

## THE LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS

Paul spent three years in Ephesus during his Third Journey, so he knew the believers there well. They were mainly Gentile Christians. The date of this letter takes us a long way on from the Galatian epistle, and even beyond the Roman one. Chapter three tells us Paul was a prisoner (v1), and in the last chapter he says that he was an ambassador in chains for the Kingdom of God (see Ephesians 6:20). There is a certain irony here. Ambassadors do not normally find themselves in chains, because they have diplomatic immunity! So, he is writing from prison, during the period covered by the last chapters of Acts.

In spite of his miserable circumstances, the aged apostle is full of thankfulness for the goodness God has shown in calling us to know the gospel. He prays for God to open the eyes of the Ephesians so that they would really appreciate his grace. It was not for anything they had done, but out of love. Once, as Gentiles, they had been shut out from the promises God had made. Now, through the sacrifice of Jesus, Gentiles and Jews could share the peace that the gospel brings.

*“ ..... remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated 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 once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (Ephesians 2:12, 13).*

Paul's statement is still true; unless we seize the offer of peace God has made, and join ourselves to the Lord Jesus, we have no hope. Hope is something we desperately need in this dying world.

Again in extravagant language the great preacher speaks of his privilege in being allowed to spread the good news. And he prays (*“I bow my knees before the Father...”*) that his readers would begin to understand the amazing love of Christ, which extends outwards, he says, to four dimensions – breadth, length, height and depth (Ephesians 3:17-19)!

Only when he reaches the fourth chapter does he get round to his exhortation. Because God had called them to peace with him, they must live at peace with each other. Jews and Gentiles in the congregation must unite together, in spite of their different backgrounds, and show humility and patience towards each other. The risen Christ had poured out upon them the Holy Spirit gifts (he quotes Psalm 68 to show this phenomenon had been predicted). These supernatural powers were to help the infant church to grow. It was like a human body, with different limbs and organs, developing from child to adult in the likeness of the Master himself.

This idea leads him into a simple but powerful analogy about two coats. Before our baptism into Christ we are all children of Adam, propelled by fleshly desires and evil practices. Now we must take off the Adam coat, he says, with its bad ways that lead to corruption, and put on the Jesus coat, the one that shapes us into the likeness of God - not just in physical form, but in mind and outlook. So, because God speaks the truth, we must abandon lies. Because God is generous, we must stop stealing from people, and instead give to the needy. Because God's words bring blessing, we must end hurtful talk, and speak what will build up and encourage others. And because God forgave our sins, we must forgive each other. Children imitate their parents, he says (we all remember copying Mum or Dad when they started painting or cooking or digging the garden); so, as God's children, we must imitate him.

Adam's folk live in darkness. We are children of the light. Paul quotes what is probably a line from an early Christian hymn about baptism and resurrection:

*“Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you”  
(Ephesians 5:14)*

Emerging from a symbolic watery grave, the newborn Christian, like the blind man who washed in the Pool of Siloam, emerges to a new world where Christ, the light of the world, gives him joy and direction.

Paul concludes his theme of unity and consideration for one other by creating three pairs within the congregation. Wife and husband make up the first. They must, he says, submit to each other. The wife should treat her husband as if he were Christ, and the husband should care for his wife with the same love that Jesus showed to his bride, the Church. Child and parent come next. Children should obey their father and mother, just as Jesus obeyed his Father - God promises a blessing for this. At the same time fathers should not be harsh with their youngsters. They should accept it as their duty to bring up their children "*in the discipline and instruction of the Lord*" (*Ephesians 6:4*). That is something to remember in these lawless days. The last pair is slave and master. Slavery was normal in the Roman world, and some slaves found hope and purpose in following Jesus. They must give good service, Paul insists, as if they were serving Jesus himself. Christian masters must remember they were servants of the Lord, who shows no respect of persons. The picture of master and slave, side by side on the first day of the week remembering their common Lord in broken bread and wine, is an amazing example of the unity that binds together the followers of Christ.

The letter concludes with a lesson from the Roman soldier – perhaps one guarding the apostle as he wrote. Paul likens the Christian life to a warfare against Sin. We need all the armour God provides – helmet, shield, sword and even gospel sandals, and the courage to stand firm when things get tough.