Experiencing God in Ephesians

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by Brian Johnston

1. Filling and made full of

The Bible letter to the Ephesians is a thrilling one written by the Apostle Paul. I've often heard it described as a 'Body letter.' Those who describe it in that way are saying they consider its main teaching to be about the Church which is Christ's Body – in other words, all those who've been born of the Spirit from the time the apostles first preached until the time when Jesus will return to take his Church away from this earth and to be with himself for ever. But I don't think that's an entirely accurate way of describing this letter. All that God's doing is shown here to be to the praise of his glorious grace. And this letter is about God's glory specifically on display in the Church – and as glimpsed in two places: in heavenly realms and also on earth where in part it grows and matures over against opposition – taking place in local churches of God just like the one at Ephesus!

But for now there's one word I'd like to focus on. It's found in the letter Paul wrote to the Colossians as well as in this letter to the Ephesians. And it's the word usually translated as 'fullness'. We'll begin with Colossians 1:19 and 2:9: *it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him … in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form.*

Now, an illustration is going to be helpful at this point. I want you to imagine a glass of water, and to think of two simple things: on the one hand, it's the water that fills the glass; and on the other, it's the glass that contains the water. Very simple. We'll come back to each of these two ideas when we consider two legitimate meanings of the Bible word 'fullness'.

In New Testament times, down in Colosse, a danger lurked nearby for those who professed the Christian Faith. An error, a heresy, was being taught. It was known as Gnosticism. Simply put, it said that God was holy, and that matter – the stuff everything is made of – was evil, and in between were a whole bunch of intermediary beings through whom God had created this (evil) world. In this way, the totality of the Godhead's power and attributes was thought to have been distributed – or

spread out – across all these beings, with each one in sequence away from God being a little less divine. But Paul says a definite "No" to this idea. The sum total of God's powers and attributes – his fullness, to use their buzz word for it – were all found in Christ. The fullness of the Godhead dwelt bodily in him. Jesus was a man with undiminished deity. As the water fills the glass; so God's fullness resided in him, the total embodiment of deity. This is important teaching for today. Because there are still pseudo-Christian cults who deny the full deity of Christ. They are repeating the error of a man called Arius who lived around 300 AD and taught that God the Son was inferior in nature, compared with the Father.



If this first example of the use of 'fullness' has underscored for us the fact of Christ's full deity, then the second use of the word shows us that Christ's Church is Christ's fullness. At the end of the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Ephesians, we read about: the Church that's called *His body*, *the fullness of Him who fills all in all.* But what exactly does this mean? I've sometimes heard this rendered as the Church being Christ's complement – that which makes him complete, as it were. The idea is drawn from God's creation of Eve as a suitable helper for Adam. It's true that Christ's Bride is another metaphor that stands alongside Christ's Body as another description of Christ's Church, but I'm wary of the application of this idea of complement on the sole basis of the parallel made with human marriage.

The Greek lexicon, Thayer, among others, points out that 'fullness' was used in a second sense. In addition to the meaning which we've illustrated by water filling a glass; its other meaning could be illustrated by the glass that contains the water. It's that second or alternative meaning that fits here. In other words, what this is saying is that the Church, which is the embodiment of the divine son, is the vehicle or receptacle in which Christ's perfections and powers and presence are put on universal display and showcased to all of creation.

Let's pick up something at this point from Ephesians 4:10, where we're told that Christ has ascended in resurrection so that he might fill all things. This just slips off the tongue so easily –

but what does it mean? There's something similar at the end of the first chapter, where it tells us about *the surpassing greatness of [God's] power … in accordance with the working of the strength of His might which he brought about in Christ, when He raised him from the dead and seated Him … far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.* Then it says that he's *put all things in subjection under His feet and [given] Him as head over all things to the church* – and it's then that the Church is defined as being the Church that's called H*is body*, *the fullness of Him who fills all in all* - *or* who fills all things in every way (Eph.1:19-23). So, in what sense does Christ fill all things? The context is one of authority: the authority of Christ as the one who's been so exalted that all things are under him, that is under his authority, an authority that's said to be all-pervading. But the Church is here described as being his fullness – putting it all together, is this not saying that Christ fills the Church with his very own power and authority – for he's the head of the Church – and that he fills the Church so that he might fill all things in every way with his authority?

We believers, as forming the Church, which is the embodiment of the divine son, have been raised and seated with Christ (Ephesians 2:5-6) to share eternal glory with him (1 Peter 5:10) and so that he might be glorified in us (2 Thessalonians 1:10) even as we're destined to reign for ever (Revelation 22:5). This is consistent, surely, with the Church, namely all believers, being the receptacle which Christ fills in order that he might showcase all of God's glory to every created thing in the exercise of his authority.

And now lastly, in the third occurrence of the word translated 'fullness', I want to come to Ephesians 3:16-19 where Paul talks about the God-filled lives he wanted to see in the disciples found then in the local church of God at Ephesus. Paul prayed like this: *that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.*

Before we were saved by God's grace, we became aware of a God-shaped hole within us. But

what is our life now full of? Does God indeed fill our lives as the water fills a glass (to return to our first illustration)? The apostle Paul prayed for his friends here that it truly would. He asked God that they might each be strengthened with power through God's Spirit in their innermost being with the end in view that Christ might reside in their hearts through faith. But hold on a moment? Isn't this already true of all genuine believers? Romans 8:9 says the Spirit of Christ is in all those who belong to Jesus. True enough, but this is an additional and conditional sense of Christ's indwelling of us which we find in Ephesians 3. The word meaning 'to dwell' here has a prefix attached to it and it gives the fuller sense of someone really settling down and feeling at home. Perhaps we could illustrate the difference like this: picture a couple who buy a house where others have previously been living. They're thrilled with their purchase and for a while, as they build up their finances again, they put up with the horrid black and silver wallpaper in the lounge; the gurgles of the central heating which are traceable to a leaking heat exchanger in the boiler; then there are the windows which at times are hard to see through because the sealed double-glazed units are no longer actually sealed; and oh, did we mention that the carpets all smell of dog – that of the previous owner? Gradually, little by little, however, the couple manage to attend to all these issues until one day as they're sitting down over dinner, they comment with a glow of satisfaction that it now really feels like home. It now reflects their own personality. It truly was their house before, but the difference is it now feels like a real home to them – their home. Do you get the picture, the challenge: the Lord owns us from the day we're saved, but is he enjoying us – is he comfortably at home in our lives, with our various attitudes, and interests and pursuits?

But Paul's prayer for those in the church of God at Ephesus continues. He wants this to be their experience so that they might come to experience in greater measure how wide, how long, how high and how deep is Christ's love for us. Paul's prayer desire for them is that they should have a greater awareness of Christ's love. And this is not just some kind of intellectual thing – it's something to be experienced: a greater sense of God - and of his love for us which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. And even this is not to be an end in itself but that it might result in us being filled to all the fullness of God. We're talking about maturity here (as a comparison with the language of chapter 4

shows). Maybe I can illustrate this too – how a greater enjoyment of Christ's love is necessary to build maturity into our Christian lives.

I heard of a couple who were in the habit of fostering newborn children. Once they were asked to take on a pair of 18-month old twins, as a stop-gap measure, just for 6 weeks, and so they agreed. Later they shared about the time when they first put them to bed. There was no noise, but they went back to check on them anyway. They were shocked to find the children awake, crying, the pillows wet with tears – but yet making no sound. They discovered they had been in eight previous homes, where they'd been beaten for crying - and so had perfected the art of crying silently. They were declared to be irremediably emotionally retarded. But after two years in this loving foster home, the twins were tested again and found to be within the normal range of emotional and intellectual capability. That's what an awareness of being loved does – and is why Paul wanted the Ephesians to develop maturity through coming to fully experience Christ's love.

Speaking of maturity, in Ephesians 4:13, we see the Church again described as Christ's fullness, and this time it's in the context of it becoming mature, attaining to a full-grown stature. And when we compare this with verse 16, which is talking about the growth of the entire Body, we realize that corporate maturity of the Body must be intended here. But how can the Body mature as a whole – other than through its individual parts? And that's certainly what we find here, hence the gifts of evangelists and teaching pastors equipping individual believers with the result that they're no longer doctrinally all at sea. Rather, they now speak the truth to one another in love. Please don't think this means they're just learning to be honest or to speak home truths in a kindly way. No, the context shows that they're lovingly speaking doctrinal truth to other Body members. That's how they're all, mutually, becoming more stable. And the end result is measured by the Body members together on earth attaining to genuine Christian unity, described variously in this chapter as the unity of the Spirit or the unity of the Faith or the unity of the knowledge of the Son of God. It's Christ's Body on earth, in microcosm, in churches of God – just like the one at Ephesus – becoming physically what it already is in spiritual reality, through becoming visibly united as a duty and function of our connectedness to other Body members – nowadays both inside and outside of the churches of God.

2. To the praise of God's glorious grace

God's ultimate purpose is not our salvation. God's ultimate purpose is his own glory. The Gospel mystery is: *Christ in you, the hope of glory* (Colossians 1:27). But whose glory? Everything is to the praise of God's glory and grace. We'll return to this very shortly.

But let me first tell you about Waylon Prendergast, 37, of Tampa, Florida. He committed a spur-of-the-moment robbery while on his way home from a late-night drinking session. A very inebriated Mr. Prendergast forced his way into a house through an upstairs window which had been left open. Once inside, he filled a suitcase with cash and valuables before setting the living-room on fire in order to cover his tracks. He then escaped through the back door and made his way home, laughing all the way. Only when he turned the corner of his own street, and discovered three fire engines outside his house, did he realize that in his drunkenness he had, in fact, broken into and set fire to his own property. His later comment was: "I had no idea I had so many valuable possessions."

We may not do anything quite that stupid, but there are times when all of us as Christians need to stop and reflect, before coming to the same conclusion as Mr. Prendergast, when he said: "I had no idea I had so many valuable possessions." Beyond the physical blessings we enjoy, there's so much more that God has given us through Jesus Christ. As the Apostle Paul wrote in his Bible letter to the Ephesians *… Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace …* (Ephesians 1:3-6)

We'll pause there, for a moment, and reflect on what Paul by the Spirit has just been saying. In a

sense we should read on, for the whole section we're reading – from Ephesians 1:3 down to verse 14 – is one continuous sentence in Paul's original letter. It's almost as if, when Paul started to list all these blessings, he just couldn't stop! There's an old hymn which encourages us to 'Count your many blessings' and 'name them one by one.' We can start to do that – and it's good that we do – but we'll surely never get to the end, for we've been blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms in Christ – and do you think we could ever fathom that wealth of blessing?

Let's think about which specific blessings have already been listed by Paul. Actually, we've split our reading into three parts by using the repeated expression *'to the praise of the glory of his grace.'* It's worth reflecting for a moment on these words which Paul uses time and time again here. God has blessed us with this ultimate goal in view – that it should all be to the praise of his glorious grace. But just what does that mean? Praise, of course, is a recognition: when we praise someone, we're recognizing their achievement. And the biblical word for glory seems to be associated with heaviness as reflected in Paul talking about the *'weight of God's glory'* (2 Corinthians 4). This reminds me of how at times we recognize there are some people whose opinions 'carry weight.' In their field of endeavour, they are recognised as 'heavyweights.' How much rather, we praise God for his truly weighty intervention in shaping our destiny!

Interestingly, we'll find that part one of this list of blessings contains blessings which are attributed to God the Father. Do you remember any of them? Basically, they centre around the fact that he chose us in the timeless, dateless past and lovingly predestined us to be his adopted sons. No wonder they're placed first: these must be among our most fundamental blessings!

It was the preacher, Spurgeon, who when asked if he could reconcile God's sovereignty and human responsibility, replied: 'There's no need to reconcile those who are already friends.' Both these truths are plainly taught in our Bibles. In fact, it's God's sovereignty which transforms Gospel preaching from being 'mission impossible' and actually guarantees its success in overall terms. No more than God wills, will be saved; but equally, no less than 'whosoever wills,' will be saved by God's grace. If we put our name in faith into the 'whoever' of John 3:16, then later – just as surely - we discover our name was in the 'chosen in Christ' of

Ephesians 1:4. We learn we were born again as God's child; and adopted as God's son. The main feature of adoption in New Testament society wasn't really the benefit to the person being adopted – although that was doubtless part of it – but attention was more associated with how an adopted son would enhance his new family's influence in society. Even so, our spiritual adoption is part of the overall picture of everything being to the praise of God's glorious grace.

But we best press on now with further thoughts of God's grace:

… which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace which He lavished on us. In all wisdom and insight He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth. In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will, to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ would be to the praise of His glory. (Ephesians 1:6-12)

Well, if the first part of this long sentence of Paul's was about blessings we could attribute to the Father, this next part we've just now read relates the blessings directly to Christ, the son. Such things as redemption, forgiveness and a wonderful inheritance feature prominently. Of course, all the blessings in all three parts as we've termed them are all 'in Christ.' That goes to show us how strongly our new Christian identity should affect the way we view ourselves all of the time. But if I can just add, in relation to the inheritance we have as Christian believers in Christ, in a few verses time, we'll see that God also has his inheritance in us. And so, again, we are to the praise of his glory.

It's true that Christ's work at the cross was on our behalf; but God was working there also on his own behalf. Just like a preacher, in concluding his message, may repeat his main point as being the summation of all he's said (Hebrews 8:1), so God will finally sum up everything (that's in view here) into a state of being united under and gathered around Christ (Ephesians 1:9-10). This was God's bigger agenda through the cross. This has always been God's master-plan – that Christ should be central – to achieve it now is our remit; to achieve it ultimately is our destiny.

Sometimes, the loss of harmony in our relationships or the

decisions of others or the struggle against illness and loss can be like a piece of grit in our shoe. These real difficulties can so easily become our total preoccupation. At times like that, a meditation on the bigger picture which is so loaded with blessing, can help us to restore our perspective. When life seems tough, and following Christ isn't easy, it's good to get a broader perspective by taking an inventory on our blessings through using a Bible passage like this one, or say, Psalm 103 where David counts his blessings in a similar way.

But we'd better complete our look at Ephesians chapter one – at least its listing of blessings from verses 3-14. Paul concludes his list like this:

In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation - having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory. (Ephesians 1:13-14)

Finally, in this third instalment, the blessings are related to the actions of God the Spirit as we're reminded of the Spirit's work inasmuch as we've been sealed in him. The fact that the Holy Spirit is in us is presented here in terms of viewing him as being the guaranteeing deposit of all that's to come – a kind of absolutely wonderful down-payment in advance of everything that's yet to come.

What a blessing it is to know that we're eternally secure in Christ: we can never lose these great blessings. When Brazil were playing a World Cup soccer match against Sweden in 1978, and the match was drawing to a close, Clive Thomas blew the final whistle seconds before Zico of Brazil scored what would have been the winning goal from a corner. Imagine the reaction of the players. In all the excitement of the action and the cauldron of noise in the stadium, it's possible that the players concerned at first think that the goal will count. The Swedish players seem to have lost the match in the dying seconds of play. They are exhausted and devastated. The ball is in the back of their net, they've come so close, but they've lost. But no! They see the referee walking to the exit, and realize he'd already blown the whistle to end the match seconds before the ball ended up in their goal. What a relief for them to realize the game had been finalized before the winning move was completed. What had seemed like the winning goal was in fact too late to count. They hadn't lost after all! This idea of something having been already

finalized such that it's too late to lose applies to our salvation also. God's sovereign choice of us underscores our human decision for Christ – and certainly after we have responded in repentance for sins and by faith in the saviour, it's too late to lose that salvation which is already so finalised that we're even now raised and seated with Christ!

Someone has said, 'Praise is like a fire that needs fuel.' If we're wondering what that means, I think a little glimpse at the next two verses Paul wrote should explain it. After recounting all these blessings in Ephesians 1 verses 3 to 14, he then writes:

For this reason I too, having heard of the faith in the Lord Jesus which exists among you and your love for all the saints, do not cease giving thanks for you, while making mention of you in my prayers. (Ephesians 1:15-16)

For this reason – in other words, because of his review of all that wealth of blessing, Paul now has brought to mind so much to be thankful to God for. May we do the same and thank and praise God now for his blessings to us which are all secured in Christ. Let's not be like the man who, as a prize, was given a free ticket to travel by ocean liner across the Atlantic. This was a luxury liner, and he was a man of very humble means. However, he was so looking forward to the experience, he didn't mind the fact that to avoid the expense of the fancy on-board restaurants, he'd have to take his own supplies of cheese and biscuits – which he did. And every time, as he saw the rich people heading to the restaurants at meal-times, he contented himself with going up on deck and enjoying his cheese and biscuits. Just before they berthed, he figured he had about enough money to sample restaurant food once – provided he chose carefully. He went in, and sat at a table, and a waiter came with a menu. When the waiter returned to take his order, he enquired about the price of what he judged might be the cheapest item listed. The waiter was shocked, and asked if he had not read his ticket properly – all his meals for the whole trip were included in his ticket! How much more he could've enjoyed that journey! As believers travelling home, bound for heaven, let's be sure to live in the assurance and rich enjoyment of all the blessings we've reminded ourselves of from Ephesians chapter 1: after all, they're already included in our ticket!

3. Paul's opening prayer defined

After 15 years of financing excavations in the Valley of the Kings with scarcely anything to show for his expenditure, Lord Carnarvon had begun to wonder if it would all prove fruitless. But then a telegram arrived. It was from Howard Carter, telling him to come to Luxor immediately. And so it was, that on 26 November 1922, Carter and Lord Carnarvon stood in front of the sealed door of Tutankhamun's tomb. First, Carter made a small hole in the door and then he inserted a candle. In answer to Carnarvon's anxious question, "Can you see anything?" Carter famously replied, "Yes, wonderful things."

When the Apostle Paul began to write his letter to the Ephesians, he prayed for them that they'd see wonderful things from the truths he was about to share with them. Here's exactly what he prayed:

For this reason I too, having heard of the faith in the Lord Jesus which exists among you and your love for all the saints, do not cease giving thanks for you, while making mention of you in my prayers; that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe. (Ephesians 1:15-19)

The sense is: because they had already been enlightened, Paul was praying that they'd get to know God more personally through coming to realize three facts: the hope of God's calling; the glorious riches of God's inheritance and the surpassing greatness of God's power. What these things are is explained by what follows, especially in chapter 2. As a preacher prays before he delivers his message so that his audience may be helped to understand it, so Paul prays in the same way here. The content of his message in chapter 2 interprets for us the requests of his prayer here in chapter 1.

Just before we explore chapter two, it's perhaps worth observing that when Paul prays they'll have a deeper knowledge of God (Ephesians 1:17), he's talking about the kind of knowledge that comes through experience. We're able to tell that because the Greek language distinguished this from knowledge that came from observation. And, in fact, this particular word as used here conveys the sense of a more exact form of that type of experiential knowledge. Of course, Paul was directing his message here to believers in the local Church of God at Ephesus, and it seems he wanted their evaluation of their place in that local church to flow out from an enhanced appreciation of the Lord - one that was bound up with an intelligent awareness of God's calling, inheritance and power. We get to know God more personally when we gain an insight into the very things he desires. And, these are the things Paul begins to expand upon as we now read chapter 2:

And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest. But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.

For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them. Therefore remember that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called "Uncircumcision" by the so-called "Circumcision," which is performed in the flesh by human hands – remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ … for through Him we both

have our access in one Spirit to the Father.

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit. (Ephesians 2:1-22)

In other words, Paul calls on these believers to remember what they once were. They once were *'even as the rest'* of humanity, being once *'dead in [their] … sins.' 'But'* - and we thank God for that word! - which we have twice here because we read *'But God'* then later *'but now.'* Paul describes in some detail the tremendous changes brought about by God's grace. Notice how he mentions *'the heavenly places'* – one of 5 mentions in this letter of an expression that's found nowhere else in our Bibles. These believers were on the earth as far as their temporal existence was concerned, but at the same time they equally belonged to the eternal realm of reality – the realm described here as the heavenly places. Down here, we can distinguish between past, present and future – even as we make progress to become the person God wants us to be. But, in another sense, in the eternal realm, there's no such distinction: the great spiritual realities are already in place now, as God sees them. It's in this sense that it's revealed to us that we're raised and seated with Christ.

We're emphasizing overall that God's ultimate purpose is not our salvation, but rather that we should be something for him, for his glory. Previously, in Deuteronomy 32:9, God once said of his former people, Israel, that they were his *'portion'* and his *'inheritance'*. Now, here in this chapter, Paul's making it clear that racial barrier no longer applies. God is now, in this age, dealing with Gentiles on an equal footing with Jews. That's the difference the cross has made. Jews and Gentiles – together – can now be something for God even while here on earth. They are fellow-members of the Church which is Christ's Body, which when viewed in the eternal or heavenly realm is complete and perfect. But we also see its members who are on earth – specifically those to whom Paul writes in the local Church of God at Ephesus – members on earth who are struggling to grasp what God intends them to become for him now. And Paul prays they will indeed grasp it.

Paul tells this local Gentile church that they're no longer separate from Christ, nor excluded from the promises, nor strangers with neither hope nor God. Far from it, they've actually been brought, he says, into *'the household of God'.* The word used there means either family or house, and we must in every case seek out which is the correct meaning from the immediate context. Here, since there's talk about *building*, and about a *foundation* and *cornerstone*, Paul has to be referring to 'the house' rather than 'the family' of God in this instance. This is a topic of Bible-wide significance, and perfectly fits the flow of thought here as Paul thinks about saved men and women being built up in the Apostles' teaching to be something for God by their offering service to God in an organized and structured way – which was an expansion upon the exclusively Jewish arrangements of the Old Testament.

In other words, Paul at the end of chapter 2, begins to elaborate on what God has in mind as the present goal of our conversion experience – which is that we should become a house or temple for God on the earth. In these terms Paul's not describing a scene in the eternal heavenly realms, but he's talking about a temporal and spiritual structure on this earth which believers such as those in the Church of God in Ephesus were then part of. Nowhere, in fact, does Paul ever describe the entire Church the Body as a temple. Quite the opposite, he says in 1 Cor.3:16,17 that God's temple is capable of being destroyed – a fate which can never befall the Body of Christ, as the Lord's famous words in Matthew 16 prove. The Lord said there that the gates of Hades would never prevail against his Church, which is his Body. But, Bible-wide, the destruction of some of God's previous earthly residences is well documented, for example at Shiloh and Jerusalem, where his temporary tabernacle and, later, more permanent temple had once stood.

Having said all that - to show that 'Body' and 'Temple' don't refer to the same thing - it's curious how so many commentators simply assume Paul has nothing other than the Church the Body in his sights here – even to the point that it even has an impact on the actual translation of verse 21. Should it read 'all the building' or should it say 'every building' in relation to the thing that's growing into a holy temple in the Lord? The point at dispute is the word for 'the' in the original language of this text – is it properly there or not? More than half of the ancient manuscripts witness to its absence – and that being the

case, respected Greek language authorities say conclusively that the most accurate meaning here is 'every building.' In turn, this means we're talking about a built-up structure on earth which is spoken about as having a foundation and a cornerstone and is overall comprised of individual buildings but altogether forming a single temple. In all these particulars, what we have described here is reminiscent of the disciples in Matthew 24:1 pointing out to Jesus *'the buildings of the temple'* – that is the rebuilt Jerusalem temple, Herod's beautified temple as it was then. That can only be a helpful analogy, of course, for within Christianity we know physical structures have no importance. They've been replaced, and let's remind ourselves with what. The local Church of God at Corinth was in every way exactly like the local Church of God at Ephesus to which Paul was currently writing. How did Paul describe that local church? He described those who formed it by saying '*you are God's building'* (1 Corinthians 3:9), and then says to them in 1 Corinthians 9:27: '*you are [in character] Body of Christ.'* In other words, each local fellowship of faithful disciples which carefully followed the Apostles' teaching took its character from the Church the Body, and, together with all the other local fellowships, they were 'the buildings of the temple' which is being described here at the end of Ephesians chapter 2 – an overall spiritual temple or house (see 1 Peter 2:5) which is the New Testament answer to the Jerusalem Temple after the cross.

So while the Temple of God and the Body of Christ are different, there's a clear connection between them, of course, as the Temple derives its character from the Body. Obedient believers like those to whom Paul was writing, are charged to visibly express – in microcosm – on earth the wonderful reality of Christ's Church. Sadly, we fail to do that when throughout Christendom we're divided by differences.

So, for all believers today, as those who have been enlightened at the time of their salvation, Paul's prayer here applies. Remember, he's praying that we come to experience more of God personally – and he specifies how that can happen. It's when we travel to the end of this chapter with Paul and see how we, too, are invited to be included in belonging to this temple made up of people – people whom God is delighted to view today as his inheritance – in the same way as he once regarded Israel as being that. This is the hope God wants to realize now by calling us through the Gospel, and it's surely a major part of the good

works he prepared for us to do
before the world began to exist!

4. A productive detour

Do you ever interrupt yourself and derail your own train of thought? At times, it can be productive. God appears to have used this in the case of the Apostle Paul's prayer in Ephesians chapter 3. We're going to read it now, and I'd ask you to notice how it begins and ends in the same way. Paul gets himself back to his original starting point after indulging in an aside – but it's an aside which, as it turns out, is highly instructive! Let's listen:

For this reason *I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles - if indeed you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace which was given to me for you; that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief. By referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit; to be specific, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel, of which I was made a minister, according to the gift of God's grace which was given to me according to the working of His power. To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things; so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and confident access through faith in Him. Therefore I ask you not to lose heart at my tribulations on your behalf, for they are your glory.* ***For this reason*** *I bow my knees …* (Ephesians 3:1-14)

With these final words, Paul returns to his reason for beginning this prayer back in the very first verse. The cause or reason which sparks off his prayer is the material we covered previously from Ephesians chapter 2. But I want you to notice with me what Paul says here during the time he got side-tracked, as it were. It's very

interesting. After describing himself as Christ's prisoner, it's as if Paul moves quickly to deflect away any sympathy vote. Paul wasn't one for wallowing in self-pity. This reminds me of the time in 2 Corinthians 11 & 12 when he lists all the troubles he'd experienced in the service of the Gospel, finally mentioning his '*thorn in the flesh'*, but then says he was well content with these difficulties which were for Christ's sake, because in and through them he experienced the power of Christ. It's the same here: Paul once again disregards his challenging circumstances by saying that he counts it an absolute privilege to suffer for such a cause as the one God has graciously entrusted to him. He then goes on to speak of his insight into the Gospel and the opportunity of being able to preach it – to be able to announce that Gentiles were now incorporated into the Church which is Christ's Body! Paul's sense of thrill is almost palpable as he adds that this was news which had been hidden from all past generations and just at this time in history God had been pleased to disclose this fact as being his eternal purpose – and God was graciously using him – even Paul – as his instrument. No suffering could compare with the honour Paul felt in being given this responsibility to disclose such stupendous divine truth to men and women!

Paul shares a little more detail here about the glorious fact that all Christian believers, both Jew and Gentile, are now all one in the Body of Christ – the Church which is the embodiment of the divine Son who is its Head. In effect, the Church is the display unit for God to showcase his kindness (2:7) and wisdom (3:10) to the angels. Consistent with this, the Apostle Peter tells us that from the prophesying of the Old Testament prophets right through to the preaching of the New Testament evangelists, the angels in heaven have been most interested in the content of all those Spirit-given messages about the sufferings and the glories of the Christ (1 Peter 1:10-12). The angels, Peter says, earnestly desire to look into the sufferings of Christ which he suffered for his Church in order to bring it to share eternal glory with himself. Doubtless, they're still learning from the persecution Christ still suffers whenever members of the Body are persecuted on earth (Acts 9:4). So that Paul's own sufferings which he's just mentioned are included among those sufferings which are of intense viewing interest to angels (Colossians 1:24). In fact, in 1 Corinthians 4:9, Paul thinks that God has exhibited apostles like himself as a *'spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men.'* And it was while Paul was at Ephesus that an evil spirit

declared that he knew about Paul (Acts 19:15)! All this information builds up an intriguing picture of celestial classrooms of angelic beings learning to appreciate more of God's manifold wisdom through the Church – through us!

Perhaps that's something to bear in mind whenever we struggle through trials which no-one appears to be aware of. One day, we know, the Bible reveals to us that God once addressed a heavenly gathering and posed the question, specifically to Satan: *'Have you considered My servant Job?'* (Job 1:8). Satan and others surely continued to observe very closely that man's great trial. In modern times, Denise was an athletic and popular seventeen year-old who tripped up the stairs one day at school because all of a sudden her legs had become numb. After resting, she found she was now paralysed from the waist down. She was moved, as it happened, into the same rehabilitation centre as the Christian author Joni found herself in. Very soon Denise was paralysed all the way down from below her neck. In another three weeks, she was blind. She was diagnosed with rapidly progressive multiple sclerosis. Soon, she could only mumble. Her mother came and read her Bible to her. Her faith remained strong, but in three years Denise was dead. Joni reflected on how well Denise had taken her sufferings, and how sad that there'd been no witnesses who could glorify God for the testimony of her enduring faith. It was then her friends pointed out Ephesians 3:10 to her. There are always angelic witnesses! Perhaps God is using you even now to complete his angels' education!

So, that's one practical way in which we can participate in this purpose of the ages surrounding the mystery of Christ's Church, his Body. But how else can we be involved? Well, chapter 4 tells us. God, through Paul, has been giving us all this precious teaching in the first 3 chapters of this letter. But, just as every sermon should have a 'so what', Paul's coming to his right now. He begins chapter 4 with a 'therefore' …

Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all. But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure

of Christ's gift. Therefore it says, "When He ascended on high, He led captive a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men." (Now this expression, "He ascended," what does it mean except that He also had descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is Himself also He who ascended far above all the heavens, so that He might fill all things.) And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.

So this is where the rubber hits the tarmac – this is where the teaching starts to get practical. The appeal here is that we should live in a way that's worthy of our Gospel calling. We've glimpsed the Church in glory, with its members raised and seated with Christ in heavenly places, and how it's seen without defect (5:27) in the eternal realm. But how are we managing to represent all this in the here and now? Our earthly quarrels and divisions are totally out of character as we seek to visibly express the Body of Christ on earth – just as the first Christians did 2,000 years ago in New Testament Churches of God in all the different localities. Individually, we're holy, but day by day we're to live holy lives – that's another matter. Equally, we're all one in the Body of Christ, but while we remain on earth God desires that we should be visibly united. Not easy to achieve, is it? Paul prescribes a large dose of humility, gentleness, patience and loving tolerance in v.2 so that we might preserve what he calls here *'the unity of the Spirit'* - which he'll later describe as being *'the unity of the faith' and also as the unity of the knowledge of the Son of God.'*

Obviously, we need help in this matter, which is why the chapter talks about Christ ascending on high, leading captivity captive and giving gifts – included among which are evangelists and

teachers. It's very interesting to see that this is a quotation taken from the 68th psalm. Psalm 68 traces the sweep of Old Testament history as God brought his people out from Egypt and all through the desert; and finally the ark of the covenant was brought up to Jerusalem and into the temple Solomon had built. Now Jerusalem is on Mount Zion, and so it's as if God was then, at last, ascending to his rightful place among his people. To assist their service of God back then, God had taken 'captive' for himself the Levites and had 'given' them back to the priests to assist with the people's worship (Num.18). This is what Paul takes up as an analogy for the Lord as he now gives – not Levites – but evangelists and teachers to equip the individual believers; to promote Christian maturity in them; and overall with the end result that Christian unity on this earth should be reached.

When we see the Church described here in Ephesians 4:13, it's in the context of it becoming mature or attaining to a full-grown stature. And when we compare this with v.16, which is clearly talking about the growth of the entire Body, we realize that corporate maturity of the Body must be intended even in v.13. But how can the Body mature as a whole - other than through its individual parts? And that's certainly what's happening here: with gifted evangelists and teachers equipping individual believers so that they're no longer all at sea doctrinally. Instead, they lovingly speak doctrinal truth to other Body members which is how they're all, mutually, becoming more stable. And the end result is measured by the Body members together on earth attaining to genuine Christian unity.

It's Christ's Body on earth, in microcosm, in churches of God – just like the one at Ephesus - becoming physically what it already is in spiritual reality. It does this – or should I say – we do this by becoming visibly more united as a duty and function of our connectedness to other Body members.

I wonder how serious are we to help each other to mature as the Body of Christ? Would we be prepared to set aside traditions and prejudices and sit down and explore the Scriptures afresh for the sake of a greater visibly expressed Christian unity? That would surely give the angels something to talk about!

5. The difference doctrine makes

In Ephesians chapter 4, we've entered into the practical teaching section of Ephesians. Doctrine must make a difference. I also want you to notice that this comes before the discussion of spiritual warfare in chapter 6. In the next chapter we'll be thinking about being prepared for battle. But where's the battle? The battleground is set out in chapters 4 & 5, and it relates to our behaviours and relationships.

But first an illustration. Lobsters shed their shells to grow. They increase their size by about 20% every time they do this, which averages 4 or 5 times per year. Growth – physical growth – for the lobster would be impossible if it somehow refused to discard its old shell. Its development would be stunted, constricted. And neither can we grow spiritually if we fail to lay aside the behaviours and attitudes which were typical of our old, our previous self. This is the immensely practical teaching which the apostle Paul gave in Ephesians 4:22-32: *In reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth. Therefore, laying aside falsehood, speak truth each one of you with his neighbor, for we are members of one another. Be angry, and yet do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give the devil an opportunity. He who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good, so that he will have something to share with one who has need. Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear. Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another,*

tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.

It's clear that our old self died and was laid aside along with the death of Christ in the purposes of God (see Colossians 3:9-10), effective from our conversion. Then, in our Christian lives, it's our responsibility to account for that in the way we live. Day by day we're to lay aside the behaviours typical of our former self and our manner of life before we came to know Christ. Easier said than done, of course. But, it seems to me that Paul gives us no less than five examples of how to do it – five areas of our lives that must progressively change if we're to evidence personal spiritual growth. In each case, Paul first gives a negative command; then a positive command; and finally tells us the reason behind the change! In other words, five times over, he tells us to stop doing something; followed by telling us what we should be doing instead; and then explains the reason for commanding it.

Take the first of the five examples. '*Therefore, laying aside falsehood, speak truth each one of you with his neighbor, for we are members of one another.'* It's about no longer telling lies. Talking about lies, did you hear of the pastor who was walking across town when he came upon a group of about a dozen little boys in a side alley. In the centre of the group of boys was a dog. The pastor went over and asked, "What are you doing with that dog?" One of the boys replied, "This dog is a neighbourhood stray. We all want him, but only one of us can take him home. So we've decided that whichever one of us can tell the biggest lie will get to keep the dog." The pastor was shocked. He launched into a ten minute sermon against lying, beginning, "Don't you boys know it's a sin to lie," and ending with, "When I was your age, I never told a lie." There was silence for a minute. Just as the pastor was beginning to think he'd really got through to them, the smallest boy gave a deep sigh and said, "All right, give him the dog."

Surely he was right to imply that it was unlikely that the pastor as a child had never lied! And yet, it's so easy for us to exaggerate the truth to the point of it becoming a lie. Telling lies, for many is a way of life. But it shouldn't be for the Christian. So, the negative command which Paul gives first is that we lay aside falsehood. Bluntly put: stop telling lies! Then the positive command is that we speak the truth to each other. And the reason given for this in the context of our relationships with other Christians is that as members of the Church which is

Christ's Body, we're members of each other. We know that even when the members of our own human body don't communicate properly with each other, we soon become dysfunctional.

At Lazarus' grave Jesus showed not just sympathy and deep distress for the mourners (John 11:33-35), but also a sense of angry outrage ('deeply moved') at the monstrosity of death in God's world. But we're often very different when it comes to anger. So Paul now says: *Be angry, and yet do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give the devil an opportunity.* We tend to get angry at the wrong things – unlike Jesus, who always got angry at the right things. That's why Paul commands us not to be sinfully angry. When it comes to human anger, it's almost always a good idea to think twice, count to ten, or do whatever it takes to reconsider our response. God never needs to reconsider or repent for his anger. Because God is holy and perfect, his anger is holy and perfect. Divine wrath is real, but it is never petty, vengeful, haphazard, or cruel – traits which so often characterize our expressions of anger. Jesus displayed the righteous anger of God on several occasions, but not to avenge a personal wrong and never to justify himself.

In contrast, here's an example of uncontrolled anger. One morning Ralph woke up at five o'clock to a noise that sounded like someone repairing boilers on his roof. Still in his pyjamas, he went into the back yard to investigate. He found a woodpecker on the TV antenna, "pounding its little brains out on the metal pole." Angry at the little creature who'd ruined his sleep, Ralph picked up a rock and threw it. The rock sailed over the house, and he heard a distant crash as it hit the car. In utter disgust, Ralph took a vicious kick at a clod of dirt, only to remember – too late – that he was still in his bare feet. Uncontrolled anger, as Ralph learned, can sometimes be its own reward. (C. Swindoll, Growing Strong, p. 332).

Now for Paul's positive follow-up command - that was where he told us not to let the sun go down on our anger. In other words, sort things out quickly, before they escalate, and certainly before any bitterness sets in. And the reason given by Paul why we should act quickly? It's to prevent the Devil gaining an opportunity. As our accuser, he'd simply be delighted at the opportunity for reproaching us in this. He'd come back later and tell us, "You're no good, God can't use you. You can't control yourself." Don't give the Devil

that kind of opportunity. Settle any dispute in real quick time.

'He who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good, so that he will have something to share with one who has need.' This is the third lifestyle issue Paul deals with. A man named Emmanuel Nenger, back in the year 1887, went into a small grocery store to buy some turnips. He gave the clerk a $20 bill. As the clerk put the money in the cash drawer, she noticed some of the ink from the $20 bill came off on her fingers - which were damp from the turnips. She looks at Mr. Nenger, a man she has known for years, and looks again at the smudged bill. This man is a trusted friend; she's known him all her life; he can't be a counterfeiter. She gives him his change, and he leaves the store. But $20 is a lot of money in 1887, and eventually the clerk calls the police. They verify the bill as counterfeit and get a search warrant to look through Mr. Nenger's home. In the attic they find he's a master artist who paints $20 bills with brushes and paint! But also in the attic they find three portraits Nenger had painted. They seized these and eventually sold them at auction for $16,000 or a little more than $5,000 per painting. The irony is that it took Nenger almost as long to paint a $20 bill as it did for him to paint a $5,000 portrait! It's true that he was a thief, but the person from whom he stole the most was himself.

Is there not a lesson there for us? When we're 'generous' with our expenses' claim or when we 'borrow' someone else's idea or plagiarize the writings of others, we bring our own Christian identity into disrepute and defraud ourselves. When Paul switches now to the positive command, and tells us to perform what is good with our hands, it reminds me of the simple statement which summed up the life of our Lord Jesus: 'he went about doing good' (Acts 10). He continually dispensed blessing to others by everything he did. If we could be more like that we'd have joy in sharing with others – which, Paul says, is what it's all about.

Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear. On my travels to the Philippines I see painted on schoolyard walls a version of an old proverb: "The words of the tongue should have three gatekeepers: Is it true? Is it necessary? Is it kind?" – Arabian Proverb. These are three tests we'd do well to apply to what we're about to say in an

attempt to filter our speech. Someone has asked the question: "If someone paid you ten cents for every kind word you said about people, and collected five cents for every unkind word, would you be rich or poor?"

In time of war, the country was made aware that careless talk cost lives – because by that means useful information could get into the wrong hands, or ears! Careless talk is always a problem for a believer, for it grieves the Holy Spirit, the gracious heavenly guest who lives within each true believer on Christ. What's more, at the assessment of our lives of Christian service, we'll have to answer to Christ for every careless or idle word (cf. Matthew 12:36). At an evening social for army officers and their wives, the commanding general of the base had been given a special award and proceeded to drone on in a long speech of thanks. A lieutenant mumbled to the woman at his side, "Why they would award him a prize is beyond me. He's nothing but a stupid old windbag." The woman turned to him, and said, "Lieutenant, do you know who I am?" "No, ma'am." "I am the wife of the man you just called a stupid old windbag." "I see," said the young lieutenant, "and do you know who I am?" "No, I don't," said the general's wife. "Good," said the lieutenant as he disappeared into the crowd.

Point made, I trust. But now, let's move quickly on with Paul to the positive command – the one about saying instead those things which are good for edification. Words like: I'm proud of you, I knew you could do it, What a good helper, You're very special to me, I trust you, Well done, That's so creative, You make my day, You really tried hard, I couldn't be prouder of you. And the reason for replacing put-downs with speech which builds the other person up? It's to 'give grace' to the other person – and so be like Christ, who was noted for the gracious words which just poured from his lips (Luke 4:22) and blessed those who heard.

Finally, Paul said: '*Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.'* The mention of bitterness and slander comes immediately after the command not to grieve the Holy Spirit – implying that unwholesome speech and bitterness are things which grieve the Holy Spirit. You can live an outwardly upright and respectable life, but be consumed with bitterness inside. That grieves the Holy Spirit

within you. Paul's positive follow-up command is to replace the vices of bitterness, slander and malice with the virtues of kindness, tenderness and a forgiving attitude. Mamie Adams always went to a branch post office in her town because the postal employees there were friendly. She was once waiting in a long queue, and someone pointed out that there was no need to wait in line because there was a stamp machine in the lobby. "I know," said Mamie, "but the machine won't ask me about my arthritis." Mamie valued the kindness and tenderness of another sympathetic human being. The reason for us being like this is to be like the God who, in Christ, has forgiven us.

6. In the theatre of war

A classic vaudeville routine begins with a pitch-black theatre except for a large circle of light coming from a street lamp. In the spotlight, a man is on his knees, crawling with his hands in front of him, carefully probing the lighted circle. After a few moments a policeman walks on stage. Seeing the man on all fours, he poses the obvious question: "Did you lose something?" "Yes," the man replies. "I've lost my keys." Kindly, the police officer joins the man's search, and two figures now circle the lighted area on hands and knees. After some time, the officer stops. "Are you absolutely certain this is where you lost your keys? We must have covered every inch." "Why no," the man replies matter-of-factly, pointing to a darkened corner. "I lost them over there." Visibly shaken, the policeman exclaims, "Well, then why are we looking for them over here?" The man responds with equal annoyance: "Isn't that obvious? The light is better over here!" This classic comedy enacts a subtle point. It's far easier to limit any self-examination to comfortable places. Searching in the dark and difficult corners of our lives is less desirable than searching where we'll not find any disturbing answers.

This is the theme of Ephesians chapter 5, from verse 3: *But immorality or any impurity or greed must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints; and there must be no filthiness and silly talk, or coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks ... Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not be partakers with them; for you were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk as children of Light (for the fruit of the Light consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth), trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. Do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead even expose them; for it is disgraceful even to speak of the things which are done by them in secret. But all things become visible when they are exposed by the light, for everything that becomes visible is light.* (Ephesians 5:3-13)

We live in a defiling world. Someone older has said that when they were growing up all

today's temptations were available. But back then it was like walking down a corridor lined with closed doors on which were the names of different temptations. The difference today, largely through the global reach and instant accessibility of the internet, is that when we walk down the same corridor, all the doors are now already wide open. Access to corrupting material has never been easier. And if our purity is tested today, then so is our submission. The general command to be subject to one another is applied in what follows to three different sets of relationships. This, equally, is challenging because it goes against the self-assertive spirit of the modern age.

Following on from the problem behaviours discussed in Ephesians chapter 4, we now see how chapter 5 reviews the challenges we face to our purity and submissiveness. Overall, in these two chapters, we're covering terrain over which the spiritual conflict of chapter 6 rages.

Be subject to one another in the fear of Christ. Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her …

Here, in Ephesians chapter 5:21-25, the submission of the wife is coupled with the requirement for the husband to be loving. Perhaps, ladies, the former isn't quite so daunting when we realize that it's equally God's desire that the husband should always have his wife's best interests at heart. It must be easier to submit when we're assured that the other person is seeking our well-being. As a gentle reminder to loving husbands, let me tell you the story of the husband who's brought to the window one Friday afternoon by his wife. "Do you see that man over there with the bunch of flowers in his hand? Every Friday he comes home with a bouquet of flowers for his wife – why won't you do that?" "But I hardly know the woman," the cornered husband replied! Perhaps, his humour defused the situation, but hopefully he learned a lesson, for there's danger in taking our spouse for granted!

Probably with these verses in mind, Martin Luther once said that human marriage was God's best way of explaining himself. It's seen here as reflecting the relationship between Christ and

his Church. Marriage – a permanent marriage relationship - is modelled on the spiritual union of Christ and his Church. But we spoke of three specific areas of submission, not just one, so let's read further now:

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and mother (which is the first commandment with a promise), so that it may be well with you, and that you may live long on the earth … Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ … (Ephesians 6:1-5)

These verses show that children are to submit to their parents, and also that employees are to submit to their employers. Satan knows this is what God wants, and he tries to disrupt these things. He's being successful today in disrupting marriages – even Christian marriages – and the family unit is also under heavy attack today in a society of absent fathers and dysfunctional families. Satan is attacking the very fabric of society by attacking the divine institutions of marriage and family life. We need to react by living defensively by using the principles Paul now shares.

Verse 10 begins with the word 'finally'. This word implies that a conclusion to what has previously been written will now be drawn as we read about the spiritual armour (in Ephesians 6:10-18) that's available to us for the battlegrounds we've looked at briefly in chapters 4 & 5.

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore, take up the full armor of God, so that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand firm therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; in addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. With all prayer and petition pray at all times …

We're taught here about the need to be strong by God's help in the spiritual battle against the

forces of evil. The value of our Christian life for God depends on understanding this information! At verse 14, the command to 'stand firm therefore' is an urgent command. And in verses 14-16 there are 4 words which go on to describe exactly how we're to stand. These words are: having girded; having put on; having shod; taking up. They each relate to the first 4 pieces of armour. Then verse 17 starts a new point with a fresh command.

We'll start with the first command in verse 14; and the first description of how we're to stand – by buckling on our belt. Before a Roman soldier put on his armour, he put a belt around his waist. To be able to examine the belt properly we have to get rid of our 21st century ideas about belts. In the first century when you got dressed you would put on your 'loin cloth' – which was like an oversized nappy. Then you would put on your undergarment, which was basically a long, baggy shirt. After that you would put on your cloak. Basically, this process meant you had all this baggy clothing hanging off you – which is why you needed a belt. It'd be used to gather up all that loose clothing, and hold it in place, so it wouldn't get in the way when you were walking about. The wide belt also served to hold the bottom of the breastplate in place, as well as being the holder for a lot of equipment. If the belt was not in place you'd always be in real danger of tripping over your own clothing. Everything depended on the belt being right – or the rest was useless.

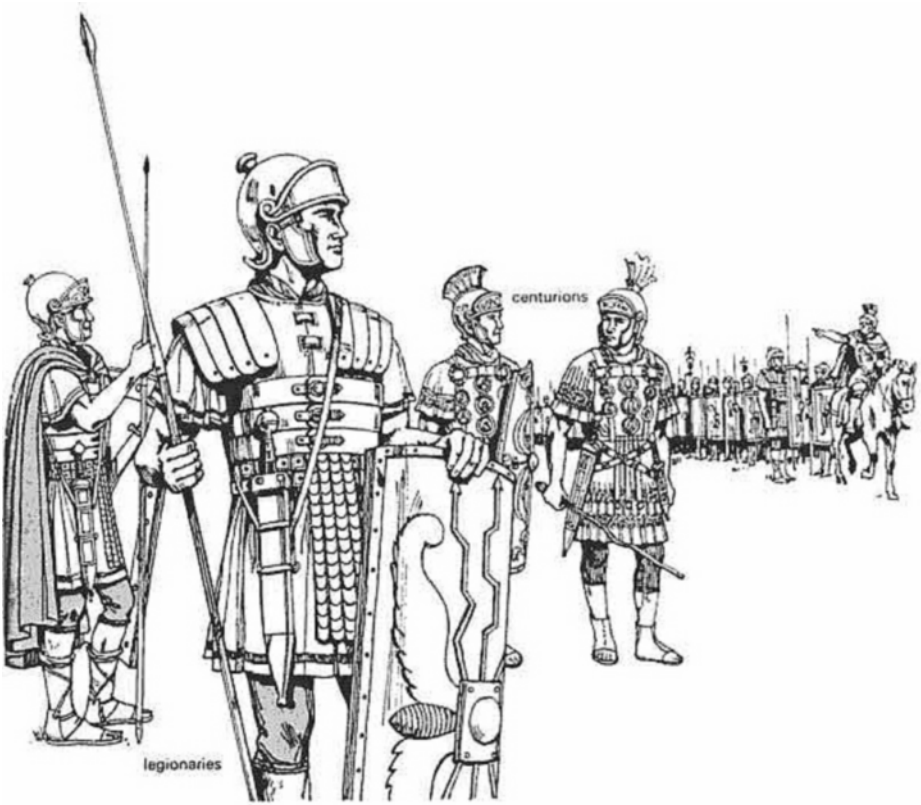
Now, let's get to grips with the actual teaching. We've absolutely got to take a stand as a Christian, and here, pictured as a belt, is the first thing we've to get right. But what is it for us? Well, it's called the belt of truth, so that's a clue. But 'truth' can be a description of actual facts. Or 'truth' can refer to a state of genuineness. Or again, 'truth' is a major part of integrity. So when we buckle on the belt of truth what are we doing? Are we buckling up a set of facts? Are we talking about whether or not we're genuine Christians? Or, is it an issue of being people of integrity? The context informs us that truth here refers to a believer's integrity (dependability & faithfulness). As a soldier's belt gave freedom of movement, our personal integrity gives freedom with self, others, and God.

Let me try to explain integrity by giving an example. According to some, the best golfer in history, Bobby Jones was in the rough, at the 1925 U.S. Open when he reported that his ball moved as he addressed it. Without that one-shot penalty, he would have won outright. Instead, Jones

finished in a tie and lost the playoff. He scoffed at praise for his sportsmanship. 'You might as well praise me for not breaking into banks,' Jones said before adding: 'There's only one way to play this game' – and there's only one way to live victoriously as a Christian. Integrity means doing the right thing, even when nobody is watching. It means doing the right thing, even when others are not. Integrity means doing the right thing even when others misunderstand and criticise you for what you do.

Next was the breastplate of righteousness which was light in weight and gave ease of movement as well as protection from blows. It was anchored to the belt, from above. In Proverbs 4:23, we're taught to guard our heart with all diligence for out of it flows our whole life. The decisions we make determine the outcome of our life. How vital then that we choose to do what's right, not what's popular, and not what we can get away with.

Then our feet are to be fitted with readiness. Some historians



credit their footwear as one of the reasons why the Roman Army was so dominant. It was equipped with spikes on the soles to provide soldiers with grip, strong stance and a good balance – all of which gave them a superior posture in battles typically fought on uneven terrain. We need to have a good grip of, and take a firm stand on, Gospel truth. Satan will try to back us into situations to wrong-foot us. Let's not slip up on the fundamentals of the Gospel and of the Christian Faith.

And so we come to the shield of faith. The Romans had a long, rectangular, knees-to-chin shield which protected them from spears, and it could be knelt behind if arrows were raining in on them. Groups of soldiers who were besieging a town could close ranks in formation and hold their shields over their heads to make a huge cover to protect the whole group from fiery arrows. The Roman shield pictures the faith of the believer in the promises of God, taking God at his Word, while we're reminded of the benefits of keeping in step with others around us.

Next there's the helmet of salvation. The Romans had the best helmet of the ancient world. Originally made of animal skin, it was strengthened with bronze or other metal, and topped with a horsehair crest, with a visor to protect the face. The greatest battlefield is in our minds. This is the area that the enemy most wants to attack. He wants to damage our assured hope of salvation – to cause us to doubt. The Bible encourages us to prepare our minds for action (1 Peter 1:13), and set them on things above (Colossians 3:2).

Finally, the sword of the Spirit – probably referring to the two-edged sword. Its advantage was that the soldier didn't have to turn his sword round to inflict damage to the enemy. Our sword of the Spirit is the word of God. When Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness, he quoted scripture. May God help us to stand firm on the promises of his Word – and maintain purity and submissiveness in all our relationships!

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