan from the beginning that all people would be united in Christ. That's God's *mysterious plan*. It's always been his goal for all eternity past. Paul elsewhere wrote, "He came into the world to save sinners," And John wrote, "God did not send his son in the world to condemn it, but to save it." There are at least a dozen other New Testament verses like this.

Both groups reconciled (2.16)

Paul continues, **Christ reconciled both groups to God, together as one body. He accomplished this by his death on**

the cross, and so our hostility toward each other was also put to death. Back in Ephesians One, Paul wrote, “This is God's plan. God has now revealed to us His mysterious plan regarding Christ, a plan to fulfill His own good pleasure.” In other words, this is what he has always wanted to do. Then Paul wrote, “And here is God’s plan.” (If you ever want to know what God's plan is, what he's doing, what his purpose is, what he's accomplishing, this is it!) “At the right time, he (God), will bring everything together under the authority of Christ. Everything in heaven and on earth.”

This is a clear and definite plan. It is not ambiguous or vague. There is no wiggle room in understanding it. There's a parallel verse to this one in Colossians One. Paul basically says the same thing – that someday God will reconcile everything to himself, everything in heaven and on earth. This is a main theme of Paul's. Now he's going to reveal in detail, here in this second half of Ephesians Two, what that plan is. It's about reconciling everything to himself. In other words, Jews and Gentiles brought together. And Jews and non-Jews can be nothing less than all humanity, bringing them into oneness with Christ. Some people don't believe this plan, some people don't experience it, some people don't even know about it yet, but they're already included because this is God's goal and purpose for his world. He's not going to fail. He's going to accomplish this in everyone's life, either in this life, the day they die, or sometime after. Exactly how and when God will complete his plan is unknown – only that he will. Despite the details of how it all works, everyone will bow their knee before Christ saying that he is indeed Lord – and it's not going to be God with his foot on their throat saying, “You better get down there and worship me!”

Instead, the worst sinners are going to be busting their way through the crowd to get to the very front so they can fall down and say to Jesus, “You are my Lord and Savior. Thank you so much for saving even me.” Paul declared himself to be the worst

of all sinners, so everyone can and will be saved – just as Paul was, saved by grace! Saving all humanity is God's plan. That's what it's all about. It's about saving His world.

Far away and near (2.17)

God brought this Good News of peace to the Gentiles who were far away from him and brought peace to the Jews who were near. Now, because of what Christ has done for us, we can all come to the Father the same way, through the Holy Spirit. Clearly, what has been done has been done by God *for* us. We don't really do it. We say, "I want to be a part of this," but there's no earning in our coming to God. There's no merit. God's not saying, "Oh, finally, you got on board. I'll like you now." That's not what he does. That's not how he works. Instead, he says, "Welcome home. Why did you wait?" Well, it takes us a while. He lets us take time to come to him because that's how we learn and figure out what's true so that we'll never go back. That's how we learn about grace. It is in our *desperation* that we learn and understand what grace is. If we hadn't gotten to a desperate point in life we would never discover how amazing grace really is. God's not being cruel by allowing this. Instead, he says, "I'm going to let you experience enough of this nonsense so that when you finally understand, you'll enjoy my grace, appreciate it, and never go back." So, God allows these things in our lives, but always with a good purpose.

So now you Gentiles are no longer strangers and foreigners. You are citizens, along with all of God's holy people. How about that? Because the Gentiles (non-Jews) are now included, they are also *citizens* in full standing, right along with all of God's people that he has saved. Now, again, it doesn't mean they all understand and believe the salvation they have from God. It doesn't mean some aren't rebellious saying, "The heck

with you, God, I'm not interested." Or "I don't believe in God." But that doesn't stop or discourage God. He's not puny. He doesn't get mad at them and say, "If you're not going to believe in me then I'm going to do something terrible to you." No, you know what he does? Instead of retaliating (which is what a puny god would do) he rolls up his sleeves and says, "You know what? I'm gonna work even harder at saving my world. I'm doubling down on what I accomplished in Jesus on the cross for all humanity that I so love. I will work even harder, be more patient and kind, and even bring some difficulty into people's lives to draw them to myself. It might take the rest of their lives for me to reconcile them to myself, and maybe I'll even work into eternity if that's what's required." The point is that God never gives up. He's a God who "fills all in all" always working in people's lives even though many, perhaps most, don't realize it.

They're not experiencing it, but God wants everyone to know him and live in peace and joy forever. How could he possibly want anything less or settle for anything less? Sometimes we project our own human thoughts onto God. Somebody wisely said that *God made us in his own image and then we returned the favor*. There's a lot of truth to this. There are many religious people who take God, weaponize him, have him (in their mind) go after all who disagree with them to punish or destroy them in some violent manner. It makes them feel important, special, and better than others because God is on *their* side. We tend to divide humanity into two groups (those with us and those against) and then place God on *our* side. But God does not do that kind of dividing. Quite the opposite, he joins all humanity into one new group in Christ, all saved by grace. The only dividing he does is to separate the *new person* we now are in Christ from the *old person* we were in our sinful state of being lost. He's gonna go after that very one lost sheep and bring it into the fold. Nobody's gonna be left behind.

This is why Paul wrote in verse 17, “He brought this good news of peace to the Gentiles who were far away from him, and peace to the Jews who were near. Now everyone can come to the Father through the same Holy Spirit because of what Christ has done for us. So, the Gentiles are no longer strangers and foreigners, and instead, they are citizens along with all of God’s holy people.” So now all the non-Jews (everybody else) are part of this unifying thing that God’s doing. They didn’t become Jews as far as their race was concerned. But they did become *Spiritual Jews* (if you want to call them that) because this was God’s original intention – for the Jews to learn of God’s saving work and take that message out for the world to hear about and believe. However, The Jews kind of blew it – just like we kind of blow it today as we fail to effectively take that same salvation message out into the world around us for all to hear.

If you look at the history of the church, Christianity started out so good, but then it deteriorated in the fourth century, and even more so in the Middle Ages when the church became brutal and monstrous, lording over and controlling ignorant people through deception, fear, and force. Yet the basic gospel message is still around and alive today because God is always working in the hearts and minds of people, still carrying out his plan to unify all humanity in Christ as an act of his love and grace. As far as *us* taking it to the world and showing them how much God loves them by loving them unconditionally, we haven’t done a very good job of that.

However, many Christians have faithfully demonstrated the full love and grace of God. Any failure on our part never gets in God’s way. He doesn’t conclude, “Oh well, you’re blowing it. I guess I won’t be able to do anything.” God just plows through the mess in this world and works in everyone’s life, individually. Even though he saves humanity as a whole by Christ on the cross, he works in the life of every person. He’s at work in even the worst sinners and in those doing really evil things. He’s working

in their lives, too, because he never gives up and he will be successful in saving his world.

We are God's house (2.19b)

Paul goes on to further describe how this coming together of all humanity (Jews and non-Jews) really works. **You are members of God's family. Together we are His house built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets.** Did you know the church isn't a building? The church is people. We are the temple of God, his dwelling place not made of hands. We are where God resides because He's everywhere and "fills all in all." He dwells in us by his Spirit. We're built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. **The cornerstone of that house is Christ Jesus Himself.** Jesus is the cornerstone, metaphorically, of the place where God dwells ... in us! In ancient times, they would set a *cornerstone* for a building, and then the whole building was built using that cornerstone as a reference. The rest of the building was built on and around that stone. Placing that cornerstone at the right spot, with the right angles, was the key to constructing the rest of the building. And that's how it is with us. God sent his Son into the world to be our *cornerstone*, the one who we are all connected to in our lives, and the one our relationships with others are built upon.

Paul continues his line of thinking. **We're carefully joined together in Christ.** We all fit together just right, even though we don't feel like it sometimes as we interact with each other. Have you ever met another person who didn't seem to fit in? I'll bet they've met you, too, and perhaps felt the same way. Sometimes we're the ones that don't fit in. In our minds, they don't fit in, and we don't fit in theirs either. But in God's mind, we all fit in, and we will all discover more of this fitting together in eternity when we are all perfect. However, we can discover a great deal of this

fitting together now, in this life, when we seek it by living in the *new person* we are in Christ. Paul will speak more about this need for unity in Ephesians Four.

Perhaps you have gotten better at working together with other people as you get older and wiser. If you haven't, I hope you will. It is a delightful discovery. You will realize, "Gee wiz, we didn't really have to do all that fighting!" Just like Paul said above, "God brought us all into one group so that we can all be reconciled to each other and be in unity."

Paul goes on and begins his conclusion of Ephesians Two by saying, **So, we are carefully joined together in Him, becoming a holy dwelling place for the Lord.** That's where God dwells. In us. He no longer dwells in buildings or temples as described in the Old Testament writings. Actually, God never dwelled exclusively in those buildings and temples made by people. But the Jews saw God as always being located in some temple that they had built, and therefore they had to go there to be with him. But God now dwells in us, which means we take God with us no matter where we go. If you want to go fishing on Sunday and spend time in the greater outdoors, God is *with* you and *in* you. You're in the great outdoor temple because he dwells in you and you are enjoying the beauty of his creation. Enjoy it! It's also OK to enjoy going to a church building where people gather, sing songs, and hopefully proclaim the Good News message of salvation by grace. It is good to be with other people and celebrate things of common belief. Nothing wrong with any of that, but that's not the *only* place that you are with God. He's with you all the time.

Paul finishes his conclusion with, **Through him, you Gentiles are also being made part of this dwelling place where God lives by his spirit.** Wow! Did you have any doubt that God includes everybody? That's his goal and he's

accomplishing it. He's working it all out in his time. This all follows in the footsteps of what Paul said in Ephesians One – that this is his plan, his purpose, it's what he's trying to accomplish, and it's all about “reconciling everything to himself in heaven and earth.” Why wouldn't he? Why would we ever expect God to do anything less than bring everyone into salvation and restoration?

A universal God

Some people don't like the idea of *universalism* or a *universal* God. But this idea is far from being foreign to who God is. God is universal in everything he *is* and everything he *does*. Think about it! His wisdom is universal, isn't it? His knowledge also is. Doesn't God know everything? That's universal knowledge. How about his presence? Isn't God universally and everywhere present? Isn't he all-powerful? Isn't that a universal power? Isn't his love universal? Doesn't he love everyone – the whole world? Isn't the atonement of Christ on the cross universal in its scope and reach? According to John in his first letter, “Jesus didn't our sins only, but those of the whole world!” Wasn't it for all humanity? Even sin is universal. We're all sinners. There are so many universal things about God. So, why wouldn't the *results* of his salvation also be universal, complete, fully successful, lacking nothing, and never failing in any way? We fall short of his glory, but he never falls short of his own glory or his goal to save the world.

It is true that the word *universal* isn't in the New Testament, but the concept of God being a universal God, who universally loves, universally saves, and has universal results is not only described in detail, repeatedly, but also it makes sense. How could God be, or do, anything less and still be God?

In the next chapter of this commentary we will be looking at Ephesians Three. If you've ever read this before, you may have

scratched your head and asked, “What's Paul talking about?” But once you understand that it's an extension of Ephesians One, where he wrote that God's plan was to save and reconcile his world to himself. This means everybody. But it's also an extension of Ephesians Two, where Paul continues his theme of bringing all people together in Christ, Jew and Gentile (non-Jews) alike.

5. The Mysterious Plan (Ephesians 3.1-13)

Here in Ephesians Three, as we shall see, Paul's going to expand his theme on God's Mysterious Plan even further and in more detail. He said there's a *mysterious plan* that God had from all the ages past, and it's being revealed today (originally, in Paul's day). It turns out, it's all about Jesus on the cross and bringing salvation to everyone. He will lay this out in a really interesting and delightful way. Ephesians Three is a chapter that people tend to read past and conclude, "I'm not sure what he's talking about." But when we get into it, if we take our time and don't try to figure out all the little nuances about predestination and other hard-to-understand things, it's all pretty clear and encouraging, and it makes pretty good sense.

God revealed his mysterious plan to me (3.1)

I, Paul, am a prisoner of Christ Jesus for the benefit of you Gentiles. And when I think about all that I am writing to you, I realize that God gave me a special responsibility of extending his grace to all of you Gentiles. I wrote that God himself revealed his mysterious plan to me. And as you read what I have written, you will understand my insight into this plan regarding Christ. God did not reveal it to previous generations, but now by His Spirit, he's revealed it to his

holy apostles and prophets. Looks like Paul is not the only one who has been given insight into the mysterious plan, which is the whole *Good News message* about Christ, revealed by the Holy Spirit. The apostles and prophets in the early church also understood this message about the grace of God for everyone. But, actually, the Holy Spirit reveals it to everyone in their inner-most being. However, not all people are listening or seeking. But, make no mistake, God will eventually break through to the worst and most hardened sinners because that's what he does – that's his plan. And Paul, who called himself the *chief of all sinners*, is proof of this!

Gentiles and Jews share equally (3.6)

And this is God's plan, Paul continues in Ephesians Three, **Both Gentiles and Jews who believe in the Good News share equally in the riches inherited by God's children.** Now, that can sound like there's a requirement for us to believe in order to be part of God's plan, but that's not really true. However, believing is required in order for us to be *actively involved* in this mysterious plan of salvation that God has already brought, through Jesus, to the whole world. Everyone is part of that plan, and when they hear about it and believe they begin experiencing and enjoying the benefits of it. But they have always been a part of God's plan because everyone is. Just think about it. If you don't believe, you're not going to experience it. You can't experience God and his plan if you don't even believe he exists! You won't even know about it, and you won't be doing anything about it. It doesn't mean God says, "Well, if you're not going to believe, I'm going to send you to hell forever." He's not going to act in pure retaliation toward you. He'll just say, "Well you'll come to me when you are ready and tired of struggling and striving. I'll be here. I will continue to extend my grace to you. I'll keep working on you. I'm never going to leave or forsake you. Someday you will be actively a part of my plan. You're part of it now. You just don't

know it, but someday you're going to be fully a part of it because I'm never giving up on you!" This is what a loving, powerful, faithful savior says.

So both the Jews and Gentiles who believe in the good news – which is Christ dying for us, raising us, seating us, and uniting us with Christ – when they believe in this, they share *equally* in the riches inherited by God's children. We inherit certain things, certain understandings, and certain experiences when we believe. That doesn't mean we've *earned* anything. It is just what we have *gained*. That's why Paul then wrote, **Both Jews and Gentiles are part of the same body, and both enjoy the promise of blessings because they belong to Christ Jesus.** Well, everybody belongs to Christ Jesus because he paid the debt for humanity. Paul wrote this to the believers in Corinth, "He who knew no sin, became sin for us so we could become perfect in Christ."

The privilege of spreading the good news (3.7)

Paul continues in Ephesians Three, **By God's grace and mighty power, I have been given the privilege of serving him by spreading this good news.** There's no way the folks in the Old Testament could understand this. They might have had little glimpses, and we can look back now and find Old Testament passages that seem to hint at the Good News message, but we still scratch our heads and ask, "How did you get *that* message out of those writings? It doesn't seem all that clear." So, people living in Old Testament times were never going to understand all the details of God's mysterious plan (the Good News message) because it wasn't revealed to them. It is only revealed in the New Testament times, and Paul considered it a *hidden* mystery.

Sometimes, amazingly to some degree, it seems that God's plan to save the world is just as mysterious to people sitting in many churches today. But it's a mystery that's right in front of

their faces – in the New Testament and being presented in many places all over the world. Yet everyone doesn't get it today. But at least it's been revealed and they *can* get it if they look and listen carefully.

So, Paul makes it clear, “This is God's plan, that both Gentiles and Jews who believe the good news share equally in the riches inherited by God's children. Both are part of the same body. They both enjoy the promise of blessings because they belong to Christ Jesus.” Then he goes on and gets a little personal. “By God's grace and mighty power, I have been given this privilege of serving him by spreading this good news.” And good news it is! How could there be any better news that we could hear?

Paul continues, **Though I am least deserving of all God's people, he graciously gave me the privilege of telling the Gentiles about the endless treasures available to them in Christ.** Maybe that's why God gave this precious message of grace to Paul – he was the least deserving and he knew it. Perhaps God wanted the most humble messenger possible. This way, the message of Paul's life is a living example of what grace is all about. If God can change a guy like Paul, and never give up on him no matter how bad he was, then God can change anyone. This is the sense of grace. Paul was the main guy out there killing Christians and dragging them from their houses, yet God came and revealed himself to Paul and demonstrated in the most dramatic fashion what grace means.

A secret plan from the beginning (3.9)

I was chosen to explain to everyone this mysterious plan that God, the creator of all things, had kept secret from the beginning. Paul claims to have been chosen by God to be explainer-in-chief of the Good News about Jesus. Jesus came and revealed the Father (God) in a way that nobody else could. I

always keep this in mind when I read the Old Testament. When we read about Jesus in the New Testament, then we can read the Old Testament in the context of who Jesus is. He explains the Old Testament and sorts out the things that are accurate and incorrect by explaining who God really is, often unlike the way God is portrayed in the Old Testament. The Old Testament seems to be more of a *conflicted view of God by man*.

Consider where Jesus quoted most in the Old Testament writings. He didn't quote from all of the Old Testament. Instead, he quoted mostly from Psalms and Isaiah, and it was almost always in reference to himself. "These passages speak of me," he once told his disciples. It really was about him. He also quoted from The Law as needed in order to draw a contrast to himself. The Old Testament is a record of all kinds of things going on, good, bad, ugly, and everything else. Jesus would often say, "Listen to me. You've heard it said..." and he would list certain well-known things from The Law of Moses or the Ten Commandments, and then would continue with, "... but I tell you..." and go on and establish his own authority in these matters. He was clearly making himself the ultimate authority. So, it always helps me to understand the Old Testament in terms of who Jesus was and what he had to say about it.

Paul goes on to explain the purpose of God's plan that was "kept secret from the beginning." **God's purpose in all this was to use the church to display his wisdom in all its rich variety.** Wow, do we have variety in the church today! Every kind of believer possible is out there somewhere. Everyone sees and knows God a little differently and that is because he made us all unique and a little different from each other. Now, some of this variety within the body of Christ (the true church) is healthy, and some of it isn't. That's for each one of us to sort out with God. If we are diligent and honest, he will show us what to believe and who to trust. But God loves the diversity in us a lot more than we

do! Frankly, we can't handle the diversity of each other. Everyone is absolutely unique, so the great span of diversity among people can't be avoided, nor should it be. We need only to let it be what God made it to be, and let it accomplish his purpose.

But we all have many things in common, too. We should always seek that common ground with others as much as we can. Sometimes this is hard to do. Every single person is totally unique in their own way. They have certain things about them that are very special to God. Those things need to be special to us, too. Just because they're different doesn't mean they're wrong. In fact, sometimes we're wrong in being the different ones!

After Paul wrote, “God’s purpose in all this was to use the church to display his wisdom in its rich variety,” he then added, **To all the unseen rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.** It’s hard to say exactly who these “unseen rulers and authorities” are, but it does not really matter. Paul believed there was something going on beyond this world. What’s important here is that God displays his creative diversity in the church for all to see, everywhere in the universe and beyond, including ourselves.

An eternal plan (3.11)

Paul continues, **This was his eternal plan.** It was his plan before the foundation of the world. And he executed his plan in Jesus. He didn't just try, he didn't just attempt it, he didn't just pretend. So Paul adds, **He carried it out through Christ Jesus who is our Lord. Because of Christ and our faith in him we can now come boldly and Confidently into God's presence.** We can now go see God boldly and in complete confidence, not because of anything in ourselves but because of Jesus and all he did for us to make us right with God. God now sees us pure, clean, and without sin because Jesus “took away the sin of the

world.” Otherwise, we would have to approach God in fear, like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, seeing the big fiery ball while she and her friends shook in their boots. However, once Toto pulled back that curtain and revealed a mere man working the levers to scare anyone approaching the Great Oz, they saw it for what it was. This is what the Gospel message of grace does. It pulls back the curtain to reveal a bunch of cruel and arrogant humans, pulling religious levers, presenting God as a mean cruel being who acts in vengeance and retaliation, when actually he is kind, loving, forgiving, and generous, desiring all to be saved and always acting to accomplish his mysterious plan of restoring and reconciling all humanity to himself that he so loves!

So now, because of Jesus, we confidently go into God's presence, not cocky, not thinking we're equal with God, but realizing he is our heavenly father who loves us. We need not be afraid of him because he's never going to do horrible things to us or anyone else. God only does good things *for* us and for us. He will discipline us when we need it, but it's always for our greater good and benefit. If we're out of line, he corrects us through whatever means necessary, because he loves us. But he's not going to do anything bad or cruel or retaliatory.

I'm suffering for your sake (3.13)

So Paul continues and writes, **Please don't lose heart because of my trials. I'm suffering for your sake and so you should feel honored.** I don't think he's being proud here. I think he's saying, “Look, I'm going through all these problems by getting the Good News message out so that you can hear about it, believe it, and benefit from it. It's all for your good. So, you should feel honored by how God is using my trials to benefit you. Don't get your eyes off how God is blessing you and instead worry about me. I'm good with this. I'm good with everything

I've gone through." You will find this sentiment in Paul's writings, all over the New Testament.

Good stuff, huh? Do you see the plan Paul was talking about? This is really a good chapter in Ephesians, even though there are no memorable verses in it. In fact, this chapter seems to be key and foundational to everything else. This is why I titled this commentary, "The Mysterious Plan Revealed." I did, however, have one person who told me there was a verse in Ephesians Three that was memorable to her. It was "the mystery of the gospel," and she remembered it because when she read it, she thought, *What mystery?* It seems to be in plain sight to me! Eventually, it was to her, too. She, like the rest of us, has the benefit of reading the New Testament where God's mysterious plan has finally been fully disclosed. But for the people living back in Paul's day, it was all brand new. God saving the whole world (Jews and non-Jews) by his amazing grace was unheard of. There may have been a few who could read between the lines in the Old Testament and see the promises made by God. They may have realized these were the seeds and basis of the Good News message, embedded in a coming messiah. But any such insight was not widespread, and by the time Jesus arrived on the scene, the Jews were lost in legalism, trying to get right with God by their own doing.

But even all of us today who have heard and believe this wonderful Good News message about God's saving grace are only seeing the tip of the iceberg. There is, undoubtedly, endless aspects to who God is and what he does (and will do) in eternity. It will be a forever experience of growing to know God better and better. We will look back and think, *wow, we didn't have a clue!*

6. Spiritual Growth (Ephesians 3.14-21)

Transactional Relationships

Some people see their relationship with God as “transactional.” In other words, *if I do something for God, he will do something for me*. But this is the opposite of grace. Grace is unmerited favor, and God acts in our best interest in spite of what we do and don’t do. This does not mean that God never responds accordingly to us. He does! But it is not a *transaction* on his part. It is always action rooted in his love, and whether he is blessing us or bringing difficult correction, the motive is always love. I have a friend who is a marriage and family counselor, and she says that, more often than not, her clients come in thinking *transactionally* about most of their experiences in life. Their mode of operation is, “I’ll do this for you, and in return, you must do this for me.” They tend to put that same *transactional* mindset, that same mode of operation onto God. We all do this, to some degree. We’ve been taught to think that we are required to do something for God in order to get something from him. It is the old *appease the gods* mindset that has been in the heart of humans since the beginning of time. But in reality, God did something for us, just because he loves us, not requiring anything in return to earn it. This is what grace is all about. When we realize God’s not a *transactional* God, at all, it totally changes how we see him and how we relate to him.

Essentially, we love God only because he first loved us and proved it by sending his very own son, who was uniquely begotten by him, into the world to save it and not condemn it. He's a forgiving God and he has always loved us. There is not a time when he started doing so. When we finally see this, that God is not *transactional* but is a God of infinite grace, it takes away all the worry, it takes away all the guilt, it takes away all the shame, and brings us peace (real peace), freedom, and joy that cannot be taken away. This all happens because we finally quit trying to earn anything with God. We're not trying to convince him that we're OK and that we're worth loving or saving. We realize that we are already all these things in Christ because God placed us in him.

It takes a big burden off us. It frees us to do even more for God because we're doing it for the right reasons – because we love him. We don't have to think about why we are able to live like this, because it happens automatically as we live and bask in his grace. True love is an organic thing. Love flows from us once we understand and experience it from God. There's really nothing to worry about in terms of our salvation. Sure, we still need to pay our bills. We still need to get up in the morning, go to work (or whatever we need to do), and face the challenges of the day. But knowing our eternity is set and taken care of by God as a result of his grace simply because he loves us is the biggest relief we will ever know. Then, whether we live or die, it really doesn't matter because we're good with God and we know it. Even if some of those you love, your kids, your friends, or your loved ones – even if they are still in some level of darkness, you know it's ultimately okay because God's mysterious plan includes them too. At the right time, now or in eternity, they will be fully reconciled to God because that's what Jesus came to this earth to accomplish and he's not going to fail. He cannot fail because *love never fails* (so says Paul in First Corinthians 13).

Keep in mind that the only real freedom we have and the only real relief from burdens we gain is in the *spiritual* life that

God has given us in Christ. In this earthly, material life, we still have bills to pay, hurts to experience, and struggles to work through. But having freedom in our *spiritual* life, knowing that everything's okay, and realizing we don't have to do anything to earn what God has so freely given us ... this gives us the strength and power to deal with all this other material nonsense that we go through daily! If you ever turn your spiritual life into a *transactional* set of do's and don'ts, you will heap yet more burden on yourself, trying to earn something with God on top of earning a living and everything else in life. Instead, the *spiritual* life is our refuge from all the struggles in our material life. It is not an additional burden. If the spiritual life is yet one more burden, we end up far worse off than being an unbeliever who only struggles with all the material burdens in life. Do not turn a wonderful spiritual experience of freedom into a horrible additional burden with stress that comes from misunderstanding what the spiritual life in God is all about. It's all good!

Some non-Christians live in more freedom than Christians do. They do so because they don't know any better. That is, they haven't been *indoctrinated* into believing in a horrible, angry, retaliating God that they must fear daily and work hard to appease. They also don't have that burden of trying to *appease the gods* and all that nonsense because they're just going about doing whatever they want, even though what they want is often not good for them. But God says, to them, and to us, "Hey, I've got something even better for you. You don't have to experience all that sin and guilt that you bear, and you can walk with me and experience real freedom. It's wonderful." Jesus put it this way, "Come to me all of you who labor and are heavy burdened with life, and I will give you rest." That's exactly what he does!

The creator of everything (3.14)

When I think of all this, I fall to my knees and I pray to the Father, the creator of everything in heaven and on earth. God is the creator of everything in heaven and earth, and therefore God's going to reconcile everything, just as he claimed in Ephesians One. How could he not? He's the creator of everything. So it makes sense that he will, eventually, make everything right. Christ is going to reign supreme over everything and everyone, someday, and in a good way. God is a God who is universal in all he is and all he does, and so his results are also universal. He doesn't cut things short, does half a job, and only *tries his best* when he saves his world. He comes to do something, has a plan, accomplishes it, and he loses nothing. God is successful. He's big. He's powerful and he always uses his power in a good and loving way.

And so I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources, he will empower you with inner strength through his spirit. That's a great prayer and a great request. That's what we can expect God to do. Nothing less. He will strengthen us through his indwelling Spirit. However, we can shun it; we can thwart it, and we can grieve the Spirit. God allows us to do that. He could stop us, but he said, "Okay, this will have to be part of your learning curve. I'm not going anywhere. I'm not going away. You can shun me if you want, but I'm still going to be here for you. I'm still going to be dwelling in you. I'll keep on empowering and encouraging you, as much as you will allow me until you finally figure it out. I am a faithful God. I'll still extend my grace to you. It's going to be a *process* that you're going to go through." Now, we're all going through some kind of learning curve with God. We're all still getting there. But eventually, God makes it all work out for good.

Rooted in God's love (3.17)

“Paul goes on and adds, **Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust him.** Ahhh... a resolution. That is always God's goal for all of us. Keep in mind that God's already there dwelling in us and we will *experience* him making his home in our hearts when we trust him. **Your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong.** The most basic rooting in our lives will be in the love of God. Love will make the roots go deep. Our roots need to go deep; they can and they will because our rooting is in the love of God. That's where our foundation is. It's not in the threat of God doing terrible things to people someday in order to scare them into doing what is right. Our rooting, our foundation, our basis for why and how we live is in the love of God. Nowhere else.

It's not even in our faith, as important as that is in allowing us to experience the love of God. But it is love itself that is what we are rooted in. And this, when it is genuine, results in love for God and love for others, and they love us back. That's the ultimate experience in life. Being rooted down deep into God's love is where we find our strength. **And may you have the power to understand...** We should understand, but we really don't fully understand. It would be good if we could, but the degree to which we do understand God's love is the degree to which our lives will be full and satisfying. **To understand how wide, and how long, and how high, and how deep God's love is.** Paul is saying here that love extends in all directions of our lives. It's a four-dimensional love of God. It is huge in every way. It's the biggest, most wonderful thing we will ever experience. There is nothing greater!

God's love is the most powerful force in the universe. I often get accused of setting God's love up as more important than anything else about God, like his knowledge, wisdom, justice,

mercy, or power. But I always tell them, “No, all the attributes of God are equally his, but his love is special in that it is His ultimate *motivation* for all that he does. His grace, forgiveness, mercy – and even his judgment and condemnation – are all motivated and grounded in his love. When God judges, he makes an *accurate assessment* (that’s what this word means in Greek). Everything in life needs to be accurately evaluated. That is what God does. He accurately assesses (judges) everything. How could he not, and still be God? But then he acts accordingly to correct, resolve, redeem, restore, and reconcile us as needed. This is always his only goal for every human being. When he condemns, he condemns bad stuff – like sin in us. Paul wrote in Romans Eight that “God condemns sin in the flesh.” Thank you, God, for your condemnation is motivated by your love. Such loving action will, eventually, eliminate all sin from the universe and beyond, forever!

Love too great to understand (3.19)

Love is what motivates God to do what he does because he *is* love, and he always wants to act in the very best interest of those he loves – which is everyone. Paul goes on and says, **May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully.** I like this. May you experience it even though you don't fully understand it! It's good to know that we can experience the love of God without fully understanding it. However, the more we understand it, the more fully we'll experience it. But fully understanding God's love is not a requirement. We don't have to figure it all out. We don't have to understand systematic theology. We don't have to hold to a creed. We don't have to go to church. It's good to go to church if you want to, especially if it enhances your relationship with God and others, but God certainly does not require it. You don't have to read the Bible, even though it's a good thing to read and study (as

this commentary series attempts to do). But this is not required by God. So, we can experience the love of God even though it's too great and magnificent to fully understand.

Paul concludes, **Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God.** That's an amazing statement. You will be *complete*, and you'll be complete with all the *fullness* of life and power that comes from God. He knows we will often fail to understand his love, fail to be strong in him, and fail to trust him as we should. But He just says, "That's okay. You'll learn by doing things wrong and fighting me. I'm gonna be here for you when you come out the other side, and you'll grow stronger as a result of all you've gone through." So it's all good, folks! It's all good, even in the midst of difficulties. I encourage people all the time by telling them, "Don't get discouraged because it's all going to be made right. God will see to it. You just wait and see." It's just that we don't see it right now. It's easy to think, *I'm gonna give up and quit because this isn't working!* But it is working! It's just not working perfectly right now and completely, the way we want it to. But it is all working, in God's way and in his time. We're made complete, with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God. But that gets manifested and comes out in us over time, as we grow. If you can just be patient with yourself, as God is with us, it will work.

Accomplishing infinitely more (3.20)

Paul closes Ephesians Three with, **Now, all glory to God, who is able through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think.** Oh, thank you, God. You're going to work beyond what I can even imagine, think, or ask for? Wow! Thank you very much for doing that because I might not even know to ask. I might not be in the mood to ask. I might be too ignorant or too distracted to ask.

And you are going to act in my best interest anyway? Wow! That's great. God accomplishes infinitely more than we might ask or think. Wonderful. That's so good to know.

Paul then finishes with, **Glory to him who is in the church...** not in some church up the street, not in a building or an institution, not in the creeds, nor even the Bible. Glory be to him who is in *the* church. The real church is the Ecclesia. This means the *called-out ones*. We are the ones who are called out by God to come to him and leave behind our lives of fear, anger, loneliness, insecurity, and bondage. God calls us out of the world to come and be free, in him and in Christ. This was his mysterious plan for his world and he will bring it to pass. Paul adds, **and who is in Christ Jesus, through all generations, forever and ever. Amen.** So glory to God who is not only in us (the church), but who is in Christ, too. All this extends to all generations, and that would be us, today, here and now!

With that big “amen” you'd think Paul was done with his letter. But He's not. He's done with one part of it. Usually, in his letters, Paul spends the first half presenting a whole bunch of factual information about God and Jesus and doesn't ask his readers to do a darn thing. Very few requirements, requests, or commands are given in the first half of Paul's letters. He just gives information, because that's what his readers need in order to go on and live a successful life in Christ.

Discipline and punishment

Ephesians One was where Paul first mentioned God's mysterious plan that was hidden for ages. There he wrote in verses 9 and 10, “God has now revealed to us his mysterious plan regarding Christ, a plan to fulfill his own good pleasure. And this is the plan: At the right time he will bring everything together under the authority of Christ – everything in heaven and on

earth.” Do you want to know what God’s ultimate plan is for this world he created and so loves? Well, here it is plain and simple, from Paul. “At the right time ...” Notice this, first. God reveals his plan at the right time in history. Not too soon, and not too late. It is easy to complain about all the evil in the world. But it's about God's timing. Sometimes he lets people wallow in sin, not because he wants them to, not because He thinks that's OK, but because he knows what it will take for us to fully embrace him. Sometimes people have to live in desperation for a while before they finally say, “Oh, I get it, God!

God disciplines people and he takes as long as it takes to accomplish his purpose in them. The word *discipline* comes from the word *disciple*. It means to teach, not to punish. Our mess-ups are the way we learn, and if we keep repeating those same mistakes we have to keep on learning. But God is patient and he never gives up on us. Never! We're just slow learners, but that's alright. He goes at our slow pace. God wants us all to do well – everyone. So he brings discipline.

Sometimes the word punishment is used in the New Testament writings. But it is always *corrective* punishment. God always has a corrective, restoring, saving, and redeeming purpose in all that he does. How could he not? He never acts in pure retaliation with no corrective purpose whatsoever. Such action by God would accomplish nothing and would render him the meanest, cruelest being in the universe, forever. Discipline and corrective punishment are always severe actions by God. But it is always for our good and it communicates that God is serious about changing us and making us more like Jesus. We mess up, we learn, but we don't need to say, “God did something bad to me.” Most people are aware that when bad things happen, it's usually because we bring them on ourselves. Even kids, when they've been disciplined, will sometimes say, “Well, I had that coming. I caused it. I could have prevented it.” It's usually a result

of our own doing, and it's not God piling on, adding to the natural consequence we experience. He only does severe things to show us the problems so we can learn and avoid them in the future. His goal is always for us to improve.

God just says, "Okay, I'm going to allow these natural consequences to happen, even though it's hard for me to watch you suffer. I hate to see it, but I know good will come from it as I guide you through it and bring corrective action as needed." It's like a good parent who will take some corrective action if their child is running out in front of a car. For the child, the experience is *ouch*, and they associate a little bit of pain with running out in front of a car. This is done in the hope that they won't have to later on experience greater pain! Also like a good parent, God always disciplines in love, even when it requires some kind of severity. It's never retaliation. God is not a puny God. He never wants or needs to *get back* at anyone. That's what we tend to do and we project this back onto God. He always has a purpose of correcting and disciplining when he involves himself in our lives.

7. Unity in Christ (Ephesians 4.1-6)

In Ephesians Four, Paul begins the second part of his letter. He starts out with “Therefore.” In other words, based on everything he wrote in Ephesians One through Three, he is going to draw some conclusions and tell us what to do in light of all we’ve learned about how God saves us through Jesus.

Live a worthy life (4.1)

Therefore I, a prisoner for serving the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling, for you have been called by God.

This is a lot like what Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans. In it, he used the word *therefore* to introduce the second half of his letter – a more practical half where he began to make suggestions on how to live. In Romans Twelve he wrote, “Therefore, by the mercies of God, present your bodies as a living sacrifice...” Notice he asks them to present themselves as *living* sacrifices, unlike normal sacrifices of dead animals. His reason for presenting themselves is not so they can earn salvation with God and avoid going to hell. Instead, based on everything he wrote for eleven previous chapters in Romans, he requests them to present themselves to God and goes on to say that their minds need to be *renewed* and that they need to be *transformed* into new persons in Christ!

So, Paul does the same thing here in Ephesians Four. Based on everything he's written to them so far, he begs them to lead a life worthy of their calling. God has called us to himself. He is saying, "Come on in, let's have fellowship. I want you to live a life of peace, freedom, success, and satisfaction." Jesus put it this way, "Come unto me, all you who labor and are heavy burdened, and I'll give you rest." So he invites us to come and live a life worthy of his inviting (our calling), and to enjoy all the benefits of living in him.

Now, if you're like me, I read Paul's words and think, "Great idea, but I can't do this!" It turns out that this is a good thing for any of us to think. It shows that we realize we can't do it. When we draw this conclusion it means we are now ready to live in grace and say, "I can't do this, so please live this through me as I trust you and rest in all you've done for me." God wants to live his life through us. He knows it's the only way we will achieve true success and live in peace. True success is not necessarily financial gain. It might include it, but even when it does there is a responsibility to use financial gain in good and positive ways and not just to please ourselves.

Also, keep in mind that God living through us does not mean he makes our hands move, or our lips move, or any other kind of robotic behavior. We still get to choose. In fact, we must choose! But when we rest in God, in who he is, in what he's done for us in Christ, then the things we do become instinctively the things of God. This results in a more joyous life, though not perfect nor free from difficulties. So, Paul says, "I beg you to lead a life that's worthy of your calling. For you have been called by God." That's a good reason!

Be humble and gentle (4.2)

Paul continues, **Always be humble and gentle.** We can't do that too much, can we? It's not easy and it does not come

naturally to us. We are all insecure, proud, and hate feeling small. But we are only one in the mass of humanity, and that's why we need God. When we find ourselves in him, we become big – but big in the right way, not in ourselves. Paul's not talking here about some kind of false humility. That's easy to do, and many do it; it's false and phony. It's a front and a con, and usually, they con themselves. A truly humble person knows who they are because they have been humbled, seeing themselves clearly – but also seeing themselves in Christ where there is no boast of pride. It is not needed. There is no need to puff ourselves up artificially when we live in the *new person* we now are in Christ. Because of what he's done for us, we are at peace and know we are good with God in every way possible. That makes us “big” in a new, better, and correct way.

My childhood pastor once said, “There are three qualifications for a pastor. The first one is ... humility. The second qualification (and it's only second to the first one), is ... humility! And you know what the third one must be!” I think he was saying that we really can't overdo humility as long as it is real. It will always serve us very well. Jesus said the humble (meek) will inherit the earth. Did he mean now, or in eternity? Perhaps both. But there is a sense in which we *inherit* all that is good in this life when we are humble. Otherwise, being lost in our pride, we miss what is truly important without even realizing it. Proud people figure this out very late in life if they ever do at all. So, we are wise to seek genuine humility today. In many ways, humility comes down to just saying, “I can be wrong,” and then leaving the rest to God where it belongs.

But always be careful. What can happen is that by the time you start thinking you're really humble, you've become proud of what you *think* is humility! Benjamin Franklin said that sometimes he had to cross humility off his list of successes because he started becoming proud of his humility. Perhaps part of humility is just saying, “I'm a person of faith. I really believe what I believe, but

I don't have to go around calling everybody else a heretic or false teacher, telling them how wrong they are." We're all wrong about something even though we *feel* that everything we believe is right. Wherever we are wrong, God will eventually show us. Sometimes, it takes our whole lives, and sometimes, we take our errors to the grave. Make no mistake, no matter what you believe, there's always something wrong with it! You just don't know what it is. If you knew what it was, you'd change it. I'm not saying it is necessarily a major item (though it could be), but there are always little tidbits that we get taught, and then we get dogmatic about them without really knowing for sure if we are right. We never really check into things. We just assume what we're told, over and over is true. This *can* be very dangerous.

Perhaps, another part of humility is just saying, "It's not that I don't know *anything* for sure, but what I know for sure I know for myself. I don't have to know it *for* everybody else. I need not go around hammering others, trying to hold them accountable to my beliefs." There's a book written by Peter Enns called *The Sin of Certainty*. His whole theme is, "God doesn't want our *certainty* ... he wants our *trust*." You can trust God without being certain in some perfect, absolute way (though it may feel that way to you). There is nothing wrong with having a strong sense of certainty in our hearts, but we don't have to go around saying, "I've got absolute proof that all my beliefs and doctrinal statements are correct, and everybody else out there must be wrong." People easily fall into this mindset, even Christians. They feel (and have even been taught) that they've got to go around saying that they're absolutely certain of what they believe – in their creeds and doctrinal statements, and their interpretation of the Bible. We really don't have to do this! God just wants us to trust him. He's not looking for us to have *absolute certainty* about everything and go hammer everybody with it to correct them. He never requires this – we do. So, humility is just admitting to God, "I trust you in spite of my imperfections and bias." We can simply be *persons of*

faith, and we can know in our own hearts what we believe and experience. That's what counts. Leave the rest to God, where it belongs!

My personal experience

If we are truly humble, perhaps the best thing we can say is, “As far as I know, based on my experience and my walk with God, this seems to be what God's telling me and I'm going to trust him to correct me if I'm wrong. I will stay open to him doing that.” Anything short of this is probably sheer arrogance, (except for that one person who is actually right! Ha!) But how could they know for sure they were right? Is he or she not just as human as everybody else with strong convictions? Isn't one imperfect person's convictions just as right or flawed as any other? Isn't this the essence of being human – having a faithful trust in God along with realizing that absolute certainty belongs solely to him?

I don't know if you've ever been through this, but I've been corrected, rebuked, and called all kinds of negative things over the years. Occasionally, I found they were right. I've lived long enough to have believed something strongly, only to find out that I was wrong and I really hadn't looked into things all that carefully. I also didn't really check with God. I just got indoctrinated into something, got all exercised and zealous about my beliefs, developed strong convictions, and accepted them as absolute truth. But then, later, I found out I hadn't really prayed about it, not really. I hadn't experienced enough of life, yet. I hadn't really looked into things the way Paul encouraged us to do by “examining everything carefully.” That's all very humbling. But I think it is healthy to go through this a few times. If you have never been down this road of correction and have always blindly trusted everything you've been taught without really looking into things and sincerely praying about it ... you might be the one who is in error and does not realize it! I sure found out that I was, and

I was about sixty when I realized how much I assumed and how little I had looked into things!

As we get older, if we are growing in wisdom, we get a little humbler and are able to conclude, “I really believe this, but I'm not dogmatic about very many things anymore. I just trust God to get it right and I do my best to tag along with him.” After 74 years of living and over 50 years of careful study, I've gotten my personal doctrinal statement down to three items: God loves me; I love him; I should love others. Beyond that, there is not much else that really matters. This is what Jesus concluded, several times in the Gospel writings – to love God and love others! I have a friend who loves to quote from John's First Letter that, “God is love, and everything after that is just footnotes.”

Make allowance for faults (4.2b)

So Paul goes on and says, **Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other's faults because of your love.** You know what? If we would just do that – in a marriage, with friends, at church – I mean, be really patient with each other, always making allowance for each other's faults simply because we love them, there would be so much less trouble in the world and in our lives. Think about it. To what degree can you do this?

Anyone who stays married, I guarantee they are exercising patience to at least *some* degree. They will tell you that this is the only way it really works. Now, I'm not saying people who didn't stay in a marriage didn't do this because sometimes they do it on their end, and they have no control over the other person. So, I never assume that somebody wasn't able to stay in a marriage and has not done everything possible to make it work – including Paul's exhortation of being patient and making allowances for others. They may have tried harder than anybody who actually stays in a marriage. Who knows? But most people will tell you that you've got to make an allowance for the other person's faults,

failures, and shortcomings. Hopefully, they are willing to do the same for you, but you can't make them. This is especially true since most marriages involve a *male vs female* mindset that is often very different and hard to understand for each of them.

But this was by design by God. Men and women, in most marriages, think so differently. So it's not always about *faults*, it's often a matter of, "How can you possibly think like that?" But the key is to make an allowance for even this different mindset that is not necessarily wrong and say, "You know, maybe you're bringing something into this difficult situation that's missing in me – and needed!" When the other person is wrong – and we all take our turn being wrong – just make an allowance for it. Hopefully, they will do the same. They are much more likely to do so when they see you modeling patience and allowance.

So Paul has wisely encouraged his readers to be humble, gentle, patient, and willing to make allowances for wrong-doing or different thinking based on the love they have for others that they received from God. By the way, we love God (and therefore others) only because he first loved us. That's what John wrote in his First Letter. Wow, there's a lot right there to ponder, just in that one verse!

Paul goes on to write, **Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace.** Here's another thing we are wise to strive for, unity with other people, unity in the Spirit!

One body and one Spirit (4.4a)

Now, Paul's going to list seven things that are unique and that should unify us. His focus is on *unity* and *oneness*. **There is one body**, and I think he's talking about the body of Christ. There's only one body of Christ and that's all of us together. There's not a whole bunch of bodies of Christ out there, only one. There are

local gatherings that are *parts* of the one body of Christ. But still, there is only one body, hopefully, united together in Christ. Even though we may be part of a body of believers going to church somewhere, and others attend in some other location, there is only one body. There are many different groups that are collections of like-minded people. But still, there is only one body. That's the body of Christ. That body of people is the way Jesus gets around in the world – through us. What's cool about it is that the diversity among ourselves allows Jesus to get around in this world in a lot of different ways.

We sometimes look at somebody else and say, “Well, you're not doing it the way we do.” But perhaps Jesus responds with, “You're right, they're not. They're not supposed to. I want them to do and believe things differently than you do.” So, there's one body that's very diverse.

Paul adds another item to his list after saying, “There is one body,” he adds, **and one Spirit**. We don't have multiple Spirits of God out there. We have one Holy Spirit, one Spirit of God that indwells us and indwells everybody, and that should unite us – that alone. But here's what's tricky about this. People will say, “Well, the Spirit told me that ...” and then they fill in the blank with something they feel is a revelation from God through his Spirit. Now, if they tell us something highly personal, that's fine. But when people say, “God told me that a certain doctrine is true and everyone needs to believe it,” it creates a huge dilemma. The problem is that there are millions of people, just as sincere and convinced, in other churches and gatherings that make the same dogmatic claim about some opposing doctrine. They, too, claim to have received revelation from God, yet they have a contradicting message. All we can really conclude is that they honestly see things differently and leave it there. However, just because a person has a strong conviction and claims to have revelation from God does not make it true. Now, it very well may

be true, but such a person with such a claim would have to be the unique one that got it right from God leaving everyone else mistaken. If all the others *can* be mistaken, then this supposedly right person, being fully human and fallible, can also be wrong! This brings error full circle and places everyone on equal ground before God as people of faith.

One hope, one Lord, one faith (4.4b)

Paul then adds, **just as you've been called to one glorious hope for the future.** His third item of oneness is hope. It's not a hope about getting out of going to hell. The word *hope* in Greek is *overwhelming confidence*. We have one overwhelming confidence, and it is God's hidden plan that he is going to save the world. How could he ever settle for less if he really loves his world, as claimed by John in the now-famous John 3:16? Actually, he's already saved his world through the work of Jesus on the cross in our place, and he's going to fully complete that salvation someday by reconciling everyone and everything to himself. That's our one glorious hope for the future, and not just for ourselves and our buddies who believe as we do, but for all humanity. God loves his world and he's not going to fail it. He's not going to abandon or give up on anybody, because that's not his nature.

Now Paul adds a fourth item: **there is one Lord.** I think he's referring to Jesus here, as our one Lord. Look at what is next on the list. **One faith.** A big part of our faith is our belief in one God. There's not a whole bunch of different gods, like the pagan religions of the Roman Empire. They had more gods than they knew what to do with – one for every possible occasion and aspect of life. They all needed to be appeased and given sacrifices. Judaism and Christianity were different. Only one God for them. In the Old Testament, it states. Hear, oh Israel, Our God is one God. Isaiah the prophet has God saying, “I alone am God. I

know of no other.” The pagans in Rome, with their many gods, did not mind adding one more; even the Christian God was OK. But the Christian faith, from the beginning, allowed no such combining. Paul will declare “one God” in his seventh item below.

One baptism (4.5b)

Paul’s sixth item of oneness is **One baptism**. This is interesting. There is water baptism, and there is the baptism of the Spirit. Some people think baptism of the Spirit means you’re going to start speaking in tongues, and perhaps some people do as a result. But the *real* baptism of the Spirit is when we are actively indwelt by him. The Holy Spirit indwells everybody. He has to if he is everywhere present. This doesn’t mean he is actively experienced by everyone. He can be shunned and ignored, and many people do this. But he is there, in everyone, always working to draw people to God. Eventually, he will be successful. But if you have given your life to God, then you will experience him actively in your life. So, you’re baptized in him, you’re identified with him, and it is very real.

Yet there is a ritual of immersing or sprinkling people with water. This is commonly known as *baptism*. But Paul said there is only one baptism! It sounds like there are two. The way I explain it is that if I hold up a picture of a friend and I ask, “Who is this?” people will say, “Oh, that’s ...” and they will give his or her name. But it’s not really that person. If I press them on it, I will say, this isn’t actually that person, is it? They will answer, “No,” because there aren’t really two of that person. The picture is not really that person, but it is an exact image of them. So the same thing is true with baptism. There’s only one baptism, and that is the baptism of the Holy Spirit when he comes and indwells us when we are living in him and actively experiencing him. This other baptism, a

ritual using water, is only a *picture* of or a *symbol* of the real baptism. It is illustrated by sprinkling or immersing people using water.

That's why I believe when we baptize someone, there's no magic in it. They don't get saved or changed in any way, but they might *feel* closer to God because of the symbolism that means something to them. There's nothing wrong with any of that, but the real baptism isn't going down into the water or getting sprinkled. It's the baptism of the Holy Spirit that going into (or under) the water represents. So there's only one baptism, the one real one, but it can be represented in a ritual that some people believe is important.

One God! (4.6)

Here is Paul's seventh aspect of oneness on his list. **One God and Father, who was overall and in all and living through all.** One God! Do not miss the obvious stated here by Paul. God is singular and unique. There is no other god or gods. Paul was a monotheist as were the Jews of the Old Testament. This is where the idea of God existing in a *trinity* (tri-unity) gets a little bit messy and controversial.

The idea that God exists in three separate persons, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and yet there is only one God and not three ... this idea was first proposed (formally) in the fourth century, some 300 years after the time of Jesus and his disciples. This is significant and presents a pretty big problem. The *Trinitarian* view of God, as it is presented in detail by the councils held in the fourth century, is never directly stated in the New Testament – at least not using the same vocabulary and terminology that was adopted by the councils in the fourth century. This is a fact that everyone who knows the history and the New Testament understands. However, the church of the fourth century decided to accept the Trinity (as they newly defined it) to be the absolute truth about the nature of God. And

so, as the Western, Roman Catholic church developed and grew in power and number during the Middle Ages, this Trinitarian view of God became foundational to all that was taught and passed down to future generations.

Whether this view of God is correct, each person must ultimately decide for themselves, keeping in mind that this view was never held by Jesus, the Jews, nor the early church fathers, – at least not using the new terminology created in the councils of Nicaea (AD 325) and Constantinople (AD 381). You won't find it in the New Testament, not the way it's worded in the fourth century. But for sure, according to Paul here in Ephesians Four, he makes it clear that there's *one* God and Father. That's the way Paul and all the writers of the New Testament always saw God ... as the Father. They often use the term *God the Father*, but the terms *God the Son* or *God the Spirit* are never used, even though these terms are commonly used today. Why this is so, is a spiritual exercise for each believer to work out in their heart and mind. But Paul's point in this seventh item in his *oneness list* is that there is only one God, and he identifies him as the Father who is *over* all, *in* all, and living *through* all.

According to the Gospel of John, which was written about twenty years after the other three gospels which are more in agreement with each other, John presents Jesus as pre-existing with God, and in some way *is* God! He makes this clear in the introduction of his gospel, as well as in the *upper room* discussions that Jesus had with his disciples in chapters 14-17. And so, it is possible that the fourth century guys, with all their new terminology that goes far beyond anything in the New Testament, are correct in their conclusions that Jesus and the Father are both fully God and yet there is only one God. No one has figured out how this apparent contradiction can rationally be true, and everyone admits that it is a problem and a mystery. But most Christians seem to accept it as the absolute truth, whether they have really thought it through and have done a careful study or

just blindly accepted what they have been taught all their lives. Perhaps the fourth century guys figured it out 300 years after the time of Jesus, even though no one in the New Testament, including Jesus, was able to articulate it as they did. Perhaps we just need to trust them. Many Christians do, and it's OK that they do. Again, each person must do their own homework, pray about it, and decide what to believe.

But this is why it has always been controversial. There are a lot of Christians who are unitarians (non-trinitarians), believing monotheism is important and even essential. They believe God manifests himself in three persons, but that they are not three *separate* person who each are fully God. This, for them, would be polytheism and the Bible is very clear and consistently presents God as being one in number, unique, and unrivaled as the Creator of all things.

Or if you're a Trinitarian, it's okay. This is a completely legitimate view considering the widespread acceptance in the church today. The book *The Shack* is a good example. In it, all three persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – are separate and distinct, are in fellowship with each other, and they invite us to come have fellowship with all three of them. This is a great demonstration of the Love of God and his loving, inviting disposition toward all humanity. This is true of God whether he is one person manifesting himself in three ways, or three persons who are together one God. I doubt this will be definitively resolved in this lifetime. But do not let this keep you from seeing the oneness of God, his love for his world, and his plan to fully save it by restoring all humanity and reconciling everyone to himself!

So when we come and have fellowship with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, it's real fellowship with God no matter in what exact form he exists. To me, it's not worth fighting over or dividing from others. This is Paul's point in presenting his list of oneness – that the unity of believers is key and essential! It's

the experience that you have with God and the changes in your life that matter. God wants you to come to him and have fellowship with him. He's not a big scary being that's going to wail on you if you do something bad, or do not have a correct disposition toward him. His desire is for us, and all people, to be saved, corrected, restored, redeemed, and fully reconciled to himself forever. That is his goal and he will never fail to achieve it.

Understanding God

One of the great problems we get ourselves into, one that distracts us from fully enjoying a new and wonderful life with our Creator, is that we think (or we've been convinced) that we must nail down, perfectly, the exact nature of God. He is meant to be mysterious because he is *God* and can never be fully understood. He is not like a bug we place under a microscope, dissect, and fully explain who he is and how he works! We are the ones being examined by God, and he has determined that we are in great need of being saved from ourselves and our fallen nature. Fortunately, he is a God who loves and then acts on that love to bring about the very best for those he loves. This is what love is all about.

I have found that most religious people love God, honor him, and try to love others as a logical result of who he is. Christians love Jesus, they have fellowship with God, and they all have different views on how spiritual life works. But that'll get sorted out in eternity, not in any doctrinal statement, creed, or dogmatic writings.

So, all this focus on *oneness* and unity is Paul's way of preparing his readers for what he will write next. He just listed seven reasons to seek oneness and unity: One body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father, who is over all, in all, and living through all. Man oh man,

that's a lot of unity, if you think about it. God is *over* everybody, he's *in* everybody, and he's living *through* everyone – even though many people are out of fellowship with God and their lives are messed up. We must be careful not to judge others – we're all messed up to some degree and need the same unifying God who loves us. Paul concluded this at the end of Romans Three, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” We all stand on equal ground before God where only in his grace is there any solution.

God is working in everybody's life. Sometimes it takes a long time, and maybe sometimes he's barely working because we don't let him. But he's always there, he's taking his time, and he's working with everybody and forever changing them. That was true of Paul, who claimed to be the worst sinner. It's true of all of us in this crazy world today; it's true of the very worst sinner out there. God is already working in them and will bring them into full reconciliation with himself in eternity, and that's our hope for the future.

8. Spiritual Gifts (Ephesians 4.7-13)

That's a lot of stuff to consider so far in Ephesians Four, and we've only gotten started. I'm sure I get many things wrong in these *Common Sense Commentaries*. But I try to be as careful and honest as I can be, even when the facts lead somewhere I don't like, or other people don't like. If we cannot "examine everything carefully" (as Paul suggested we do) then we do not really think very highly of what we believe. If we cannot beat on our dearly held beliefs to see if they will withstand scrutiny, then we are doomed to the insecurity that comes with assuming we are right. So, am I wrong? Yes! I am. But I honestly do not know *exactly* where and how. However, I know I must be to some degree simply because I am human.

Therefore, it is up to you to do your own study, go see God, and ask him to show you what is right for you to believe. But be prepared – God might show you that you are wrong in some area of your thinking that you never dreamed you would be. This has happened to me many times, so now I hold firmly to what I believe, but I also stay open to discovering whatever God has for me. So far in life, things have only gotten better and I have grown more confident in what I believe simply because I looked into things for myself. Follow the facts... wherever they lead. You will never go wrong – or at least you will not *stay* wrong!

So the important thing is that we are one with Christ and one with the Father just as Jesus was with the Father, and that we are

to live in that unity with the Father and the Son. Its not wrong to say, “With the Holy Spirit, too,” no matter how that all works together about who God is. Paul’s point is unity and oneness should be our goal.

A special gift for everyone (4.7)

Now Paul goes on, and this section gets a little interesting and tricky. He writes, **God has given each one of us a special gift through the generosity of Christ.** Here Paul introduces this idea of *spiritual gifts*. He discusses this topic in other letters, like in his first letter to the Corinthians. This is a fitting topic after stressing the importance of unity among people. Everyone is given a special gift or ability to exercise in a way that benefits others!

But before he lists four of them and how they work in the church, he tells us why these gifts are given. Here is what he wrote: **That is why the Scriptures** (or, the writings of the Old Testament) **say, ‘When Jesus ascended up on high, he led a crowd of captives and he gave gifts to his people.’** Of course, this is a picture of Jesus ascending after his resurrection and taking humanity with him in salvation. I think that's the only way we can read it and make any real sense of it. I’m sure there are other interpretations out there, and they may very well be right. But it seems like understanding this idea of *ascending and taking captives* as the work of Jesus saving the world by his death and resurrection is consistent with all the things we know about salvation and God elsewhere in the New Testament. But Paul’s point here is that when Jesus completed his saving work and returned to his Father, he also gave gifts (special abilities) to his people.

Paul continues with an explanation of what he just quoted from the Old Testament. He writes **Notice it says *he ascended*.**

This clearly means that Christ also *descended* to our lowly world. And, that makes sense. If Jesus was from God, he could not *ascend* to heaven unless he had first *descended* from that other realm. Paul continues, **And the same one who descended is the one who ascended higher than all the heavens so that he might fill the entire universe with himself.** Wow, that's quite a claim, Paul! Something happened to Jesus when he ascended after the resurrection that unified him with God (who fills all in all), causing Jesus to also fill the entire universe with himself. Looks like the human, Jesus, moved into the realm of being everywhere present, just as God is! Again, wow! This is amazing if it is true.

These are the gifts (4.11)

So now Paul is ready to tell us about these gifts that Jesus gave when he ascended. **Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers.** In the Greek language – the language of the New Testament – the last two gifts (pastor and teacher) are really a hyphenated word and represent just one gift. There are not five different gifts; only four are listed here by Paul. This makes sense because good pastors teach people; and good teachers pastor (or shepherd) people. Now some people who are pastors-teachers act mostly as pastors. Others act mostly as teachers. But all of them should do both because these two abilities work best when combined. Do you have a pastor? Does he or she teach you anything? Most pastors usually do. Do you have a teacher? Does he or she pastor you, or shepherd you in any way? Normally they should. That's their gift. Those who are better at pastoring, work with people really well. But sometimes they're not great teachers. But they really help you connect with God. They're compassionate and caring. Other people are really good teachers and they're not quite as strong on pastoring – that shepherding

thing of working with people that is sometimes very tricky. But that's okay because we're all different in how we exercise our gifts. Try not to compare and disparage one person over another who is trying to serve you well with the abilities they were given. So, we shouldn't compare teachers and pastors against each other. Just conclude, "That's who that person is." If he or she is your pastor or your teacher at your church, accept them as the one that God has provided for you at this point in time with all their strengths and weaknesses.

Paul has listed four different gifts: apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers. Now, some people believe that the first two (apostles and prophets) are more miraculous-oriented and that they were just intended for the First Century. They also conclude that evangelists and pastor-teachers are gifts that are for all periods of time, including today. But this seems to be more of a modern-day bias by those Christians who are non-charismatic and are not comfortable with *all* the gifts mentioned in the New Testament as being active today. That's why we have different people in different churches. But this breaks the unity that Paul so clearly expressed as his desire for all of us as fellow believers. Unfortunately and realistically, this will probably not be resolved in this lifetime. But, perhaps we will someday! That would be a great day if we could ever see past our prejudices and bigotry and just love and accept each other. But there are literally hundreds of other issues that divide people today. Most of them are based on speculation and interpretation about the "true meaning" of the New Testament writings, and then people become dogmatic about these things and teach others to do the same. It is a bad disease that is common in most churches today.

God has made us all very different, diverse, and with various abilities and interests. If we could ever learn to appreciate diversity the way God does and work together – really work together – we could accomplish so much. But until then, all we

can do is strive to be as unified with others as we can be. Remember what Paul said, early on in this chapter? “Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other’s faults because of your love.” All we can really do, and all God asks us to do, is take that to heart and do all we can to live that way each day!

Apostles

Apostles are those who are *sent out* by Christ. The word apostle means *sent-out ones*. It does not mean to be a big cheese in the church, telling everyone what to do and how to live. Paul often said things like, “I urge you by the mercies of God...” and then gave instructions. He was seldom heavy-handed with people, except in a few severe situations. I don't see any reason why everyone can't be a *sent-out one* by Christ today. Maybe not exactly the same way the original apostles were, but as those who love God and want to tell the world about his love, grace, and mysterious plan now revealed to save all humanity. In that way, we're all *sent ones*, we're all apostles. Right?

We may all be *sent ones* by God, in our own special way, but we are also growing and learning from God. Even the disciples of Jesus, when they were walking with him for three years and had seen everything that he did, had to grow in grace and the knowledge of who Jesus was and in who God is. In other words, there were many things that they didn't know about Jesus even though they walked around right there with him. If we're not willing to grow, learn, change, and find out where we might be wrong, we can lose our ability to share the love of God by remaining stuck in something that we mistakenly think is right. In reality, the only thing that works is real, genuine, self-giving love.

Prophets and evangelists

So according to Paul, God has given the church apostles – sent-ones. And he also gave *prophets*. The idea of *prophecy* is not to predict the future. It might include that, but that is not what this word means. The word *prophecy* actually means to *proclaim*. One who prophesies is one who proclaims the truth. It's usually timeless truths that are proclaimed, not time-limited predictions. It *can* include predictions of some sort, but it's really about proclaiming the truth of the Good News about Jesus.

Then, also, Paul says God gave *evangelists*. They're the ones who take the message of the Gospel and tell others about it. The word *evangelize* means “to announce.” Paul's focus was to announce the message of the Good News of what God has already done through Jesus for all humanity. It is an announcement, not *let's make a deal*. God is not saying (through the Good News message), “Are you ready to make a deal? I've got a really good one for you. If you believe in me, I won't do anything horrific to you – like torment you forever. Deal, or no deal? You decide.” Instead, God is saying, through this message of Good News, and through these evangelists, “Hey folks, I'm announcing to all of you what I've already done for you through Jesus on the cross. I'm telling you about it so you can hear it, believe it, and benefit from it!” Many churches tell people that the Gospel (the Good News message) is an invitation for people to do something (believe, take action, or both) in order to avoid horrible retaliation by a God who is vengeful, angry, and out to destroy or torment them forever. But this is not how God is presented in the New Testament. He is a God who loves his world – every single person – and wants all of them to be corrected, restored, and saved from their own sinful selves and from death.

Now, there is an invitation aspect to the Good News message. God is inviting everyone to come to him, believe in him,

and engage with him in a life of peace, joy, freedom, and security ... forever. He does not need to threaten people with doom. His love is so powerful and effective that he knows his love will win in the end and all will be saved, just as his hidden, mysterious plan was determined to do.

But the problem is that many Christians turn that invitation into the main thing, the key that unlocks the door of being saved from a vengeful, retaliating god. Most of them do not realize the *announcement* nature of the Good News. They really believe it's an invitation or a threat. This is why there's so much confusion out there about what salvation is and what people must do to attain it. The answer is ... nothing! God has already secured the salvation of everyone and has *announced* it through those who are evangelists (announcers) so that people can hear about it, believe it, and just say *thank you* to God. This is why so many people wonder and ask themselves, "Am I okay? Am I saved? Am I going to heaven to be with God for eternity? Have I believed enough, or believed the right things? Have I done enough good works to please God and prove that I am a true believer?" What a horrible insecure way to live, when it is all actually quite simple. God has saved the world as an act of his grace and not by anything we believe or do. This enables us to *know* we are saved, live securely in God's unconditional love for us, and experience peace that passes understanding. This is the *only* way!

It's not our act of believing the Good News message that saves us. It is the *object* of that announcement, Jesus Christ, who saves us! It is *who* he is and *what* he did that saves us. Paul summed salvation up this way, "Christ and him crucified." It is Jesus that saves us; we don't save ourselves from our sins. We are not capable. However, there is a sense in which we save (deliver) ourselves from the *entanglement* of sin when we choose to believe in God and Jesus. But we have done nothing to earn anything from God when we believe. We are only accepting, receiving,

understanding, and getting on board with what God has *already* done for us – something we were powerless to do for ourselves!

Our salvation (deliverance) is from ourselves, from our sin, and from death that results from our sin. It is not salvation from a mean, cruel god who wants to do something horrible to us in pure retaliation (with no corrective purpose whatsoever) because we have sinned or failed to believe. God is often presented as one who is going to send the majority of humanity into horrible torment forever! That is a really sick and disgusting view of God, and it is about as far away from who he really is as anyone can get in their thinking. Do you think this is true about God? Have you been taught this over and over all your life? I was, and I believed it until I looked into who God is, and who he must be based on his love, grace, mercy, and his mysterious plan that he has always had to save the world he created and so loves. Instead, this announcement (the Good News) is letting us know what's true and who God is – the one who loves us and plans to save all of us no matter how long or what it takes.

Good news in the ancient world

In the ancient world, the “good news” (gospel) was a common occurrence. It was an announcement of something that had already taken place. Messengers would run through the cities (they didn't have Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, or cable news) and would literally yell out the most recent news of some great importance. It could be that the king just had a newborn child who would be a prince and next in line to the throne. Or, it might be that some raging battle had just been won and was over. The runner would enthusiastically shout, “The victory has been won!” This is the sense in which the Good News about Jesus, as the Savior of the World, was heralded. It is an announcement of something already done and finished for us!

Now, let's suppose a messenger has just announced the good news of a battlefield victory being won. Let's suppose somebody didn't hear it. The victory has still been won. It's true whether they hear it or not. Or, let's suppose somebody else in town says, "I don't believe we won." That's fine. They don't have to believe the victory has been won in order for it to be true. So it is with the Good News of Jesus and the cross. The victory hasn't been won because we believe it; the victory has been won on the cross whether we believe it or not! Everyone benefits from the victory won on the battlefield, regardless of their attitude about it. Their belief doesn't make it true. Also, everyone benefits from the victory over death by Jesus on the cross, whether they hear about it or not, and whether they believe it or not. However, keep in mind, that we personally experience a benefit from the victory already won by Jesus when we believe and engage with God as a result. But we have not earned anything by believing. All earning was done on the cross by Jesus, for us, just as those on the battlefield won and earned the victory for the people of the city.

Okay, so according to Paul, God has given apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers. A lot has been taught about these gifts to the church over the centuries. You can find plenty of commentaries on it. But here's the key. The gift Christ gave to the church was the people themselves. The apostles were the gift, the prophets were the gift. God gave these *persons* to the church with the abilities God bestowed upon them. I think, to some degree, the gifts he gives is every person, not just special ones. We are all special gifts to each other, each of us with our own special abilities. Everybody is a gift to the body of Christ, even beyond these four gifts mentioned by Paul. People are gifted to play music, to be an encourager, or to be a giver who gives money and meets needs. There are endless gifts because God made humans very diverse from each other and always with a

grand purpose. Discover the gift you are to others and go exercise it for the good of all!

Equipping people to serve (4.12)

There must be leaders in any organization, or there will be chaos. Sometimes there is chaos because of the leaders! But good leaders are servants. When they are, they help keep the group organized as they move forward. However, good leaders are not dictators who always get their way. They lead by *servicing* and finding out what the group wants and needs, and then they find a way to bring it about. They are not supposed to do all the work themselves, where everyone else becomes spectators.

So Paul continues his thoughts about leaders, After listing the four kinds of leaders that are given as gifts from God, he adds, **Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ.** This is really interesting. These men and women that have these gifts, and are themselves the gifts, aren't given so they can put on a great show and do all the work! We're not supposed to just sit back and watch because they're the really talented, special ones. No, they've been given to *equip* everybody to go do the work – to serve others in various ways. The leaders are, themselves, to be servants equipping others to serve each other. It is quite a beautiful thing when done correctly with a *servants heart* motivating everyone. These servant leaders are to be instructors, coaches, encouragers, enablers, and sources of information. Hopefully, they will inspire others as good examples of what it means to humbly serve. That's all they are. They're not almighty ones.

In the church, people sometimes put leaders up on pedestals and tell other people, “Oh, come and listen to my pastor.” But some of those invited people often ask, “Well, what is it that *you* believe?” The answer is often, “Oh, I can't say it in the right way,

but my pastor says it really well.” That works, but not well, and God desires something much better for us. It is so much better and more effective when we’re equipped to tell other people the Good News in our own unique way, based on our own experiences. The best thing we can tell people is what God has brought into our lives and what he has taught us. It's not that hard.

One of the problems is people tend to listen to people who have become good articulators. They have the *gift of gab* – that’s what I call it. People think to themselves, “Oh, I can't talk like that. So I can't really tell anybody about Jesus and the Good News.” Oh, but you can! Tell them about your life; tell them what you’ve experienced. This will relate to people more than all the fancy speeches in the world. You might not need to say much at all. Somebody once said, “Tell people the Good News ... and even use some words when you need to!” Just live the life you have been given in Christ and love people unconditionally. This is powerful stuff, even more powerful than any sermon.

Continue until unified (4.13)

Paul continues in Ephesians Four of his letter and says, **This will continue until we all come to such unity.** And there’s that *unity* idea of Paul’s, again. He sure does want us to live in harmony and unity. That’s because he knows that the Good News will be the most successful and helpful when we’re not wasting our time and energy fighting each other. Paul continues, ... **unity in our faith and knowledge of God's son, so that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ.** Wow, what a statement. That’s a good one to read a few times and think about it. It’s not just unity for unity’s sake, but unity that helps us reach a goal – the goal of faith, knowledge, maturity, and measuring up.

9. Put On Your New Self (Ephesians 4.14-24)

No longer be immature (14a)

Paul goes on to tell us the practical result of reaching this goal of faith, knowledge, maturity, and measuring up. He says, **Then we will no longer be immature like children.** So when we reach that goal (or, perhaps, *to the degree* that we reach that goal), we will no longer be immature, which we all fall back into at times like a bunch of selfish children. He adds **We won't be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching.** Maybe you've been there when you were new in your faith, chasing after the latest books and teachers. This is normal and something we all tend to do when we encounter something new in our lives. But we are wise to listen to Paul's advice that he gave in one of his other letters, "Examine everything carefully and then hold on to that which proves itself to be good and true and right." Doing this will guard against being immature, getting tossed around by every new teaching, and thinking, "Oh wow, this is the way it works!" It might not be. Time, prayer, and examining everything carefully are the solution.

Paul then gives more results of our having reached the goal of faith, knowledge, maturity, and measuring up. **We will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth.** And sometimes this is exactly what

happens. It happens in politics. It happens in relationships. It happens in religion. It can happen in any area of our lives because human beings are kind of deceitful. We're tricky. We try to trick each other. We even trick ourselves. We often talk ourselves into believing things that are not really true. It's always interesting that everybody thinks the *other* people are the deceived ones and we're always telling the truth.

And the other group – they think the same thing. All churches and religions think they've got it all figured out and everybody else is only *close but no cigar* or way off completely. In reality, we're all off base in our thinking and beliefs to some degree. Part of maturity is saying, "You know, I don't have it all figured out. I've got a lot figured out between myself and God, and so I'm gonna march on in life and trust God to show me where I'm wrong." Ask God to show you where you're off a bit and need to adjust. He will. But you gotta be open and willing to change. That is very hard for most people. It scares them!

Speak truth in love (4.15)

After warning his readers not to get tricked, Paul added this, So instead, **Speak the truth in love growing in your knowledge in every way, becoming more and more like Christ.** Ah ha, speak the truth ... but do it in love! As Walter Martin used to say, "Speak the truth *in love* ... but for pity's sake speak it!" Walter Martin was a guy who lectured on the cults and liked to emphasize the *truth* part in our speech. I would say, well, that's good. It's true, speak the *truth*. Speak it and don't be wishy-washy about it. Let it fly. On the other hand, speak the truth in *love*. Be loving in how you speak it. Make sure you're speaking it in love and not just in harshness and dogma. Get rid of, "I'm right, and you're wrong," calling people heretics and false teachers to dismiss them. If the love's not there, any truth you present will not be heard. So, I like Paul's careful balance of truth and love,

both being essential elements. So, let's "speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ." That's the goal, not just attaining more and more knowledge of the New Testament and a better understanding of man-made doctrinal statements and creeds.

To this Paul adds, **who is the head of his body, which is the church.** Okay, Christ's body is the church. They are the *called-out ones*, the *ecclesia*, those who've been called out of the world to experience the salvation (deliverance from sin) that God has already accomplished in Jesus for all humanity. And of course, everyone's called by Christ out of the world. So in one sense, everyone's in the church. It's just that it's not active in their life and they're not experiencing it, but they're basically there because God is the one who saved them by his grace. They just don't know it yet. So there are two groups of people – those who actively experience a relationship with Christ and another group who are not. But all are called out of this world into a wonderful, active relationship with God. No one will be left behind ... unless God fails in carrying out his *mysterious plan* to save all humanity, Jew and non-Jew, (as Paul so carefully explained in Ephesians Two and Three). But he will never fail.

God's always working in everybody. How could he not? Even in the very worst sinners out there, like tormenting terrorists in the Mideast, there is still an image of God in them. That image has just been damaged and tainted by the way they've been taught. All of these terrorists were once innocent little kids who were totally brainwashed into becoming animalistic with no view of God, or worse, a distorted one. But God still loves them just as much as he loves any of us, and there's still an image of God in them. Someday, when all the sin is stripped away, a new wonderful creature will emerge, one who shines with God's image in fullness. This is true of us, too. We have plenty of sin that will someday be gone. We, too, will shine with all the glory of who

God is, in perfection! In eternity, those terrorists might be busting ahead of everyone, so that they can fall down and say, “Jesus is Lord.” They will joyfully bow their knee before him because their salvation (by grace) will mean more to them than perhaps all the pastors and “good people” in the world combined. We shall one day see if this is true.

That's how deep and how extensive God's salvation is. He came to save. He didn't come to grab the *cream of the crop*, the people who were raised in churches, are pretty good, pretty moral, and stay out of trouble. Jesus came to save the worst of all sinners – which Paul claimed to be. So, that would include everyone. Because if he doesn't save the very worst sinners who need it the most, he's really not much of a savior at all! If he just does the easy salvation, saves only those who are already pretty good because they've been raised well like you and me and others that are higher in morality ... if he doesn't save the worst sinners that have been taught to hate and do greater evil than most people ... if he doesn't save them, then it's not really much of a salvation. Saving people is God's joy and pleasure. It's what he's good at. It's who he is!

Fitting together perfectly (4.16)

Paul now begins to talk about how all of this works, **God makes the whole body fit together perfectly**. Now, I don't feel like that's happening because I see so little of it sometimes. Yet, I'm sure that God is in the process of making the body fit together. I think it fits together better than we think. We just get a little uncomfortable with the whole process because we start to think, “That person's not like me and they don't think like me. They need to change. They need to be more like all of us who believe in the *right* things.” None of us like to admit it, but this kind of thing seeps into our thinking a lot. But in reality, God is fitting all of us together – our differences, our strengths and

weaknesses – they can actually fit together. It is just a painful process, and we fight it; it's easier to judge others than it is to try to understand and appreciate them. If we quit bouncing around and fighting each other, we might fit together better than we think. It just won't be perfect in this life. But God is in the process of making the body of Christ fit together perfectly. It takes time and it is sometimes painful. We have to stay ready to give something up! But it's going to happen eventually and completely. Count on it!

Paul continues on, **But as each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love.** We all have special work we do, and we all tend to think somebody else's work isn't worthy or isn't as special as ours. Or, sometimes we think everybody's supposed to be like us – whatever group we are in. We get used to ourselves and ingrown into our particular preferences. We sometimes think everybody ought to come in and believe what we believe. I finally learned to not think that way, not require such compliance of others, and let them be the special persons God made them to be.

I try to say to myself, “If they believe something different, and God's working in their life, that's between them and God.” We need only to keep planting seeds about what we believe, try to do it with some degree of humility and avoid dogmatically saying that we've got it right and everybody else is wrong. I think God is doing something and working things out in a marvelous way.

Hopelessly confused (4.17)

I remember reading this following section of Ephesians when I was a young man and a new Christian, and thinking, “I can't do all this stuff.” I was right, no one can. But it discouraged me just

the same. However, that was back when I still believed what I was told growing up in church that God basically operates *transactionally*. That is, we do something, and God rewards us, and if we don't, we get punished. So, this section of the New Testament (and many others like it) became a burden to me. The more I read it and tried to do it, the more I became a failure in my own mind.

But more recently, I learned that there is another way of looking at passages like this. Instead of making it a burden I must live under and try to perform, I learned to see these as wonderful presentations of the kinds of things that God's going to bring into my life when I walk with him. So we can look at it legalistically, or we can look at it as a joyous list of things that result from being a new person in Christ. These two perspectives are drastically different. One is *law* the other is *grace*.

Paul starts this extraordinary section of his letter by saying, **With the Lord's authority, I say this: live no longer as the Gentiles do for they are hopelessly confused. Their minds are full of darkness, and they wander far from the life God gives, because they have closed their minds and hardened their hearts against him.** People get to the point where life becomes very dark. Now, it doesn't mean they're totally defeated, and that they're never going to break through. Paul's just saying, "Okay folks, you want to do it the long way, the hard way, you can. It's up to you and the consequences are severe."

They have no sense of shame. They live for lustful pleasures and eagerly practice every kind of impurity. People can and do get lost in all kinds of foolish things. It doesn't always have to be sexual. It can be just living for pleasure and going from one exciting thing to the next until they wear themselves out and ask, "Is that all there is?" Some people spend their whole lives doing this. Isn't there more to life than just chasing pleasure and

enjoyment, one more sport I can do, and one more fun activity? These are all good things that healthy people do to stay sane and live a healthy life of enjoyment and recreation. God made us to want and need such things. But by themselves without a relationship with the Creator who brought them all into existence for us, we live a meaningless life. It's the presence of God that gives all these good things meaning and purpose. When you live *only* for these stimulating things, get all the toys you can collect, and do all the outdoor activities you can – when they only live for that, it eventually gets old. The new wears off and they are on the hunt for the next stimulating thrill.

Put on your new nature (4.20)

So what's the solution, Paul? How can we ever make difficulties meaningful instead of worthless disappointments? Paul now begins to answer this important question. **But that isn't what you learned about Christ. Because you heard about Jesus and learned the truth that comes from him, you can throw off your old sinful nature and your previous way of life. That old life is corrupted by lust and deception. Instead, let the Spirit renew your thoughts and attitudes. Put on your new nature, truly righteous and holy, just like God.** The solution is already within us, placed there by God through what Jesus has done and what the Spirit is doing. Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is within you." The *new nature* we have is already in us, but it's not active. It lays dormant. Some people are still living in that *old nature* and Paul's saying, "Take it off, throw it away, and put on this new nature like a coat that fully covers you." It always fits well. Our new nature is custom-made by God for each one of us. We only need to put it on and live a brand new life in Christ, walking in the Spirit, and fellowshiping with God each moment of the day. He will never leave or forsake us. He doesn't even forsake those who don't put on their new nature

coat. He waits for them to learn and he helps them so they can live fully in him as soon as possible. For some people, it just takes a long time, but God is in no hurry when he knows how good everything will turn out. It's all part of his mysterious plan revealed!

Keep in mind that there are probably another thirty verses in the New Testament (many in Paul's letters) that contrast the Spirit and the flesh, the new and the old persons (natures), law vs grace, and being *born again* by God. Yet we are all still plagued with that old nature and it's always a struggle back and forth. This will continue as long as we are living in this world. Our ultimate victory and freedom is when, at the end of time, we are all raised from the dead just as Jesus was and we are given complete and final newness of life, forever. It will be a great day, the greatest day ever! But for now, the best we can do is, by faith, shed that old nature and put on the new one.

Now, it is a fact that all of us will, sometime in the future, slip right out of this new "coat" in a moment of weakness or distraction. Count on it. But never let that discourage or destroy you. We are always, in a flash of a second, able to slip on that wonderful coat of God's perfection and walk again with him for as long as we wear it. It is not that we lose the salvation God has done for us, only that we lose sight of it. Salvation is always ours because it was a free gift from God, unearned by us, to be enjoyed forever. Someday, we will never again temporarily step away from our new nature that results from our human weakness. We'll be home, then, and our God-given new nature will be experienced permanently. Till then, we need only to walk by faith, trust God, and turn back to his loving arms when we stray. He is always there for us.

When you slip back in, you will eventually wake out of your slumber and ask yourself, "What the heck am I doing?" You'll find that as soon as you do, you're back in fellowship with God, in an instant. As you go through this more and more, you slip into

that old nature less and less, and you live more and more in Christ and in the new person you are in him. Your life becomes better, no matter what. You're not living in fear, you're not living in frustration, you're not living in anger, you're no longer trying to get back at somebody who's wronged you, nor rehearsing all those things in your head because you're mad at someone. All that nasty stuff goes away and you just live in Christ.

It's amazing. It's a wonderful, pleasant thing. You're not living *out of* reality; you're living *in* the ultimate reality. So, taking off that old person and putting on the new one is a major theme in the New Testament, and it is key to living a life of freedom, peace, and joy.

10. Living Better (Ephesians 4.25-32)

Paul started his presentation of the solution found in our *new nature* by writing, “That is not what you learned about Christ (lustful pleasures and impurity). Ever since you have heard about Jesus, you have learned the truth that comes from Him.” It is true that we can get some sense of truth from reading the New Testament, but in reality, the truth comes from Christ and it comes from the Holy Spirit, not from any book (even though the New Testament records many things from Jesus and his apostles). So then Paul wrote, “Throw off your old nature in your formal way of life, which is corrupted by lust and deception. Instead, let the Spirit renew your thoughts and attitudes put on the new nature created by God to be truly righteous and holy.”

Stop telling lies (4.25)

To all of this great discussion about the solution, Paul adds, **Stop telling lies.** Lying to ourselves as well as to other people is very destructive. It kills trust and relationships. It's easy to slip into lying, where we fool ourselves or we're being fooled by someone else. Pretty soon the lies start becoming truth-like in our minds and then we live in them. We start living in things that aren't really true. Have you ever done this? I have and we can fall into this when we feel cornered. But when we walk with God we

are never cornered because we live out in the open and in the light of all that God is.

Paul continues, **Let us tell our neighbors the truth for we are all part of the same body.** They say, “You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink.” Well, sometimes you can't even lead them to water! We can tell people the truth as honestly as we can. We can give them facts – all of the facts – including the ones they have never heard from those they have blindly trusted. But they have to be open to hearing them, receive them long enough to seriously consider them, and then “examine them carefully,” as Paul always encourages his readers to do. For sure, we cannot do any of this for others. They can only choose to do it for themselves, and they really can't even do that until they are ready. Only God knows when people are ready because he is intimately involved in getting them ready. All we can do is faithfully tell people what we know, lovingly and patiently, and let God work in his time.

Don't let anger control you (4.26)

So Paul says, “Stop telling lies and tell your neighbors the truth, for we're all parts of the same body.” And we really are. Never forget that. To this Paul adds, **Don't sin by letting anger control you.** Anger is a big problem in many people's lives, and it is a problem to some degree in everyone's life.

Paul gets more specific. **Don't let the sun go down while you're still angry. For anger gives a foothold to the devil.** The thing about anger is that it's so easy to slip into when we're mad at someone. It doesn't even have to be something they did wrong. Sometimes, it's what we have done wrong. We are embarrassed and proud, and we take it out on them. Have you ever done this? Come on, now, be honest! I have.

It's just like when you want to indulge in a chocolate éclair, eating too much of it and getting sick. We can get pulled in so easily. The biggest problem with anger is that it will own you. You won't own it. It will own you if you give in to it, and soon it will consume you and dominate your life. You'll be a slave to it. Perhaps you remember the OJ Simpson trial? My theory is that he got totally consumed by anger and went crazy-wild on his victims. This is an extreme example, but if we ever get consumed by anger, it can cause us to do things we normally would never do. The longer we stay angry the greater the danger for us. This is why Paul tells his readers, "Don't let the sun go down while you are still angry." Do not let your anger go past one day.

Now, it is possible to be angry and not sin. God gets angry without sinning, and we can be angry (to a degree, and for the right reasons) and not sin. In fact, sometimes the proper human response is anger! If I have a child that I love who runs out into the street after I told him not to, and he does it anyway ... I will rightly be angry with him. Communicating my anger (which is actually based on my love for him) may very well change his behavior and save his life. This is love taking action.

So Paul warns us to not let the sun go down while we're still angry. In other words, don't let anger go on and on without end. If we observe these two principles (be angry without sinning and don't let anger continue), we will do well! Go ahead and let yourself be angry about proper things because it's a proper response. But then don't let it fester and control you. Don't let it go on and on because it will own you. If you try to never be angry about anything, it won't work. That's not realistic and you may create another kind of problem building up inside of you. The key is to allow yourself to be angry when it is about something proper and not selfish, and to not allow your anger to continue.

Overcoming anger

Don't let the sun go down on your anger is more of a principle than a literal time limitation. You could spend all night angry, and it still might not be wrong. Many years ago, I had somebody I was very angry with. He had told me something that he should have told me ten years earlier, but he hadn't. His silence had a profound effect on my life. I really wanted to be angry with him, and I remember going to bed and pondering, even struggling with what to do. I didn't really want to be angry with him, but I was. So I started praying for this person. I prayed for him, for his family, and that his relationship with God would be good. I prayed like that for about an hour, maybe longer. I did not pray that God would change him or do something to him. That would only deepen my anger and I knew this.

I was lying there just focusing on prayer and thinking positively about this person. And you know what? The anger went away. It took an hour or so, but at some point it quickly diminished, went away, and never came back! I really believe if I hadn't done that, I would have rehearsed all the things I was going to tell him if I ever had a chance to do so. You know, that little dialogue we do in our heads when we're angry with someone? We think of all the things we didn't think of saying at the time but are coming out of our hearts and minds now that we are angry. We all tend to rehearse what we would say if we could, and the anger grows. But I didn't do that. I prayed for him. I found that it was hard to be angry with somebody that I was genuinely praying for. So, I really think if I hadn't done that, I would still be angry with him to this day. Anger never really goes away if we never resolve it, either with that person or in our own heart. If we don't talk to that person anymore, those emotions stay very real for a very long time. So, the best thing we can do for ourselves, more than for the other person, is to pray genuinely for that person. Connecting

with God is the best way to connect with love, forgiveness, and real healing. Try it sometime!

They're not gonna know you've prayed for them, but you know and God knows. However, our genuine prayer may help the other person more than we realize. Prayer is related in some mysterious way to how God works in other people. But even more important is how prayer helps us even more. For sure, it's OK to pray that other people change. But spend most of your time praying good things for others, and praying that *you* will change! "Lord create me a clean heart with renewal."

In my 74 years, I've learned that hurt people don't fully realize how much they are hurting, and we don't fully appreciate it either. So we are wise to just pray for them, help them, and be patient with them. Often their anger toward us is really not about us, but instead about themselves or their difficult situation. They're coming from a place of pain, and hopefully, we can say, "I know this person isn't totally mad at me. It's more about what they're going through, or what they've gone through in the past, and they're taking it out on me and others around them. We need to see through the pain and even the sin, just as God does with us. Sometimes when people hurt us it's more about them than us. It really is. It's the same as what God realizes about us – that our hurting is more about us than him. His attitude toward us is, "You're not really mad at me. You've got things going on in your life that are turning you away from me, and I want to save you from that. I want you to know my love and that I'm not giving up on you. I'm not so petty to think, *How dare you be mad at me. I need to torment you forever.*"

God's not a petty God. He is "magnanimous" in the greatest sense of the word. He rises up above all such pettiness and solves our problem. I think he says, "I'm all the more determined to redeem you, and save you, and change you, and restore you. I will keep at it for as long as it takes. I'm not going to force you to

work this through. Instead, I will be patient and go at the pace that will bring the best solution for you. It might take most of your life, but that's OK. I'm in no hurry to do things right." For some people it takes a lifetime. Actually, God is at work in everyone for all their life. That's how he knows when its time to bring us home to him.

So, pray for the person who is angry with you, but pray even more for yourself, that God will change your heart! When I prayed for my friend, I was angry; I don't remember exactly how long it was that I prayed, but it wasn't a ten-minute prayer. It was not long enough to change me! I struggled in prayer for at least an hour or so, but my anger slowly began to go away. I remember laying there in bed, almost giggling about my anger being gone and how petty it all seemed in retrospect. The resentment I had for that guy was gone. I didn't know that was going to happen. I just thought, "Man, I gotta start praying for this guy, because I don't like this feeling of anger I have toward him."

I was about 40 when I did all this. Looking back, that was pretty wise for a restless, ambitious forty-year-old. It was a big, big moment in my life. I learned a lot that night about anger and prayer.

Quit stealing (4.28)

Paul addresses another sin that some people face. **if you are a thief quit stealing.** Pretty simple, huh? Quit ... and you won't be a thief anymore. I like what Paul says next. It's a practical answer. **Instead, use your hands** (the same ones you used for stealing) **to do good. Work hard so you can give generously to others in need.** Paul is solving the thief's problem and solving the problem of others tempted to steal, all at the same time. He's telling the thief, "Instead of stealing things just because somebody's got more than you do, go work hard, earn some money, and help others in need. You'll be more satisfied with that,

than you ever will be by stealing things you didn't earn.” But this is a tough lesson to teach some people because they get into an *I want this and I want that* mode and so they go steal it or get it through some kind of deception. Thieves don't have to come into your house and take things; they have other ways of fooling or cheating you out of your money.

Use encouraging words

Paul chooses yet another topic – our speech. **Don't use foul or abusive language.** Such talk is never good. It's easy to get mad and cuss people out, but it serves no purpose. It's just a cheap way of dealing with your anger. It also may mean you don't have a very good vocabulary! People get frustrated trying to express themselves, and so they start using cheap words. The alternative Paul offers them is this. **Let everything you say be good and helpful so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them.** That's a whole different perspective. Instead of getting mad and telling somebody off, maybe even flipping them off, use your words to encourage them. Even if people aren't encouraged by your words, and even if they ignore you and flip you off, stay in the mindset of, “I'm going to try to use my words to encourage people.” It's the best thing you can do for yourself and for your own sense of peace.

As I said above, as a young Christian I used to read this part of Paul's letter and conclude that I can't do all this stuff. But now I read it differently. I don't read it and see a long list of things I've got to do that I can't do. I just read it and think, “Wow, what encouraging words and ideas Paul is giving me.” He's essentially saying, “Hey, Carl, let everything you say be good and helpful so that your words will encourage others who hear them.” That's not a *command* that I need to obey or I'm going to be in trouble. It is just good information from Paul, letting me know how to live a

better life in Christ so that I'll enjoy it more, and others around me will also. That's a whole different way of looking at Paul's exhortation. It is seeing it from the loving heart of God.

A guaranteed salvation (4.30)

Paul goes on to give his readers more information on how they can live a better and more successful life in God. **Don't bring sorrow to God's Holy Spirit by the way you live. Remember, He has identified you as His own, guaranteeing that you will be saved on the day of redemption.** The Holy Spirit is the guarantee that God's going to save the world that he so loves. He's going to "reconcile the world to himself" and he's not going to fail. God doesn't set out to save the world, but then at some point decides, "I tried as hard as I could, but these people are really hard to save. So I know, I'll torment them forever. That's what they deserve for rejecting me. How dare they!" Come on! No way. There's going to be a day of redemption. God's going to be successful. Everything that happens in the lives of people who have not yet gotten to know their Creator, it all has a purpose which God allows, knowing how he will keep on working in their lives until he accomplishes all he sent his son, Jesus, into the world to do.

As for these people who aren't coming to God yet, God has some purpose in keeping them there as long as he does. They're learning. They're learning even where they are in their temporary lost state. It looks like a waste of time, but it's not. It never is when God is involved, and he's always involved. They're learning what they need to learn in order to come to him. God is even asking them, "Why don't you come join me in wonderful fellowship? I've got a shortcut for you if you want to take it. But if you don't, I'll wait for you, help you on your journey toward me, and be there when you finally come home." Maybe they have

to go through things so that when they do get there, it'll mean so much more to them. Isn't that our story, too?

Someday, they'll say, "Wow, I needed to be away this long because if I'd come out of my lost state too soon, I wouldn't have appreciated my homecoming. Thank you, Lord, for working, waiting, and never forsaking me. You really do love me and you've proven it." Knowing this about God is why we can be patient with others on their journey, even when they are angry and mean. Even though we want them to come and know God now, God may allow a lot of them stay away for a long time, maybe their whole life, maybe until the end of life, maybe until they're in eternity. But then they will fall down (with the rest of us) and say, "Oh, I could have done it differently, but I wasn't ready. Thank you so much, God, for now that I see it all so clearly. I bow before you, Jesus is indeed *Lord*, and I love and appreciate you more than I ever did in life." So we have a confident hope for them, and for ourselves, based on who God is and his unfathomable, unconditional, undying love for his world.

So never give up, on yourself or anyone else. God never does! Don't let it become a burden to you, where it affects your life or your relationship with your friends, loved ones, and even strangers. We are all targets of God's love. If we're not careful we can get weighed down with burden for other people, to the point where it starts to own us. Instead, we should be realizing, "Hey, I know they're going to get there, even though I'd really like to see them know God today. But if they don't, I'm here for them just as God is." We need only to keep planting seeds and leave the rest in God's hands where it belongs. All of this helps to take a load off us.

Forgive as you have been forgiven (4.31)

Okay, one more verse from Paul in this impossible-to-do section of his letter. **Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior.** Well, that's a pretty thorough list. Covers just about everything, in principle. **Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, and forgiving one another.** Paul then adds this as the capstone of all he has said, **just as God, through Christ, has forgiven you!**

I remember reading this as a young Christian and thinking, “Whoa, wait a minute here. I need to forgive others? I don't want to.” But then I realized that the reason Paul gave was because God had forgiven me! Ouch! It was like Paul saying. “God forgave you, Carl. Look at all that he forgave you of. You can't turn around and forgive others for the puny little sins they do to you?” I, rightly, hung my head in my heart and I have never forgotten that moment.

People who have rejected Christ, who have not lived for him, and who have lived the way they want – they can't turn around and forgive others, even for little things because they have never really ever experienced forgiveness themselves. But if they ever do and experience forgiveness fully, it will be very hard for them to *not* forgive others. The contrast is just too great to miss! We can now easily forgive little things because we have been forgiven of bigger things. That's always been a verse that has given me a big perspective on life.

Again, this is not something we've got to do to stay out of big trouble with God. It's really just Paul's saying, “Let me give you a huge perspective in life that will help you so much to bring peace to your heart and heal your broken relationships with others!”

So when Paul tells us, “Be kind to each other and be tenderhearted,” it means that we don't have to be mean to others. They have their own shame and guilt to deal with. Just love and

forgive them, and in this way help them escape the bondage that they are in. When Paul tells us, “Forgive each other because God's forgiven you,” just forgive them! It's not easy, but it's not complicated either. Just emotionally walk away from it and say, “God, you take care of them and forgive them, and so I'll do the same.”

Choosing how we see life

Life is like a treadmill sometimes. But the good thing about this is it gets people thinking, “I gotta get off this treadmill. I'm not gonna do this anymore. This is crazy.” But they had to be on it, going like a hamster in a wheel until they finally wore themselves out. Usually, it's the desperation people reach that brings them to God. They complain, “I'm desperate,” and God says, “Good, now you're ready for me. Now that you've tried to do that long list of *do's and don'ts* and have failed, your eyes are now open to what life is all about. There isn't any real life apart from me. So, let's get together!” Once people reach the point where they realize they can't do life on their own – and even if they can, it becomes meaningless – then they are ready for God and experiencing life in its fullness. They are ready for grace.

There's a book called *The Normal Christian Life* by Watchman Nee, and it's a commentary on Paul's letter to the Romans. But in it, Nee reaches a point in the middle of his book where he says, “Once you figure out you can't do all this that Paul writes, you're ready for grace!” When I first read this it was such a relief because I'd been taught all my life that I was to strive (and never quit striving) to do all that is commanded in the New Testament. That's a lot of stuff ... too much for anyone to do.

In some ways, the so-called *commands* in the New Testament are designed to weigh us down until we realize we can't do them, and then they take on a new purpose. They make us realize, “Wait a minute, these aren't commands I gotta keep. These are things I

get to experience as God works in my life, as I live in the *new person* I am in Jesus, and step out of that *old person* of the flesh who I no longer really am.” That’s a whole different way of looking at Paul’s writings. Ephesians Four is really great stuff, but we have to choose to read it either legalistically, or as a delightful description of who we can expect to be in Christ. We can read it as our Declaration of Independence and our Statute of Liberty in Christ showing us what we can now experience walking in the Spirit. It all depends on what's going on in our hearts and our minds.

11. Live in the Light (Ephesians 5.1-9)

Okay, we're ready to start Ephesians Five. This part of Paul's letter gets kind of tricky because it deals with husbands and wives and relationships. But first, Paul wants to say some things about living in the light of all that God is.

Life filled with love (5.1)

Imitate God, therefore, in everything you do, because you are his dear children. Live a life filled with love following the example of Christ. He loved us and offered himself as a sacrifice for us, a pleasing aroma to God. Paul is referring to the Old Testament sacrifices, where they sacrificed animals; the smoke and aroma went up, and supposedly, it pleased God. So he's comparing what Jesus did in giving up his life on the cross to what the ancient Jews did to worship God through animal sacrifices. People were primitive in the Old Testament and they were very basic. They may have had a lot of misunderstandings about God and they were always trying to *appease* God in some way. They claim the idea of sacrificing animals was a requirement given to them by the Law of Moses. That could very well be, but it seems horribly violent, messy, and not a very good way to communicate God's love for his creation. Also, all of the surrounding nations engaged in such sacrificial systems, and it could be that these Old Testament Jews were following suit in

trying to appease the God they believed in. But either way, Paul is making this comparison, using terms that people with a Jewish background could understand and relate to. His point is that what Jesus did for all humanity by dying on the cross was pleasing to God because he was taking the sin of humanity on himself and away from people. It is the ultimate sacrifice and one that demonstrates ultimate love by acting in the best interest of those he loves. This is Paul's point, and it is a good one.

However, in my study over the years, I never found that in the Old Testament, God originally came up with the idea of animal sacrifice. When I read from Genesis all the way up to Exodus, where the Law was introduced, I couldn't find one time that God said, go do a sacrifice. It was always people who initiated it. Abraham went and instinctively made an altar to God because it's man's nature to think he has to appease God, thinking God's up there angry and we gotta make him happy. So we have this history of people feeling guilty about their sin, and feeling like they gotta do something to please God. They always seemed to feel they had to give something up, that they had to sacrifice something important. It got so bad in Israel, that they started sacrificing their own children to God to try to appease him. But God told them it was totally wrong and judged them for it. In fact, the place where they carried out these disgusting practices was in a valley just south of Jerusalem. It was known as the "Valley of the Son of Hinnom" and eventually became known as *Gehenna*. Jesus made reference to this several times when he taught. But almost all modern-day translations render *gehenna* as "hell" in order to support their hell and damnation theology. This subject is worth looking into and is very eye-opening!

A pleasing sacrifice

People tend to think they've got to make some kind of sacrifice to please God. In the New Testament, where the writers

tried to put things in terms that human beings could understand, they used this sacrifice idea to convey what Jesus did on the cross. But it could be that God was saying through them, “If you think you need a sacrifice (as you always have in the past) then I’ll provide you with one. I’ll send my son, and he will be a sacrifice that *you* will make by crucifying him. I will use this as my way of proving that I have taken away your sin, something you could never do on your own. It will be an act of love on my part.”

Some people have concluded that when Jesus died on the cross, he was being sacrificed by the Father. The idea is that God the Father poured his wrath out on his pure, innocent son instead of on all of us guilty sinners. In doing so, this supposedly satisfied God who is required to punish (inflict some kind of pain and suffering) on anyone who sins without repenting. Therefore (if all of this is true), God must do this retaliation to regain his honor, which we, as sinners, robbed him of. This concept of Christ’s atonement is called Penal Substitutionary Atonement, and it came from Anselm in the Middle Ages.

But this seems absolutely backward and wrong. God did not sacrifice his son on the cross ... we did! Jesus was *our* sacrifice. If God wanted to bring wrath down on humanity as punishment for their sin, he could have done it when they crucified Jesus. Instead, God was effectively saying, “Go ahead and kill my son. I’m gonna love you anyway. I’m letting you kill him in order to prove to you that I don’t solve my problems with violence. That’s the kind of thing you humans would do! I solve my problems with love. So, I will solve your sin problems by self-sacrificing, by giving my son, showing that I love you.” So those are two very different views of Christ’s atonement (his death on the cross). That first view is very popular today in most Catholic and Protestant churches – that Jesus “took the bullet” from the Father who was shooting at us in anger because of our sin.

But the other view, which seems far superior and consistent with a God who is love, is that Jesus got in the way of the bullet shot at us by our sin, trying to kill us. And so, the “bullet of sin” hit Jesus instead of hitting us. He took away our sin that was killing us and ruining us. He, in effect, was saying, “I’m gonna take that away from you so that you can live forever with me.”

Sex and greed (5.3)

Paul now discusses some moral issues. **Let there be no sexual immorality, impurity, or greed among you.** Yeah, right. I’m afraid there always is, but Paul wants us to avoid it if possible. **Such sins have no place among God’s people.** Sin should have no place among Christians, and yet it finds a place anyway because we are sinful by our nature. Sometimes, sin takes place all the way to the top level of churches. No one is automatically exempt. I’ve attended a particular church for 45 years, and over that time period, two of the senior pastors involved themselves in sexual immorality. Behind the scenes, they were living a hypocritical, double life while actively carrying out their pastoral duties. Two other very prominent lay leaders in the same church also fell into sexual misconduct. It deeply hurt the whole church and severely hurt the young people who looked up to them.

This is why Paul exhorts his readers to not allow this kind of behavior. He knew how terribly destructive it was. It’s not that this kind of thing can be prevented by the congregation or by other leaders. But I think Paul is appealing to the conscience of each person who reads his letter, encouraging each one of them to make sure they are not the ones to create this kind of problem in the church. This is really the only level – on a personal one – that immorality, impurity, and greed can be prevented. It’s not so much a group decision (although it includes this) but more of an

individual responsibility. We each have an individual responsibility to each other as the *body* of Christ.

Paul then adds to his list, **Obscene stories, foolish talk, and coarse jokes.** We've all encountered this – like the *guy talk* in the locker room, and I imagine that the girls have their own version of this kind of talk. We all tend to be immature, careless people when it comes to using our tongues, especially when we are young. James has a lot to say about the ill-use of our tongue in his New Testament letter. But at some point we need to grow up and bring words that are edifying and encouraging, not silly or destructive words. Most people, make this journey as they emerge into adulthood. But some don't, and some don't want to. They remain impressed (and maybe even feel empowered) by using cheap and valueless speech. Some of the worst in society are certain political figures. Not all of them, but a few stoop to lazy and worthless speech, perhaps for shock value or worse to inflame the existing anger in their followers to keep them faithful in a cynical way. But Paul desires something much better for his readers because he (like James) knows that our speech can be a very good or very destructive thing.

These things are not for you, Paul says in conclusion. He wants them to rise up above such nonsense and be a shining example of who Jesus was and exemplify the love of God. I remember in Junior High engaging in some such foolish talk. I guess it was new and I was impressing myself. But by the time I was in high school, I decided I didn't want to be that kind of person. It wasn't that I was a Bible reader or a strong Christian, but I was raised in a Christian home, and something told me that this was not the kind of person I wanted to be. I assume it was God already at work in me long before I was even seeking him, praying, or studying the Bible. He's always at work with everyone! Count on it. How can he not? I was just a kid who was going to

church and lived in a Christian family, and God was telling me (as Paul does in this letter), “These things are not for you!” Somehow, I got through two and a half years in the Army and did not pick up the habit of using cheap and foul language. It just didn’t seem to fit who I wanted to be.

Let there be thankfulness (5.4b)

Paul now turns to the positive side of things. **Instead, let there be thankfulness to God.** Thankfulness may very well be the best kind of speech we can give. Not only does it honor God, but it is the best investment you can make in your soul. In one of Paul’s letters to the Thessalonians he encouraged them to “give thank in all things.” All things? Notice that Paul did not say to *feel* thankful. In many circumstances in life, we do not at all feel thankful because that is an emotional response. Emotions are, for the most part, outside of our will. What Paul is saying is to give thanks! This is an act of our will and we can choose to do it no matter how we feel. The beauty of this distinction is that when we give thanks for all things, it changes our perspective and our heart, we begin to see things as God does, and that will, eventually, change how we feel. But it takes time!

Paul now turns his attention to the consequences of our foolish actions and speech. **You can be sure that no immoral, impure, or greedy person will inherit the kingdom of Christ and of God.** There are at least two ways to look at this. You can look at it and conclude that immoral, greedy, and impure persons will be rejected by God because of their sin and will be separated from God and tormented in hell, forever. Many people will immediately take it this way. For them, God is saying, “You’re not going to make it. I’m cutting you out. You’ve got to do better than that to make it into my kingdom.”

But there is another way of looking at it. It could be God saying, “You know what? I’m so successful in saving this world that I created; by the time I get done with humanity, there’s not going to be anyone who is impure, immoral, or greedy. This is because my saving work, through Jesus taking away the sin of the world, will be so successful that everyone will be reconciled to me and will inherit my kingdom! I’m going to save everyone, just as I planned to from before the world began. It’s all part of my *mysterious plan revealed.*” This is a positive, optimistic view of God and his kingdom instead of a negative, defeated view where only a few persons out of all humanity make the cut and are saved.

If this is the correct view of God’s kingdom it’s because he’s going to save everyone, change everyone, and make the whole universe pure, good, and right (just). So there won’t be any greedy, immoral, or impure persons in the kingdom of God. He will not allow it and that’s why he changes, restores, redeems, and reconciles everyone. How could God ever settle for, or be satisfied with anything less? Otherwise, nobody would make it. Everybody’s a little bit impure, greedy, and immoral. We’ve all got some of that going on. So nobody would make it outside of God sending his son to save the world (and not condemn it) making us clean and pure by *his* doing and not ours. This is the essence of salvation by grace!

But Paul goes on and says that **A greedy person is an idolater, worshiping the things of this world.** And that’s true. That’s who they are. That’s how bad these things are, proving all the more how badly we need to be saved from our sins and from ourselves. Only God can do this. In fact, he *will* do this! One of the newer translations of the Bible is called “The Mirror Bible.” It is on the more flexible end of the translation scale. It is really a paraphrase with a little commentary mixed in. (See the preface of this commentary for a brief explanation of translations). It translates verse five this way, “Christ’s life gives a distinct

definition to the kingdom of God. You cannot live a double-standard life. Abusing people through adultery, lust, and greed is like worshiping a distorted image of yourself, which is what idolatry is all about.”

Entering the Kingdom of God

Most people think that when the *Kingdom of God* is mentioned in the New Testament, it's some future, eternal thing. And it is true that God's kingdom (his realm) extends into eternity because it must. However, according to Jesus in the Gospel, the Kingdom of God had more to do with the present time frame. Jesus said the kingdom is *near* you, *within* you, and that it is *at hand*. For him, it was not just some future eternal state of being. So it makes sense that Paul was effectively saying, “No one can, and therefore never will, enter the Kingdom of God (his realm) while they're in any kind of sinful state (like immoral, impure, or greedy). No one can be in that state of mind and enter into God's Kingdom, which is where we enjoy fellowship with God and other people.

That's probably the greater meaning that Paul's talking about. Notice that he says that such persons *will* not enter the kingdom. It may be more about what a person *wills* to do or not than what God allows. Paul's not saying God's not going to let them in. They won't let themselves in! They can't because of what they're doing and how they choose to live. So it is true of us when we're living in our old, sinful nature (having stepped out of the new person we are in Christ), we can't enter into that wonderful relationship with God, in his kingdom, because of our own limitation.

But God's going to eventually overcome that. It's just tragic that some people never do experience this in this life, or at best they finally get it worked out later in life. Some people don't even get around to getting their act together until later in life, but often they do by God's grace. So, it's not true that if we don't get right

with God, don't live right, and don't believe right, that God will torment us forever as punishment in pure retaliation with no corrective purpose. Just the opposite is true. God will be determined all the more to save us, restore us, and make us whole – through whatever means it takes – so that we will live with him forever just as he planned to do before he even created the world!

Don't be fooled (5.6)

Paul's plot now thickens. **Don't be fooled by those who try to excuse these sins.** Okay, that's good advice. Many people are fooled by sin and also fooled by those who come up with excuses. You can always find someone who will help you excuse your sin. Usually, they are excusing their own sin, too. But this will get you nowhere fast. Sin cannot be excused; it can only be denied. God wants better for us.

For the anger of God will fall on those who disobey him. Okay, here we go with the anger of God again. It comes up occasionally in the Bible. When God is angry, it's not a bad thing because all legitimate anger is rooted in love. When we really love somebody, and they're messing up their lives by doing less than they can, it makes us angry and motivates us to say, "I love that person, and I'm going to do all I can to help them do better." So, when we sin, God is angry because he wants better for us. He never hates us for sinning. However, God doesn't just pat us on the head and say, "Okay, if you want to sin, go ahead. I don't care."

He gets angry because he wants better for us, even more than we want it. He is saying something like, "No, I'm not going to allow this. I'm going to bring discipline. I'm going to bring correction. I'm going to work to redeem you from your fallen state. I'm going to bring restoration into your life no matter what it takes. I'm angry, but it's because I created you, and I love you!"

So the anger of God is a good thing. It's a righteous, correct anger and dissatisfaction toward us. But it's really dissatisfaction with what's going on in our life and he wants better for us. He won't give up until we are healed and made whole. This is the same kind of anger I had toward my kids when they were doing things to hurt themselves. When they disobeyed me, it made me angry, but it was always my love in action saying, "I'm going to do whatever it takes to help you be a better person." I got this correct attitude from God, who always loves me, and is motivated in his anger to make me better.

live as people of light (5.7)

Don't participate in these things that people do. For once you were full of darkness, but now you have light from the Lord. So live as people of light. And, of course, by *light*, he means seeing things clearly. It's like being in a dark room where you can't see anything, and then you turn the light on and say, "Wow, now I can see everything!" I was raised in a Christian home so I wasn't living in total darkness because of the good influence on me. But when I came to know God, I just saw things more clearly. The light had come on. I was about twenty-two and I will never forget it. Some people come out of total darkness into the light and they're just astonished. I mean, it is like darkness and light in extreme difference. So Paul rightly concluded, "Once you were full of darkness, but now you have light from the Lord. So live as people of the light."

This light within you produces only what is good and right and true. And, of course, that's "Christ in you, the hope of glory." That's what Paul wrote in his letter to the Colossians. When God indwells us by his Spirit, we sense his presence. He's there in everybody, but it's not an active experience for everyone because they shun him. But when he's actively engaged in our

lives (when we receive him, when we allow him), it “produces only what is good and right and true.” Good as opposed to bad, right as opposed to wrong, and true as opposed to false. This is what God’s light produces in us when we seek him and let him. When we don’t, he still loves us, will keep working in our lives, and will never leave, forsake, or give up on us because he will “finish the good work he started in us,” as Paul wrote in his letter to the Philippians.

12. Power of the Spirit (Ephesians 5.10-20)

A careful determination (5.10)

Carefully determine what pleases the Lord. It's a fine line between *appeasing the gods* and *pleasing the Lord*. Appeasing is living in fear, guilt, and shame always concluding, "I gotta do something for God." Pleasing is knowing God loves you, you are so thankful for it, and you want to live your life in a way that he is pleased by showing your love back to him. Big difference. Appeasement is a natural response we have when living in our old sinful nature. Pleasing is what we learn to do after we have become a new creation in Christ and are living as the new person we now are in him.

Appeasing means we have to prove to God that we really mean business. We think giving up (sacrificing) important things will impress God and win his favor. The Jews (along with the nations around them) got caught up in literally sacrificing (killing and burning) their precious little babies to the gods. What a distorted and sick view of God that developed in their ignorant state of thinking God needed to be appeased, failing to see, experience, or understand his love for them. This is why Jesus had to come and die on the cross – to prove to all humanity that God so loves them and is willing to allow us to kill his son in anger without God retaliating in violence. Instead, he only

responded with arms held out wide and open, saying, “Come to me, all of you who are heavy with burdens, and I will give you rest.” God is the only one who wants to do this and he’s the only one who can!

Like our kids who want to please us as parents, we want to please God and say, “Hey, Daddy, I love you, and I want to do things that make you proud of me and please you.” But in reality, God is pleased with us when we experience a better life due to our good attitude and behavior. God doesn’t say, “It’s about time you shaped up, got into line, and quit being a dirty rotten sinner. Okay, now I will love you. But you better keep on doing this, or I’ll quit loving you and punish you forever in hell!” No, instead he’s saying, “Yay, good job, welcome home. This is great. We’re making progress in your life.” That’s God’s attitude. So Paul said, “Carefully determine what pleases God.” What pleases him is what is best for us! Nothing less. It’s all about us, not about him. He only wants us to make it about him for *our* benefit and well-being; this is what love does and how it operates.

Don't take part in evil (5.11)

Paul then makes a pretty obvious statement. **Don't take part in evil and evil deeds.** It’s amazing that he actually thought he needed to tell anyone this. But there are some people who need to hear this. They are so corrupt they do not instinctively know what is right. **Instead, expose them.** Never be neutral about things that are obviously evil. This does not mean reacting to every detail in life where you disagree with others. Sometimes, they just have a different take on life, it makes you uncomfortable, and it's not something you would do. This doesn’t make it evil. But there are things in life that are evil, and almost everyone agrees that they are (sometimes even those who engage in them and they do it anyway). Just point it out clearly for what it is. But, you don't have to be mean to people when you do this. Often,

you can say, without judging them, “That's not something that works for me in my walk with God. But I love you anyway, and I'm always willing to talk or help you do what *you know* to be right.” But don't just keep your mouth shut, either. Always ask God when it's time to speak up, and when to shut up!

It is shameful even to talk about the things that ungodly people do in secret, People often do their sins in secret. I mentioned the pastors at my church over the past 45 years, that were involved in sexual immorality behind the scenes. They were doing it in secret. But usually, secrets like this don't stay secret. I don't know how they thought they could get away with it. I think people let themselves get into situations where they start *babysitting* a little problem. It starts with a little flirt, then a fling, and pretty soon, their emotions and passions are engaged, and then they cross a line they never thought they would. The key is that they didn't step away while it was still easy – as soon as they realized what was happening. Babysitting a temptation is very dangerous.

They all got there one step at a time. But I think that religious people often place so much focus on sin that it's also their orientation. I don't mean they sin a lot, only that they pay a lot of attention to it, how much other people engage in it, and making sure they do not fall into it. That's a lot of focus. Sometimes it is more than the amount of focus they give to the solution of just focusing on God. Unfortunately, it is a human trait that what we focus on most can entice us the most. It's interesting that the two pastors who got caught up in immorality were both missionary kids, raised with a lot of legalism and focusing on how bad sin is. I cannot say if this had any effect on their decision-making, but anyone can get into the *try and try and try to not sin* loop, needing to bust out and cross a line. Church background, seminary training, and pastoral positions are no guarantee of staying away from foolish behavior.

That's what too much *law* can do to people. It sometimes drives people to sin because of the overfocus on it instead of engaging in the freedom from the law that comes with knowing God and living in him. The Holy Spirit present in our life is really the answer.

Perhaps Paul understood this principle of focusing on the solution of God in our life and not focusing on sin, spending all our energy trying not to sin, when he wrote, "It's shameful to even talk about the things ungodly people do in secret."

When the light shines (5.13)

But their evil intentions will be exposed when the light shines on them. That's true, evil is exposed when we shine light on it. This is metaphorical light, not literal light. This kind of light is all around us in life. It is simply the truth about who God is (in any situation) that brings us a new perspective. We need only open our eyes (again, metaphorical eyes) and see what God is showing us. Light comes in many forms, persons, ideas, words, situations, memories, convictions, beliefs, and experiences. And that is the shortlist. Think of all the different ways God shows you the light. It includes reading the Bible, but *the light* is far from limited to just that source, as some people seem to think.

Keep in mind it is not our job to go around trying to shine the light of truth on people, acting as God's fruit inspectors and calling out everybody who's sinful. The best light that shines on people is the light that God brings into their lives, in his way and in his time. Often all we need to do is be there for people, be a living example the best we can, and love them when they begin to see the light God brings. We don't need to pile on and talk about how horrible they are or how much they are sinning, and what the consequences will be. They usually know this. But sometimes this kind of discussion with them is in order, but only when they are ready.

After Paul says, “Their evil intentions will be exposed when the light shines on them,” he adds, **For the light makes everything visible. This is why it is said, ‘Awake, O sleeper, rise up from the dead, and Christ will give you light.’** And so Paul affirms that the solution of God bringing light, and brings it in the form of Christ’s presence in our lives. That should be our focus and not our sin, or the practice of trying harder and harder to not sin. When we trust God, focus on him, live in the new person we are in Christ, and walk in the Spirit ... the problem of sin tends to take care of itself!

Be careful how you live (5.15)

So be careful how you live. This seems like an obvious conclusion after talking about all the foolish and evil things people can fall into. Then Paul writes, **Don't live like fools.** Notice that Paul's not coming down on anyone with some kind of threat. He's not saying, “Be careful how you live, or you will be condemned and go to hell forever.” Paul never brings this kind of threat (which is so popular with many legalistic religious people) in any of his letters. In fact, you'll never find this anywhere in the New Testament. Instead, Paul exhorts them not to live like fools because the consequences of doing so are not retaliation by God but a messed up life full of stress, anguish, and failure. God wants us to avoid this and live in the peace and security of knowing him. And so Paul offers the only real alternative, **but live like those who are wise and make the most of every opportunity in these evil days.** These days are evil, too, not just back in Paul's day. But this is a good reason to be wise and careful in how we live. **Don't act thoughtlessly, but understand what the Lord wants you to do.** That goes with what he said above, to “Carefully determine what pleases the Lord.” Of course, such a determination is highly personal. It can

be a little different for everyone. Find out what God has for you. It may be quite different from what he has for other people. Don't put your determination on them and don't let them put theirs on you! God customizes his will for each person. However, there are certain principles that apply to everyone. These are presented clearly and repeatedly in the New Testament. Study it carefully.

There are certain things God wants everybody to do, and there are certain things God doesn't want anyone to do. For example, in the case of my pastors who were living a double life of sexual immorality, God doesn't want that for anyone. There's never any situation where that's okay. Sometimes, God wants us to speak up and talk to someone, and other times, he might want us to shut up and stay out of the way. We can really complicate things when we get this wrong, either way. Sometimes we just need to talk with God and say, "Let me know when to speak up and when to shut up, when to act or not act, give people money or withhold it." He will let us know in his own unique way if we're listening to him.

When and how to help others

You may be blessed with more money at some time in your life and you might feel you should help other people. This is, generally, a good thing and is something Jesus and Paul both advocated. But we must be careful. We can give people money indiscriminately and it can interfere with what God's doing in their life. More often than not, God's solution is not "more money" for people. However, other times it can be. This is where a degree of discernment and prayer makes a difference. Don't just hand out money because people seem to need it. I'm not saying don't help to meet their needs, but be careful how, when, and why you do it. Really think it through, get to know them, and find out what's going on in their life to make sure you are really helping

them and not just enabling them. It is important that we help people for the right reasons and in the right way. This can only be discerned by taking it to God and asking him to show you what to do.

This does not mean we should stand by idly and watch people desperately go under, and say, “Well, I guess you’re learning your lesson. I can’t help you!” We should always be ready to help someone in need. But also, it is an opportunity to show we love them and that God loves them, too. Get to know them; be a faithful friend. But if we are always removing every bit of pressure someone experiences due to their own stubbornness and foolishness, especially when they are unwilling to change – or at least try to change – then we end up enabling them and we possibly remove the natural consequences that God has built into life to make them think and turn to him. I’m not saying let them fail, but sometimes the tension in life makes them think things through and we’re there to help them and encourage them.

Let’s suppose someone got themselves into debt. If we paid their debt off and said, “Your debt is paid,” that would be a nice thing to do. But it’s probable they wouldn’t learn any self-discipline and would likely go right back into debt again. But there could be another (more unique situation) where paying off someone’s debt in full would be the best thing to do. Jesus paid our debt in full, didn’t he? It takes discernment, prayer, and experience to know what’s best. So we must be careful with money and helping people. In one situation, God might say, “Go help them.” In other one, he might say, “Just be there for them.” I’ve had people come to me and say, I need some money. I usually tell them, “Well, you know, money’s not really your problem. It’s certainly not your *ultimate* problem. You have other things going on. Let’s talk about them. Why are you in debt? How can I help you think through your budget and spending habits?” So, Paul rightly warns his readers, “Be careful how you live. Don’t live like fools, but like those who are wise. Make the most of every

opportunity in these evil days. Don't act thoughtlessly, but understand what the Lord wants you to do.”

Don't get drunk (5.18)

Don't be drunk with wine because that will ruin your life. It will ... if you get drunk a lot and consistently. If you get drunk once, learn your lesson or a few times, it probably won't kill you, and you might get away with it. It probably won't ruin your life unless you run into someone with your car and kill them. Notice Paul doesn't say, “Don't drink wine.” I came from a background where some people thought people shouldn't drink at all. They are also sure that Jesus made *new* wine (grape juice). If Paul wanted to prohibit alcohol consumption, he would have said so. This is a good example of where some people try to make the New Testament say more than it actually says, in order to support their personal convictions. The opposite problem of not letting it say everything it does is just as dangerous. The bottom line is that this and many other behaviors are up to each person to decide with (or without) God. Paul's point seems to be “Don't be controlled by any substance.” As a principle, it seems to cover much more than just alcohol.

The proof of Paul's point is found in what he wrote next. **Instead, be filled with the Holy Spirit.** Let the Spirit of God be that good and proper controlling influence in your life. It will always be perfect control because it is done by a person who loves you and wants the best for you. That is much different from a substance that cannot think or care in any way as it controls your body and mind. You could put pot in there, prescription drugs, or anything else that controls you. They all tend to be poor and impersonal substitutes for the Spirit of God who lives in you.

This is not to say never have a glass of wine to relax, have a beer with your pizza, or even take a prescription drug when

carefully prescribed by a doctor who is working with you in your best interest. There are prescription drugs that some people have to take to keep them from going over the edge. It's like an *emotional band-aid*, but they can be abused. However, this idea by some Christians is that you should never take any drugs. I don't know if that's practical or realistic. God made them for some good purpose and they should only be used in that way. They should be taken with great care, always seeking to be filled with the Spirit as the very best controller of our lives.

Recently I had a long-time friend call me. He had been on pot and cigarettes most of his adult life and decided to go off both of them. That is very noble and I appreciated his desire to do what is best for his health and to honor God. But now he's really struggling. He said, "I wanna go back on them." So, I told him, "Hey bro, maybe, there's something in between all the way on and all the way off. Maybe you can go to a doctor and get some cannabis oil and take just a little bit of it. Maybe it'll give you some relief without being fully dependent." He was experiencing a lot of anxiety. I've been there, and it is one of the worst things to go through. I suggested the same approach for cigarettes – nicotine patches that can be regulated and decreased. The bottom line is that sometimes there is no easy way, and we have to suffer, endure, and trust God to find our way through a really difficult situation. The point is that we are not necessarily more spiritual if we don't take any drugs whatsoever, right? We're not necessarily carnal if we do it for some good reason. We need to be realistic about life and the way God made it. It all has a good purpose, but sometimes we don't see it until we get through it. This is often something we will not understand until God takes us home and explains it. And someday he will!

Sing songs! (5.19)

After telling his readers to, “instead, be filled with the Holy Spirit,” he adds some other good things to engage in that will enhance our relationship with God and others around us. **Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves.** You can even do this by yourself. Sometimes, I sing in the car, and people catch me. Oops! **And making music to the Lord in your hearts.** Sometimes it's just in your heart that you will sing. You don't even have to be a good singer because you use your head and not your vocal cords. Have you ever done this? Just make music to the Lord in your own mind, your own heart, and in your whole being. **Give thanks in everything to God, who is Father, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.**

13. Wives & Husbands (Ephesians 5.21-33)

Submit to each other (5.21)

Notice how Paul starts this section of his letter concerning husbands and wives. **Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.** Instead of jumping right into what husbands and wives are supposed to do, he establishes, overall, that we all need to submit to one another. This applies to husbands and wives, too. This is particularly interesting because he focuses on wives submitting to their husbands when he addresses their role in marriage. Perhaps he wants to make sure that his readers understand, even before he begins, that submission (in the right way and for the right reason) is something we all should do in respect for each other! It's not really about wives submitting to husbands or husbands submitting to wives but being subject to each other in different ways, at different times, and in different situations, keeping in mind that Jesus is the one who gives all relationships meaning.

I remember, years ago, someone asking my wife and I (in a Facebook post, perhaps) what our secret was to staying married (as we have for 49 years now). There are a host of answers that can be given, and I'm sure it is different for everyone. My answer was that there are two things that come to mind. First is realizing there's something bigger than both of us. For me that would be

God, and that kind of puts everything in perspective. Now, it doesn't solve all our problems, but it takes us a long way down the road and keeps us from asserting ourselves (either of us) too far above the other in any situation. We are equal before God! This keeps everything in check, at least to some degree.

The other thing for me, that is important in staying married, is to appreciate the other person, including the many differences we may have – and in any marriage, these can be big. After all these many years of marriage, I must admit I have not figured out my wife. But I don't think I am supposed to! I'm sure she feels this way about me. What I learned early on in our marriage – and it was something I had to learn, it didn't come easy but it turned out to be key. I discovered that even though I did not understand how she thinks and why she feels and decides as she does, she provides what is missing in me! That's exactly why I do not fully understand her. So, I began, by faith, believing God had not made a mistake in creating marriage and to look for how our differences are really an advantage to both of us. Had we been exactly the same, or had we lived separate lives, we would not have grown and gained as we did together. Don't get me wrong, this was often not easy, but I knew it was right. This allowed me to settle into what God was doing, not overreact (at least not too badly), and experience a much better marriage than I would have had otherwise. I only wish I could have done this better, but at least I realized this important principle about appreciating in my wife what she brings that is missing in me!

So Paul starts this section about husbands and wives with, “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” And to the degree that anyone in a marriage can do this and let it be the overarching perspective is probably also how successful they will be. However, a lot of people get divorced and I've found that *some* people in these broken relationships have done everything they could, on their end, to make it work. It takes two to make a

relationship work and only one to prevent it. However, we all contribute in some way and to some degree, when a relationship does not work out. The fault is not always equal. Sometimes the person they were married to had serious problems that no one could endure. Just because a person stays married doesn't mean they did it better than those who didn't. They may have just been very fortunate. Who among us can say they really knew the other person when they married them? Even those who stayed married look back and admit, "I didn't really know that person very well because it took many years." They may have just been very fortunate and blessed to have somebody else on the other end who's at least reasonable to work with. I think this is all good to keep in mind, so we won't fall into judging others who had a different experience. But also, keep in mind that God is never disadvantaged by anything in our lives, even divorce as ugly and painful as it usually is. He is always at work, using everything that happens to make us all better persons that are his workmanship. We are his masterpiece, and we will all see this clearly in eternity; it will be a joyous day when all things will be made right. Only God can and will pull this off!

Submit as you would to God? (5.22)

Paul addresses the wives first, but he only uses three verses to do so (22-24). Then, when he addresses the husbands, he uses six verses for them (25-30). So, maybe the guys have a tougher job in their role as husbands, or more likely, they're a little thicker-skulled and require twice as much information before they get it. Here is what Paul says to wives about their role in *mutual submission*, **For wives, this means submit to your husbands as to the Lord.** Oh, wow. Wait a minute. Wives are to submit to their husbands like they would to God? That seems like a formula for abuse! And, sadly, in the history of Christianity, it sometimes has been. A man sees a verse like this and can think, "Man, oh

man, I'm in charge, and my wife has to do everything my way.” Keep in mind that these first three verses are written to wives for them to consider. They are not written to the husbands so they can make sure their wives are living up to their instructions. The guys will get their verses and there will be plenty for them to chew on. And, in the same way, the wives need not read the verses addressed to the husbands just so they can ensure their compliance with Paul's words. In other words, everybody read your own mail that has been addressed to you and don't worry about the other person's mail.

Paul continues his advice to wives. **For the husband is the head of his wife as Christ's head of the church. He is the Savior of his body, the church. As the church submits to Christ, so wives should submit to their husbands in everything.**

Now, that's a pretty strong statement. If you take it literally, then wives would just have to do whatever their husbands say no matter what. There are religious people who believe that and try to live that way. There are husbands that pull rank and there are wives who are convinced that they should take this to an extreme in order to obey God! I've seen wives try to do this and actually take abuse, either physical or verbal, in the name of submitting to their husbands and obeying God. Sometimes, they are told, “You're going to be rewarded for obeying this command from God, and God honors you for it.” Well, that could very well be, but each wife needs to decide if this is what it really means. But it turns out that Paul has something to say to husbands that seems to bring a careful balance and help in avoiding extremes

I don't think Paul means it quite the way it appears at first sight. Don't forget that Paul has already established an overarching perspective of equal submission to each other! This should never be dismissed. There's a reason why Paul stated this

upfront. So, husbands have no grounds for abusing Paul's words to fulfill their selfish desires.

Keep in mind that Paul lived in a male-dominated culture and perhaps he brought some of his legalistic, Old Testament influence with him into what he writes. Perhaps also, when Paul addresses wives in this letter, he may be dealing with what he thinks they struggle with the most in marriage. (Paul will have a different topic of struggle for the husbands.)

It's not that wives are *only* supposed to do what he says here, and husbands are *only* supposed to do what he says later. Maybe he's dealing with the pressure points for each marriage partner.

Love as Christ loved? (5.25)

Paul now turns his attention to husbands and gives them advice. As he did in his advice to wives, he may be addressing husbands in the area of their greatest struggle. For wives, it was respecting their husbands, and for husbands, it was loving their wives, as we shall see next.

Paul says to husbands, **For husbands, this means** (mutual submission means) **love your wives, just as Christ loved the church**. Paul has something very different to tell husbands. He could have said, "Husbands, you also need to submit to your wives," but he didn't. However, they should already know this to be true based on Paul's opening remarks about *mutual* submission. Paul asks of the husbands an impossible task for anyone. Love as Christ loves? No one can really do that. Yet this is what Paul sets as a goal for husbands, and probably because this is where they struggle the most. Wives struggle most with respecting their husbands, whereas husbands struggle most with loving their wives. It's not that wives never respect, or that husbands never love, only that these are possibly the most difficult tasks for each of them. According to Paul, a wife is to submit to her husband as she would to God (the Lord) This seems like an impossible task,

especially considering that husbands do not always earn the respect of their wives. Also, according to Paul, a husband is to love his wife as Christ loves the church. That is definitely an impossible task because no one can love to that degree. I don't know which job is harder, but they're both difficult. They're both hard. I suspect that Paul observed that women struggle more with respecting and submitting to their husbands, and men struggle more with loving their wives. However, I also suspect that Paul knew that men are supposed to submit (mutually) to their wives and that women are to love their husbands. The areas where husbands and wives each struggle are not areas that are exclusive to each!

Paul continues his advice to husbands as he explains how Christ's love for the church works. **He gave his life up for her to make her holy and clean, washed by cleansing of God's word.**

Now, it's not the job of a husband to make his wife holy and clean – that's God's job. But in light of how Christ loves the church, husbands should let this be their supreme example of how to love their wives. They should be willing to, literally and figuratively, give up their lives for their wives. And, frankly, the figurative aspect is harder than the literal one. A husband would only have to give up his life once, literally, but would have to do it constantly, daily, in the figurative sense! Their role is to be a protector and always act in their best interest ... just as Christ does for all of us. That's a huge task and the best any man can do is only to put a small dent in it. But perhaps it's the mindset of desiring to do this that really counts.

This is what real love is about. It's not just kissing and hugging, feeling good, and going to Disneyland together. It usually means giving up certain things. It's acting in the best interest of the other person, and husbands and wives are both supposed to do this. They don't just get to do whatever they want.

When they love each other in this way, they will have the best marriage possible.

No spot, wrinkle, or blemish (5.27)

Paul goes on and says that **Christ did this to present her to himself as a glorious church without a spotter wrinkle or any other blemish. And so, she will be holy and without fault.** That's what Christ does for the church. A husband can't literally do that for his wife. He can't really present his wife as *holy and perfect*. That's God's job and it is better left to him. But a husband does need to act in his wife's best interest (as Christ did for the church), to give her every opportunity to flourish, blossom, bloom, be creative, enjoy life, be a good mom, have friends, and be a good wife to the husband who loves her.

Paul even takes it further. **In the same way, husbands ought to love their wives as they love their own bodies.** Well, there you go. All men put effort into looking good and ensuring their own comfort. We all do! But Paul's giving them some practical advice here. "Guys, you know how much you love yourself and you really care for yourself? At least love your wife as much as you love and care for yourself. Take care of her." This was a big problem in that culture because women were second class. They were to have babies and cook meals, and they really weren't seen as equals. They were just kind of *there* and had some functionality. So Paul is really saying something revolutionary in that day. In other words, he was elevating women in the eyes of an established male-dominated culture.

I'm sure most people back then read this and thought, "You're out of your mind. Women? Oh sure. They're not supposed to speak. They're not supposed to do things. They're not supposed to exist except to have babies, cook meals, and be there for us guys." But there were also some strong women in the

New Testament, and Jesus affirmed them. Some of them were his most faithful followers,

If Jesus came today, he might choose men *and* women to be his disciples. Actually, he did indirectly, even though they were not included in his official twelve. I'm only guessing at this point, but he may have chosen only men to be his official disciples because, in that culture, women were not allowed to be in any position of authority. Jesus had a mission to accomplish bringing the Good News message about himself to the world, and trying to solve the problem of inequality among the sexes was not to be solved at that time. That problem would take time, but it was the very gospel that Jesus was bringing that would, eventually, make the sexes equal in Christ. Paul wrote in his letter to the Galatians, "There is no male or female in Christ," making them equal before God. It took time for liberty, freedom, tolerance, and respect to grow, too. So, in that culture, Jesus allowed the male dominance thing to prevail, but only so that he could bring the Good News message that would, eventually, change the whole world!

Remember, the ladies were the first ones at the tomb. The ladies were supportive of Jesus in a very special way, at his feet in a very good way, serving him and following him in a way that they were a prime example of discipleship to the men. Sometimes it was a struggle for the guys to come in and embrace Jesus in this same way. So Jesus didn't try to accomplish everything in his day. He kept his focus on doing the work his Father had given him to do, bringing the Good News to a fallen world desperately in need of love, knowing that someday it will result in all things being made right by God.

So, it's not that Jesus favored men and only wanted men in his inner circle. He obviously had women there, too. But perhaps he didn't make it official so that it wouldn't be a social distraction that would hinder the Good News from going out.

Paul then adds, **For a man who loves his wife actually shows love for himself.** So Paul ties the two together. If you really love yourself, you'll love your wife. If you love your wife, then that means you love yourself in the right way, that you love who you are in Christ because God loves you. Love is always in the context of our identity of who we are in Christ.

It seems like there is a reasonable limit to what a woman should have to go through. Notice that if she's supposed to submit to her husband, as unto Christ, then she should only have to submit to him if he is a loving authority. This would mean submitting to somebody who is caring, nurturing, and protecting just as Christ does for the church. So if they don't have a man who is like Christ, at least to some degree, then there's really nothing to submit to!

It's kind of a double-edged sword. Yes, Paul thinks women should submit to their husbands as to the Lord, but their husbands need to be like the Lord, at least to some degree and really love their wives so they have something good to submit to. If they're abusing their wives in any way then they're not loving them. However, this is a judgment call that each woman has to make for herself, depending on her temperament, the situation, and what she believes about God. It's not for a lot of other people to decide. A trusted counselor or a good friend might be able to weigh in and help her think it through.

We are all members (5.29)

No one hates his own body, but feeds and cares for it, just as Christ cares for the church. And we are members of his body. So this whole section on marriage is really interesting in that Paul ties it in with Christ and the church. This is why marriage is such a valuable, precious, important thing. It's not just advanced dating. It actually means something significant. Two

people come together and become *one*, not just physically, but also emotionally and spiritually.

Every marriage has its limitations. Mine has limitations. I love my wife more than anybody in the world. Yet, sometimes it's hard to communicate, even after 49 years, because I don't totally understand it and it is a great mystery. I'm sure she doesn't fully get it, either, but she probably understands better than I do. Women have an edge in many areas of life, and we guys know it. But we've got this bigger thing called God who we both know. Both of us knowing him brings us together in an important way, in spite of any differences. We agree on that, and that is huge! It doesn't solve all our communication problems, but perhaps we don't need them all solved. I'm not sure that any couple are total *soulmates* who totally communicate perfectly. I doubt this is even possible simply because we're human. However, one of the best solutions in a marriage is to be connected with each other through God.

If a husband and wife are both connected with God, they don't have to try to be *perfectly* connected with each other! Even their connection with God need not be perfect because it never can be in this life. God knows this and he always makes up for any gap on our part. However, they can be close enough to God, as much as is humanly possible, and that will be good enough to make their connection with each other successful and right. Keep in mind that there are ways to help people understand each other better, which will improve their communication, and that should be sought as much as possible. But there's always a limit. If people are hoping that human attempts alone will make them happy or satisfied, they may be chasing an impossible rainbow in the sky. I've found that establishing a real relationship with God and finding my satisfaction in Him, gives me the greatest ability to communicate, love, and enjoy a relationship. I have also discovered how far I fall short of doing this well, but seeking God first seems to always be my best hope for success. We don't need

to try to seek some kind of perfection in a relationship, just let it grow and improve. This takes time! And ... a lot of forgiveness is also required.

As a young guy, I had just been married, and I thought, "I'm gonna go do a study on *marriage* in the Bible." Oops ... turned out there were very few passages that addressed the subject of marriage directly. Peter has one in his first letter, Paul addresses it directly here in this letter to the Ephesians, and Jesus had some important things to say about it in his Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel account. This surprised me. Then I realized, "Oh, the best study on marriage in the Bible is the study of all the New Testament principles that *apply* to a marriage. They are countless because marriage is a relationship, and the bulk of the New Testament writings focus on relationships in some manner or form. Then the world opened up to me. The answer to my question, "Where are all the verses on marriage?" was answered by, "They're all over the place, Carl. Start living the endless number of New Testament principles and you will find success." It's been an amazing (and often bumpy) journey since then.

If we change the way we think about things, we become less judgmental in our marriage. The more you get that relationship with God going (just you and him), the more it will enhance your relationship with the other person because now it finds its place in the real world and you don't have to try to live in some idealistic mindset that you're never going to attain as a human being in this life. Enjoy the real life God has given you and don't chase the ideal life you have created in your mind. And we don't need to, because when we're complete in Christ the relationships can be what they are, imperfect as they may be, and still be very enjoyable and very good.

Two become one (5.31)

Paul quotes a famous Old Testament passage, one that Jesus also quoted, as he begins to close Ephesians Five. **As the scriptures say, ‘a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two are united into one.’** Now, it's interesting that it doesn't talk about a woman leaving her mother and father and joining her husband, although that's kind of what's also implied here. Paul picks on the man and insists that he must leave his parents to be joined with his new bride. Maybe, just maybe, it's harder for a man to leave one situation and really engage himself in a new one. Women are more naturally suited for relationships and seek them earnestly in life. Men desire relationships, too, but sometimes hesitate and even seem to tolerate them at times. Paul saw this in his day, and it is true today. Some things about human nature never change and are timeless.

So Paul's saying, “Guys, you’ve got to leave your mother and father – and really everything else – and be joined to your wife. You now have to think *double*. This is difficult for a man. I remember a pastor, who was prominent in my life, was teaching about marriage. He said, “Guys, you got to learn to think double. If you go get a bowl out of the cupboard to have some cereal, get two of them. I know that's a small thing, but it shows consideration. It shows that you’re thinking in terms of not just yourself and what you want to do in life, but also what’s in it for this person you made a life-long commitment to! Always consider her in every decision you make, even the small ones.” We need to be thinking in terms of, “We're in this together, and I want you to be included so I can help you be everything you can be and want to be.” This cuts both ways. Wives need to have the same *thinking double* going on in their hearts, too. But they tend to already be there ahead of the husband. This is where we must live in order to experience success.

Paul then provides this very insightful conclusion. **This is a great mystery, but it is an illustration of the way Christ and the church are one.** This is why marriage is such a very special relationship. There is nothing else like it in all of life. In fact, I have concluded that there is nothing better in life than a good marriage, and nothing worse than a bad one. Only the closeness of a marriage relationship can have such extreme possibilities. Marriage is a picture. It's a demonstration of the amazing reality of Christ loving his church, entering into it spiritually, and abiding in all of us through the Holy Spirit. Marriage is full of metaphor and symbolism, and it is so very mystical.

Love and respect! (5.33)

Finally, Paul sums up everything he has said about marriage with this, **I say again: each man must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.** Love and respect are the two big things that husbands and wives each struggle with most. Keep in mind that this is Paul's generalization and that there may be many exceptions. Some men love better than others, and some women respect better than others. Some may not have any problem with loving or respecting; if you are one of these, consider yourself blessed and go help others to learn what you've learned. You are the salt of the earth. God has blessed you so you can bless others.

Women are naturally better lovers. They love their kids, they love other people, and they're generally better at relationships than men. But not always. Some men are better lovers. I'm talking about real, self-giving love, not just how well it can be expressed physically. Some women may struggle a little more with respecting their husband because, well, he's *the husband*, and they live with him, and they know all his faults. This is a hindrance to respect. It's easy to respect a guy who shows up on Sunday and preaches a sermon, and you only see him for an hour each week

and don't go home with him, live with him, and see his faults daily. But someone else does! It's easy to admire a man you are not married to, who is always on his best behavior and protecting his public image. Often if you could talk to his wife, she would just roll her eyes! But the same is true for men. They have to be careful not to compare their wife, whom they know so well and have become accustomed to, with other women who they hardly know, who are also on their best public behavior. Do not be fooled by illusions!

I have a friend that says, “An *expert* is someone who's away from home.” And there's a lot of truth to that. I can't tell you how many times, (and this has worked both ways with my wife and me), that I'll say something I heard it from somebody, (especially if it's from another woman), and she'll roll her eyes and say, “I told you that like a year ago.” That has happened to me, too. She'll say something, and I'm thinking, “Oh man, I mentioned that to her a year ago; you didn't listen to me.” But that's just what happens when we get too familiar with each other, we get too used to the other person; we know all their faults, and sometimes we tune them out.

Sadly, this is sometimes why affairs happen. Someone will slip into an affair because they're comparing this other person that they don't really know with their wife or husband, who they know all too well. That other person looks so beautiful or handsome or wonderful, and they're always on their best behavior. They compare this to what they experience at home, where it's real and all the faults and shortcomings are seen. Even though they love that person at home, they fall for the false and inaccurate comparison.

Sometimes people find, outside of their marriage, something they feel is missing inside their own. It may not actually be true, but if they feel it's true, then it is true for them. This becomes dangerous. But sometimes there are certain things missing in a marriage because the other person just isn't ready for that level of

commitment or communication. That's when we've got to find our satisfaction, our identity, our meaning in God himself. This is the best (perhaps the only) guard against having a marriage destroyed because of foolish illusions that are not really real. Knowing God and walking with him daily is the best protection against some human relationship looming bigger than life and taking you down. God is always your answer in life!

14. Children & Parents, Slaves & Masters (Ephesians 6.1-10)

Review

We now move on to Ephesians Six, the final section of Paul's letter. In the last part of Ephesians Five Paul discussed the very difficult, complicated, and controversial subject of marriage. He didn't even come close to doing a comprehensive presentation, only a brief set of instructions for husbands and wives. In his conclusion, he wrote, "Each man must love his wife as he loves himself, and each wife must respect her husband." Actually, his advice for the husband was a bit more of an impossible task than what he concluded. The husband, he said earlier, is to, "Love his wife as Christ loves the church." Of course, this is an impossible task, and every man is painfully aware of it. But such an extreme exhortation serves as a huge guard against any husband abusing the advice Paul gave to the wives. He told them to submit to their husbands as unto God and to "Respect their husbands." It seems obvious that this kind of language is ripe for abuse in the mind of any self-centered man. But the two keys are first, the wife is to "submit as to God." This sounds harsh and rigged in favor of the husband. But Paul may have actually been giving wives the legitimate bases for not submitting in situations where the husband is not behaving as God would, which is the highest

possible bar. Now, this does not mean the husband must be perfect, only that he is one who believes in, respects, and desires to be like God and Christ as much as possible. So Paul seemed to have installed some safeguards in what he wrote as advice to husbands and wives in marriage.

I have a friend, who is a marriage and family counselor. She has a slogan she picked up somewhere, and she is always a little apologetic in using it. But I think there is a lot of truth in it and I do not think it is intended to speak ill of either men or women. Here it is, “A woman marries a man hoping she can change him. But a man marries a woman hoping she'll never change.” Well, there will be a few things he'll want to change in her! Ha!

I still see my wife as that beautiful young bride. I'm not saying my eyes don't see present reality, but I'm emotionally tied to the young girl I was so enamored and infatuated with so long ago. That has never left me. It really hasn't.

When people get married, it's often because they have a lot of common interests; they seem to love the same things. This is good, but it's not always sustainable. They don't have to have the same interests, but they do need to have the same values. You will never really become close to someone because you enjoy the same hobbies or the same outdoor experiences. But these things do matter. Common *values* are more important, and they can bind people together stronger than just about anything else. Like raising kids, there are all kinds of values involved. We can grow closer or apart based on our convictions about what is best for our kids. Sometimes it separates people because they have a different set of values on what their kids should do and not do.

The kids will push all the buttons to separate parents in order to get their way. They'll go to mom first and then they'll go to dad, and then they'll use the information in their favor without saying they went to mom first. One old trick is claiming that “Dad didn't say I couldn't,” when in reality, they hadn't talked to Dad

yet. Technically, they were telling the truth. We all learned those tricks, didn't we? But some kids are the voice of reason, and they call out their parents when they're fighting.

Children obey your parents (6.1)

Well, Paul starts Ephesians Six by talking about parents and children. **Children, obey your parents because you belong to the Lord, for this is the right thing to do. Honor your father and mother.** Paul took this directly from one of the Ten Commandments in the Old Testament Law. That law worded it this way, "Honor your father and mother." Back then the law was addressing adults, that they were to honor their aging parents who need assistance as they approach death. But the application can be to children in a home, to obey their parents.

Paul then adds that **this is the first commandment with a promise. If you honor your father and mother, things will go well for you and you will have a long life on earth.** And that's true. Children who obey their parents (assuming they are good ones, and most are) will do well in life. Good parents want the best for their kids and want to keep them out of trouble so that their lives will go better.

A lot of children have not obeyed their parents, maybe in their teens, and have not listened to wise counsel which resulted in a lot of trouble. So that's just a very practical application for children from that Commandment in the Old Testament Law. But keep in mind, the initial commandment had to do with adults honoring their aging mother and father, which is also very important. I've been on both ends. Well, I'm getting closer to the older end of it. My kids, in their forties are already watching out for me. My daughter works in senior care, so this is particularly helpful. It is good to know that we have someone who knows about this stage of life as we slowly move into it. I know she and

our son will be watching out for us in every way. This is a shining example of keeping that age-old commandment.

My dad passed away a few years ago and I honored him and took care of him. He was in assisted living close by. I could not help but visit him each day, checking in to see what he might need. I took him out for lunch twice a week. He was always so appreciative. Every time I dropped him off and watched him stroll into the building using his walker, I could never shake the feeling that I somehow should be doing more. But God always assured me that I was doing all I could, that this was my dad's *rite of passage* into God's eternal presence, and that I could be at peace knowing my dad was in the best of hands. Three things always motivated me to care for him and spend time with him. First, he was my dad and he had always been there for me, even as an adult child. Second, he was a WWII vet, and I so appreciated his service to maintain freedom here in our country. But third, even if these two things were not true, he was a precious child of God, made in his own image, and I know Jesus would have cared for him just because he so loves him. One other thing is important. Our kids are watching how we honor our parents, and we are setting an example (one way or the other) for them to ponder and follow.

Fathers don't provoke (6.4)

Paul now turns his attention to fathers. **Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger by the way you treat them.** I have a friend whose dad was a pastor, and he was a little bit harsh at times. Religious people can sometimes be overly strict, depending on the view of God they inherited and how they were raised. To my friend it seemed that sometimes he may have provoked his children to anger. I'm sure all dads have done this in their zeal to discipline and correct their children. It is impossible for anyone to get this perfectly right all the time. Moms are naturally more nurturing. So, this is why Paul gives this

warning to dads. There are reasons why people (dads) end up doing what they do as parents and as people. My friend's dad grew up with an alcoholic father. That is a lot to work through. But he clearly loved his kids who all learned to love God and their own children. It is a testimony and example of the grace of God working in one life, just as he does in all of us. God allows difficulty and problems in life so that we will learn. One way or another, we will learn what he has for us and God will bring us all into complete and final reconciliation with himself, just as he has promised. God is the ultimate loving parent, and he can do no less than to guide us, lead us, and love us in life until we fully attain all he wants us to be in him!

But here, Paul gives good advice to dads because they can easily provoke their kids to anger without even realizing it, just by being staunch, stern, and wanting to prepare their kids to be tough and able to face a difficult and cruel world. This can be especially true when they're teenagers. But dads (and moms, too) can end up *causing* what they're trying to prevent by over-disciplining and provoking anger in their children. This happens a lot in religious homes.

Paul then offers this alternative solution. **Rather, bring them up with the discipline and instruction that comes from the Lord.** So don't just get into to mode of, "How dare you disobey me," and then over-discipline with a lot of punishment. Instead, Paul suggests, "Bring them up with the discipline and instruction that comes from God!" That is, using his kind of discipline and instruction, the kind he uses with us in life, which is kind (though firm) and loving, always with the purpose of correction, never pure retaliation, punishing just for punishment's sake to get back in a mindset of revenge. God never does that, and we never should either. Many religious people have been taught a distorted and horrible view of God, as one who retaliates and does not always have correction in mind when he acts.

Parents who believe this will usually act out what they believe about God. We all become like the god we worship. If you worship a god who is vengeful, retaliating, does not always have correction and a good purpose in mind, and at some point gives up on those he is supposed to love, you will turn around and do the same things to others and your children. How we view God, correctly or distorted, makes a huge difference in our lives and those around us!

Slaves obey your masters? (6.5)

Now this is a tricky one. **Slaves, obey your earthly masters with deep respect and fear.** And, of course, the Southern States used the Bible to justify their slavery, saying, “Look, Paul obviously was okay with slavery.” Why didn't Paul start out this part of his letter saying, “Slaves, you're free because you have one master who is Christ and those who enslave you don't really own you.” But he doesn't say that. I wish he had. I can only assume Paul is dealing with the culture at hand. Slavery was a common thing in the Roman Empire, and Paul was trying to help slaves who were believers in Jesus to deal with it in a God-honoring way so that they would do well in life and be an example of who Jesus was. So he tells them to obey their earthly masters with deep respect and fear. Notice he says, *earthly* masters. This is key and it puts it into the perspective of who their real master is and what real freedom is.

Serve them sincerely as you would serve Christ. Now, again, how do they do that? It's like the problem he presented to wives in Ephesians Five. Some slave masters beat their slaves; that is never OK, even though they thought they had that right over their property, as did the Southern States slave owners before the Civil War. But it was also true in that first-century culture that a few fortunate slaves were happy in their situation because they

were treated well. They were servants and treated more like employees, but they also had no choice in the matter. Many were part of the household. They were not beaten. They were not mistreated. It was actually a pretty good deal for a lot of them. Some would commit their lives to their slave owners by piercing their ear with a ring to indicate their devotion. Paul in several of his letters, identified himself as a bond-servant of Jesus Christ. He drew his analogy from slaves in that culture who committed themselves to servanthood. Still, involuntary ownership of other human beings is absolutely wrong and goes against all that we know about God, our being made in his image, and the value each one of us has in him alone. In the Old Testament, the Jews were rebuked by their prophets for enslaving other people.

So try to please them all the time, not just when they are watching you. In other words, be genuine. Don't be a hypocrite about what you're doing. **As slaves of Christ do the will of God with all your heart. Work with enthusiasm as though you are working for the Lord rather than for people. Remember, the Lord will reward each one of us for the good we do, whether we are slaves or free.** And that's the bottom line. Paul is saying, "You slaves that know Jesus ... you are *slaves* of Christ! When you're a slave to Christ, you're actually free." There are different kinds of slavery and different kinds of freedom. These believers were not really *slaves* to Christ. They're actually *free* in Christ. But Paul's using the concept of slavery (that they are experiencing) to make a point. They are in a good kind of *slavery* (ownership), one where they are owned by God in a very good way. Paul said this in his first letter to the Corinthians, "You've been bought with a price (by the shed blood of Jesus on the cross), so honor God in this life."

Paul is essentially saying, "To the degree that you can keep your slave master happy, do it." That principle applies to all of us in our work environment. Though they are not slave masters

(even though it seems like it at times), they are our employers by our own choice. So, to the degree we can comply with a boss, we are wise to do so. I've had some doozy bosses, I've had some pretty good ones, and I've had some who are almost impossible to please. But to the degree that I have been humanly able to please them things have gone pretty smoothly all of my working years. So this is very practical advice Paul is giving to his original readers and to us! Paul was helping these slaves deal with things as believers in the situation they were in. Sometimes that's the best anyone can do.

We all have one master (6.9)

But now Paul goes on and addresses the slave masters, **Masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Don't threaten them. Remember you both have the same master in heaven And he has no favorites.** I wish he'd said, "And masters, free your slaves. It's wrong to own people, don't you know? We are all equal under God, created by him with unalienable rights!" But that was left for a later day and a different writer after many centuries had passed, and the positive effect of the Good News message had time to take hold throughout the whole world. But that's not what Paul wrote. He may have figured that claiming slaves should be free, in that culture, would do more harm than good. So, he stuck with what he knew would help his slave audience the most. He helped them all deal with the situation each one was in (whether slave or master), by keeping that big perspective of, "You're spiritually free in Christ, even if you're a slave in your physical life."

Be strong in God (6.10)

Paul is about to write a famous passage in the New Testament writings, talking about the armor of God and the ways we are

protected from all kinds of pitfalls when we let God live in and through us. But before he does, he has one final statement that sets the readers up for what he's about to share with them. **Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.** That's where our strength is! In the Lord, in Christ, in God himself. He does not tell them (as we often hear), "Be strong, be tough, suck it in, rise to the occasion and make it work." That's all generally good advice, but we need to know that our *real* strength is going to be in God, in knowing him and trusting him. When you do this, you'll be stronger in a better way than you ever will by just toughing it out and fighting everything in your own strength.

15. The Armor of God (Ephesians 6.11-24)

Put on the armor of God (6.11)

Put on all God's armor so that you will be able to stand firm against all strategies of the devil. So this armor of God idea is very interesting. Paul was, most likely, in prison when he wrote this letter. He may have noticed one of the Centurion Guards and how he was dressed, seeing all the warfare garb and the purpose of each item. So he uses each of these as analogies for the spiritual warfare that believers face.

Here is a little more of what Paul has in mind. **For we are not fighting against flesh and blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world and against evil spirits in the heavenly places.** Wow, that's quite a collection of spiritual foes. Sometimes, I wonder how much there is that really exists in what we call the spiritual realm, that are real entities and not just figurative representations that we have within ourselves. Is there a real devil? Are there real evil rulers and authorities, real powers in dark places, and real evil spirits in some heavenly realm? Why would they be found there? Many people believe they all exist, even though they have never seen any of them. Even Paul calls

them *unseen*. But Paul talks like they are very real, and real or not they represent what we are up against as we struggle in life.

So it's OK to take Paul's word for it and believe he is giving a very real warning. What is very real to everyone is that we all battle things internally and spiritually. We all know that some battles are not physical. Struggles are not always in the physical world. There are things inside of us that seem to betray us and we're doing battle with ourselves in a very real way as some kind of spiritual conflict. How much of this is mental or emotional illness is unknown. When the brain is not working right, chemically, it can plague us with all kinds of difficulties. How much is mental and how much is spiritual is hard to say with certainty. Perhaps some of each. But for the person experiencing it, it is all too real.

Either way, Paul's solution is very real and practical. But notice that in order to give us some idea of how to fight in the spiritual world, he needs to use material world items to clearly express what he means. **Therefore, put on every piece of God's armor so you will be able to resist the enemy in the time of evil.** So he's saying, "Hey, get ready. Know what kinds of things are available to you, spiritually, so you can do battle in the spiritual realm which is unseen but very real." This battle can be with demons, with spiritual realities, and sometimes with yourself, your own psyche, and your own human nature that's fallen and betraying you. Most of the spiritual battle is with ourselves, our old nature, our sinful nature. You may recall what Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans, where he lamented that he didn't do what he wanted to do and he did the things he did not want to do. He was going through a spiritual battle with himself, between his old nature and the new one he had in Christ.

So Paul wants everyone to put on every piece of God's armor so that we will all be able to resist the spiritual enemy when we

encounter it. **Then after the battle, you will still be standing firm.** So his idea is that if we put on this spiritual armor (God's kind of armor), we'll be ready and know how to fight (not physically, but spiritually), and end up still standing when the battle is done. Sometimes it's not so much active fighting as it is prayer, correct focus, resting in God, and not trying so hard to keep from sinning.

Belt of truth; shoes of peace (6.14)

Paul has a list of spiritual armor from God that we need to know about and take advantage of. Here are the first two items of armor. **So stand your ground, putting on the belt of truth and the body armor of God's righteousness.** We can speculate as to what these mean and what Paul's *Armor of God* analogy stands for. Paul never explains it perfectly, and perhaps he wanted to leave such conclusions up to each reader. You can have fun with it for yourself, but seek to find in what ways we can fight spiritual battles using the things God provides. Paul looked at a soldier and saw how his belt held his belly in and bound him up, ready for battle. Truth acts in this way for us. Knowing the truth will keep you contained, spiritually. It sets boundaries that we learn not to cross. It defines a realm in which to exist that is safe from error and danger,

The body armor of God's righteousness protects us. Righteousness is just a big word for being in the right standing before God. Jesus accomplished this for all humanity on the cross, and so we all stand right before God in the new person that we now are – the person God made us to be in Christ. The body armor that those Roman soldiers wore was sometimes braided metal for lightweight protection of vital organs that were targets of swords and spears. It was the original form of flack vests that we have today. So we can stand our ground (spiritually) by putting on the belt of truth and the body armor of God's righteousness.

Paul now turns his attention to a soldier's shoes. **Put on the shoes of peace that comes from the Good News so that you will be fully prepared.** Peace is a great thing to experience. It's hard to visualize it being a weapon in warfare. But this is spiritual warfare that Paul is discussing and something like peace plays a big role. If we can get ourselves to be at peace with God and with other people, we're going to be able to fight through this life with all its dangers, difficulties, and temptations just by resting in God and experiencing peace with him. In another of Paul's letters, Paul talks about the "peace that surpasses understanding." Peace comes from us knowing, understanding, and embracing the Good News message about Jesus and his death on the cross. There is no greater source of peace because in the Good News, we discover how much God loves us (and the whole world), what he has done *for* us that we could never do for ourselves, and rest in knowing that God will make everything right in this world and in the universe forever. No other message that we could ever hear will bring us peace, real peace, lasting peace as does the Good News about the grace of God. With this, we will be fully prepared!

Shield of Faith (6.16)

In addition to all of these, hold up the shield of faith to stop the fiery arrows of the devil. The Roman soldiers had these big shields, kind of like body armor, except they could move it around and it was better protection. The enemy was accustomed to shooting fiery arrows into the ranks of soldiers, hoping to thin them out before engaging them directly. These are big, life-size shields. Smaller shields were held in one hand with a sword in the other. It took quite some skill to work both items in effective coordination. We shall discover that the final item in Paul's list of God's armor will be the *Sword of the Spirit*, which Paul identifies as the *Word of God*. We, too, must learn how to use a shield (faith) and a sword (God's Word) together effectively.

So now, Paul has listed *truth* as a belt, *righteousness* as body armor, *peace* as shoes, and *faith* as a shield. Each of these items protects us in different ways. Faith is a protector. If you think about it, when you exercise faith, and you trust God, that relationship you have with God is very protective; it's very strong. You're not out there floating around, wondering what's true and false, and pondering whether or not there is anybody out there who loves you and not just a bunch of people who want something from you. Faith (trusting God) is difficult and will be far from perfect; it may even come with some honest doubts. But that's okay; you can have doubts while exercising real faith. Everyone does. Well, 95% of all people have *some* doubts. And the other 5% ... they're liars! They're not giving it straight or they're fooling themselves. Everyone has at least a little bit of doubt because no one can objectively prove anything in the spiritual realm. God made it this way; it causes us to grow and makes us reach into that realm we cannot see, yet we so belong in. Hopefully your faith in God is much greater than the little bit of doubt that you have. But if it's not, your faith will grow. Choose to trust God. Faith begets more faith!

God could have provided a *Damascus Road* experience for everyone. He could come down, put the scales on our eyes, and bring a voice from out of the sky. If he did, we may very well conclude, "Wow, there's no question, now." But would you still be absolutely sure the next day after the experience is behind you? Would you doubt and think, did that really happen? Is there some other explanation? Was someone playing a trick on me? The point is that we can never really get away from faith. It's part of being finite humans. God set it up this way and made a line between the material and spiritual worlds. But it is for our best, for our growth, for our becoming more like him. This is what life is really all about!

To some degree, it is Jesus' faith in us. We experience it and we contribute to it. To some degree we can choose how much

we'll believe and how much we won't. But in another sense, our faith (or lack of it) is a result of who we are and what we experience. We cannot make ourselves believe what we honestly don't believe, and we cannot help but believe things we cannot deny. God knows this, is patient with us, and is always working to draw all people to himself. In this, he will never fail because "love never fails!"

When my daughter was just three or four, I told her about God, and she didn't say, "Well, Dad, let's have a discussion about this. I don't know if he's there since I can't see him." Instead, she walked out on the back deck, looked up at the sky, and said, "Hey God, where are you?" At three years old, she didn't have a problem with the existence of God. She just wanted to know where he was. She was instinctively on board with God. Helen Keller was blind and deaf from birth. When they finally busted through and communicated with her, they asked her if she knew God. She said, "Yes, I always knew somebody was there." Knowing somebody is in that spiritual realm is intuitively in all of us. So, we all have a degree of faith. Many people get talked out of it in life by other people who influence them.

As you go through difficult things, don't you often think, "God, are you really there?" David, who wrote most of the Psalms, went through this. We all kind of struggle with our faith to some degree. But that's what life is all about – experiencing God, going through things, learning, and growing in our faith and confidence. Perhaps this is the silver lining in being older, at least for those of us who believe. My faith is stronger, and I can depend on it more. It's not as *up and down* as it was when I was younger. It's now based more on experiences with God and life; the longer we live the more faith we have. God has come through so many times, even though sometimes it seemed like he wasn't there.

Have you ever gone through this? Sometimes we rightly ask, "Where are you, God?" But he doesn't mind. He understands. He knows how we're made because he made each one of us! But he's

there. He was there all the time in difficulties, and then after we get through it, all we can do is look back and say, “You were there, and you were letting me learn – letting me stretch and grow. It was for my benefit. I’m closer to you now than ever. It was worth it!”

God wasn't being mean. We just need to know where our identity is. And when we realize our identity is in Christ, that's when the doubts diminish. So, God lets us go through this divine process and it isn't mean. He brings us to that place where we need to be. It's not in any way careless on God's part. It is helping us get an identity with ourselves, and in the long run, that's so much better. But at the time, it can be really hard, as we have all experienced to some degree. Some people go through such hard things that they are overwhelmed by them. They don't know if they'll ever figure it out in this life, but I believe they will in eternity because God's not going to let go of them or forsake them in any way. He can't!

Helmet of salvation (6.17a)

Paul brings one more piece of *defensive* armor. **Put on salvation as your helmet.** A helmet protects a soldier's head. And salvation – that action by God through Jesus dying on the cross to take away the sin of the world – protects our eyes, ears, and everything in our head, including our mind and thoughts. Actually, when God saves us, he saves our body, soul, and spirit, our whole being. But perhaps the act of God saving us is special in some way for our head and all it contains. Though historically, feelings and emotions are always associated with our gut, thinking and reasoning are usually associated with our head. Our brain is located there, so is our mind and thinking are done there too? At least it seems like it is. Perceive yourself right now. Doesn't it seem like the whole world is centered around you, your head, 360 degrees? Isn't your sense of awareness and perception located

there, where you see and hear everything? Doesn't it seem like your thoughts are in your head? Well, perhaps the reason Paul chose a helmet to represent salvation is because salvation is the thing that protects our head and everything in it. Paul's analogy obviously goes beyond our physical head, having a physical helmet to protect us. Instead, he may be referring to protecting what's inside our heads, our thoughts, our minds, and our decision-making. God's act of saving us is his way of delivering (that's what *salvation* means in Greek, the language of the New Testament), us from things that would otherwise harm our heads. That would include not only our thinking and the many life-changing conclusions that we draw, but also our eyes and ears that take in so much information that influences us.

It is up to each of us to ponder these things and come to conclusions. I've spent time thinking about how these analogies of Paul's work. Somehow, I think Paul wanted his readers to do this; otherwise, he would have given more explanation. So take some time and muse on the spiritual meaning of the belt of truth, body armor of righteousness, shoes of peace, the shield of faith, and the helmet of salvation. These six items are all defensive weapons. Paul has just one more weapon, but it is the one *offensive* weapon that we have.

Sword of the Spirit (6.17b)

As his last weapon of warfare, Paul writes, **And take the sword of the spirit which is the word of God.** Take up that offensive weapon; it's the only one on Paul's list. It's offensive in that you can grab it, swing it around, and cause something to happen with it. The other six defensive weapons just sit there doing their protective work. Perhaps this is what most of what trusting God, believing in Jesus, and walking in the spirit is all about. It's all about putting on defensive weapons that God has provided and letting him carry most of the battle.

But this Sword of the Spirit seems to be the one offensive weapon God has given us. There is a time to go on the offensive and be proactive when fighting a battle. As to when this is, only each person can decide and it will be different in type and degree for everyone. Paul identifies this sword as the “Word of God.” Many people will immediately say that this is the Bible because that's what they've been taught all their lives. I have been, too! And that's fine. This could be the right answer. Paul never tells us here in this or any of his other letters.

There is a sense in which the Bible, or any revelation that God brings through ancient writings, is his word, or his word *to* us, or it *becomes* his word when we read it, and he verifies it in our mind. However, the *Word of God*, predominantly in the New Testament, is identified as Jesus. Go look and see. Paul said repeatedly that he preached the Word of God. Was he saying he was preaching what was written down in some collection of books? I don't think so. And even if he was, it could not have been the Bible since the books we now find collected in it were not identified until about 300 years after the time of Jesus, in the fourth century!

Paul was the first to write books (letters) that ended up in the Bible, and he started writing them around 45 to 50 AD. The Gospels weren't written until 70 to 90 AD. So, no one ran around with Bibles in the early years of Christianity. But based on what we know from these New Testament writings we have today, the *Word of God* was Jesus. He is God's expression. He is God's revelation of Himself to humanity. Any writings collected into a Bible are only testimonies of their understanding of who Jesus was as God's Word. The next most prominent use of the term Word of God was by Paul in referring to the message he brought in person and in letters. But his focus was always on “Christ and him crucified,” so we still end up with Jesus being the Word of God.

When we take up the Sword of the Spirit, the offensive weapon, and it's the Word of God, it's Christ, it's Jesus. It's a person living in us (and us in him) that we ultimately take up as our one offensive weapon. It's not a mere collection of writings, good and helpful as they are. In fact, they are so good that this commentary is a close look at one of many writings by Paul found in the Bible. But whether any such collection of writings size up to being "the very word of God, inerrant, inspired, and infallible right down to each *jot and tittle*?" is easily and reasonably debated. We always need to be careful not to allow anything or anyone to take the place of (or even find equality with) the one true God, who alone is the Creator of all things.

You can and should play with these ideas, ask God about them, and ask what exactly should be the ultimate and highest authority in your life. For me, it is God alone. But I also appreciate that he works through many people and many writings in history and today. But it seems that Jesus, his followers, and some of their writings have proven themselves throughout church history to be the most important thing God uses to reveal himself and provide us with a record of key historical events concerning Jesus as the only begotten Son of God, and as the Savior of the World.

Pray in the spirit (6.18)

Pray in the spirit at all times on every occasion. Stay alert and persistent in your prayers for all believers everywhere. Now, I don't think this means getting on your knees, folding your hands, and closing your eyes. No one can pray like that without ceasing. I think he's saying, pray in the Spirit in all opportunities, maybe even all the time. I feel like I'm in a constant prayer meeting with God. It's not that difficult when we see prayer as simply communing with God. It's not a struggle. It's not a burden or a task when we think of prayer in this way. I remember being a young guy and having a bunch of index cards,

and I was going to pray for everyone I knew based on the needs I had written on each card. It was a noble effort, and there may be people who pray like this year after year and are fulfilled in it. Everyone is different because God made us all different. But I would fall asleep praying because I was trying too hard at it.

So now I just let prayer be talking with God. In fact, when I have thoughts about somebody, I am praying for them! How can I not be? God doesn't say, "Well, first you've got to be very still, fold your hands and close your eye, address me using a list of how awesome my attributes are, then make your requests for me to consider, finish with 'amen,' and then I'll listen to you." As soon as we are burdened for somebody or just start thinking about them, it's a prayer. You can do it in the middle of the night, or driving down the road in your car. So pray at all times and on every occasion. You can pray about anything and everything. This doesn't mean we're going to get what we want. It's not a magic wand, nor is it a genie in the bottle promising three wishes. We often do not get what we want. God might say no, he might say wait, he might say yes, he might say soon or not quite yet. But he always says, "I've got some things to teach you." God also might say, "No, this isn't for you. I know you think it is, but this isn't for you at this time."

I remember when my wife went through a prolonged time of illness. Our kids were little and we couldn't even go to church together. So I'd pray and say, "God, I know I'm asking you for something good." But he didn't grant it and so I figured there was some purpose greater than the ideal lifestyle I had developed in my mind. But it was really hard to trust God because it went on for such a long time. However, I look back and am so glad I somehow had the faith to keep trusting him, one day at a time, until he brought a solution. Now that I'm older, when God doesn't give me what I want, I respond with, "Thank you. I'll trust your wisdom and timing in everything." In this, I can fully rest and be at peace. Sometimes I wish I could have experienced more

of this when I was young. But then I realized that it was all I went through that brought me to where I am today, able to fully trust God no matter what!

I remember there were times in my later working years when I would get laid off or the job would go away. I'd go to pray about getting a job, but instead of praying, "God, I really want this job," I started praying, "God, do whatever you want about this job. I'm willing to go do it, but if you don't want me in that job then block it! I know you will be watching out for me if you do." That kind of mindset in prayer took me about fifty years to learn and realize that it was the best way to pray. I also realized that this was exactly how Jesus prayed. He prayed, "Father, I'd rather not go through this horrible, upcoming crucifixion. So, if it can be avoided let me do so. However, the bottom line is that *your will be done*, not mine!" So this became my greatest example of how to pray.

Often, I pray in the middle of the night when I can't sleep. I've always had a lot of friends going through a lot of difficult things. When I was young, we prayed for our friends about getting married, having babies, raising kids, starting new jobs, and even going through divorces. Now, it's what illness or limitation do they have? Ha! Our prayers change as we age, but the God we pray to never changes. So good to know!

Pray for me too says Paul. He wanted to be prayed for. He needed it even though he trusted God and believed God was behind all he was doing. He didn't see prayer as an act of desperation, trying to bend the ear and will of God his way. Instead, prayer for Paul was his way of participating in what God will do in his wisdom and in accordance with his *mysterious plan* that he's always had from eternity past. But still, Paul wanted to know that people were praying for him, and he believed it would somehow make a difference in whatever way God honors and uses his prayers. It certainly has an element of mystery to it.

Ask God to give me the right word so I can boldly explain God's mysterious plan that the Good News is for Jews and Gentiles alike. Now that's interesting. You wouldn't think Paul would have to ask for boldness. He's probably the most tenacious, bold, unstoppable guy that ever lived. If there's a wall in front of him, Paul would go through it, over it, under it, or around the wall. He would do whatever it took. Yet he is asking God to give him the right words so he can boldly explain God's mysterious plan, which is the Good News to bring all humanity (Jews and Gentiles) to Christ. This has been Paul's theme all the way through this letter to the Ephesians, and so he's got to express it one more time before he ends his letter.

I'm in chains now, still preaching this message as God's ambassador. So pray that I will keep on speaking boldly for him as I should. When he was writing this letter, he was in prison. This is probably one of the later letters he wrote, unlike Galatians and Thessalonians which were earlier letters.

Closing words (6.21)

To bring you up to date, Tychicus will give you a full report about what I'm doing and how I'm getting along. He is a beloved brother and a faithful helper in the Lord's work. Well, obviously, if Paul's in chains, he can't get out to do his missionary follow-up visits. So he sends other people, and that was good because they're younger people, they're learning, and he's been mentoring them. **I have sent him to you for this very purpose to let you know how we are doing and to encourage you.** This is very realistic. Paul doesn't say. "Hey, we are all trusting God. There are no problems." We all struggle. Paul struggled. The people he was ministering to struggled, and they needed encouragement. They needed an update on how Paul was

doing. That was all part of what he needed to do. So he sends out these surrogates.

Peace be with you, dear brothers and sisters. May God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you love with faithfulness. I always think this is interesting. “Peace be with you,” he says as if it's not going to happen. Well, sometimes we don't experience peace. But it's not because God is goofing off in any way. But it might be because we failed to put on those shoes of peace he talked about above. We may not allow it. We may not seek it, but God's always there to give us peace. The problem is not on God's end.

Then he added, “May God the Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ give you love with faithfulness.” Well, of course, they will, and Paul knows it. Like peace, faithfulness and love from God are always there. God always wants to give us these things. God is always there working to give this to us. The problem is on the receiving end. That's us! So, I think Paul's really saying, “May it happen that you will receive and experience the love and faithfulness that God is always actively giving everyone.” God never says, “Ya know, I don't think you need any more peace, love, or faithfulness from me. Maybe I'll give it to you later.” He's always lavishing it on us. Just think back on how Paul first started this letter listing all the spiritual blessings we have in the heavenly realm!

May God's grace be eternally upon all who love our Lord Jesus Christ. That's how Paul ends his letter, with a supercharged blessing to his readers.

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