

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR OCTOBER 3

EPHESIANS 3:1-13

THE BACKGROUND

Paul began his Letter to the Ephesians with the best of all news — that God had acted on their behalf through the Lord Jesus Christ. God had lavished great spiritual benefits on them. What were these lavish actions? God chose, predestined, adopted, redeemed, forgave, made known His will, made believers His inheritance, and sealed them with the Holy Spirit. What awesome power and plenteous grace He poured out on them because of Christ! Paul also revealed the content of his prayers for the believers and then reviewed how God had made them, who formerly were dead in their sins, alive in Christ Jesus. In Ephesians 2:11-22 Paul magnified how God brought both believing Jews and Gentiles into one new man in Christ. Nothing on earth can compare with the body of Christ, this multicultural family of believers God loves and indwells (2:22). At this point in the letter (3:1), Paul offered a prayer for the Ephesians but abruptly digressed and then resumed his prayer in 3:14. His digression was about the mystery of Christ and the apostle's sense of responsibility to make known to the world this wonderful mystery.

1. RECOGNIZING GOD'S GRACE (EPHESIANS 3:1-2)

Verse 1: *For this reason, I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles—*

Here the apostle briefly turned his thoughts toward himself. His self-description was I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus. In his letters Paul elsewhere referred to himself as a prisoner of Christ (Eph. 4:1; 2 Tim. 1:8; Philem. 1,9) and in Ephesians 6:20 as “an ambassador in chains.” At the time of his writing the Letter to the Ephesians, Paul had been a prisoner for approximately four years, including his imprisonment in Caesarea and his travel time to Rome. Luke informed us in the Book of Acts that while in Jerusalem, Paul was arrested because Jews falsely accused him of taking a Gentile named Trophimus [TRAHF-ih-muhs] into an area of the temple forbidden to non-Jews.

Following his arrest, Paul experienced a string of hearings: before the Sanhedrin (a ruling Jewish council of the highest authority), before Felix the governor, and later

before Felix's successor Festus. Paul even presented his defense before King Agrippa, who commented that had Paul not appealed to Caesar to hear his case, the apostle could have been released (Acts 26:32). Having appealed to Caesar, however, Paul was placed on a ship sailing to Rome. There he spent two years under house arrest in his own rented quarters (Acts 28:30).

Paul, however, didn't think of himself as the emperor's prisoner. According to his self-description, he was the prisoner of Christ Jesus. Paul had assurance that his situation was in the Lord's hands. He knew the outcome of his imprisonment, whether acquittal or the death sentence, was ultimately under God's control. Paul's outlook on his life was that the whole of his life was under the rule of the King of kings, the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul belonged to Christ wherever he was or whatever the circumstances. If Paul had believed his life was controlled by his Jewish accusers, his persecutors, his guards, or even the government of the Roman Empire, he could have yielded to despair. How believers react to their circumstances is always more important than those circumstances.

In commenting on his imprisonment in his Letter to the Philippians, Paul wrote: “Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has actually resulted in the advancement of the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard, and to everyone else, that my imprisonment is for Christ” (Phil. 1:12-13).

Paul further acknowledged his imprisonment was on behalf of ... Gentiles. Fanatical Jewish opposition to Paul's preaching to Gentiles had resulted in his arrest and imprisonment, his consequent trials, and his appeal to Caesar, that paved the path to Rome. The Jews hated Paul. They identified him as “the man who teaches everyone everywhere against our people, our law, and this place” (Acts 21:28). Imprisoned in Rome, Paul was still presenting the same gospel message, which was, as he wrote in Ephesians 2:11-22, the work of God in creating a new and an undivided humanity, the church of Christ, consisting of Jew and Gentile in peaceful and equal status before God. As Paul wrote this Letter to the Ephesians, he was suffering because of the very truths he was preaching and living.

Verse 2: *you have heard, haven't you, about the administration of God's grace that He gave to me for you?*

Paul's ministry was not of his own origination. God had sent Him to preach the good news of peace with God and peace between Jew and Gentile through Christ. Paul described his ministry as the administration of God's grace that “He gave to me for you.” The Greek word for “administration” also means “stewardship” and refers to the management of a household or the oversight of another's property. In other words, Paul's commission was that of an administrator whose responsibility was to help carry out God's work on earth. Furthermore, Paul's authority to speak for God about Christ was solely by God's grace. Paul knew without question that his opportunities to serve God were because of His grace, and the intent of his service was that both Jews and Gentiles would experience God's grace by coming to know Christ as Savior.

2. RECEIVING GOD'S REVELATION (EPHESIANS 3:3-6)

In Ephesians 3:1-2 Paul made clear that his ministry to the Gentiles was solely because of God's grace. His ministry involved the administration or stewardship of God's grace. In verse 3 and following, the nature of this stewardship becomes clear. It has to do with the mystery by which God determined to include believing Gentiles as equal partners along with believing Jews into the one body of the church.

Verses 3-4: *The mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have briefly written above. By reading this you are able to understand my insight about the mystery of the Messiah.*

Paul didn't acquire an understanding of this mystery by his own diligent searching. Rather, the unveiling of this mystery was by God's revelation to him. In Ephesians 3:3-6 Paul elaborated on the mystery.

The Greek word translated “mystery” occurs six times in Paul's Letter to the Ephesians. The connotation of the term in the Scriptures does not have the same meaning that we generally associate with the term “mystery.” We typically think of a mystery as something puzzling, obscure, or not understood. In the Scriptures, however, the word refers to truth once hidden from human understanding but now revealed by God. Thus a mystery is a revealed secret, something that cannot be understood except by divine revelation. Paul explicitly stated the essence of this mystery in Ephesians 3:6. He could do so only because of

the insight God gave him regarding the mystery.

Paul did not gain his zeal for preaching because God gave him emotionally high experiences, although he may have had many. Rather, Paul's understanding of God's great mystery received by divine revelation led him to sacrifice his time, health, safety, and freedom to impart to others God's wonderful truth, now fully revealed.

The insight Paul received was a God-given understanding about the "mystery of the Messiah." This phrase points to the mystery's content and character. It centers in Christ. God prepared Paul for ministry by giving him a supernatural revelation regarding His Son and His purpose through His Son.

Verse 5: *This was not made known to people in other generations as it is now revealed to His holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit:*

This mystery is one people in other generations did not know, Paul wrote, as clearly as it is now revealed. Paul's language takes into account Old Testament passages regarding the blessing of the Gentiles (see Gen. 12:3; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14; 1 Kings 8:41-43). However, this truth was not proclaimed so fully or extensively as under the new covenant. In particular the revelation regarding the church as the one body of Christ, consisting of both believing Jews and Gentiles, had not been disclosed. Paul was not the only believer who received insight by the Spirit into God's mystery. Others who received this revelation were holy apostles and prophets. The designation "apostles" refers to official delegates of Jesus (Eph. 1:1; 2:20) commissioned by Him. Prophets were believers whom the Holy Spirit gifted to edify, encourage, and comfort God's people and to give understanding of God's revelation, which included, but was not limited to, prediction (see Eph. 4:11-12). These men were holy because they were set apart for the task of proclaiming the gospel.

Verse 6: *the Gentiles are co-heirs, members of the same body, and partners of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.*

Paul here spelled out with clarity the exact nature of God's mystery. God was creating His church in which both Gentile and Jewish believers share equally in God's blessings in Christ. In the church Jew and Gentile are fused into perfect spiritual union, into "one new man" (Eph. 2:15). In God's house no spiritual walls are to exist; no

barriers are to separate those who are part of His church.

It is hard for us to imagine how incredibly revolutionary this reality was to Jews in the first century. The idea that God would create something new in His universe (the church) where Jew and Gentile were equally accepted was unthinkable. From the general perspective of the Jews, total spiritual equality with Gentiles was a heinous idea God would not tolerate. That Jews and Gentiles could become one people was simply inconceivable. However, through His grace and power God did just that. In His church — the body of Christ — no racial, cultural, political, or other such divides exist!

Paul showed that Jews and Gentiles hold their salvation jointly in Christ's church. To make his point, he used three parallel expressions, each of which in Greek begins with a prefix meaning "together with." This repetition stresses the reality of Jewish and Gentile equality in the body of Christ.

First, Gentiles are co-heirs. Believing Gentiles have received jointly with believing Jews the blessings of salvation. Second, Gentiles are members of the same body. They have equal standing before God along with other members of Christ's body, the church. Third, being in Christ, Gentiles also are partners of the promise in Christ Jesus. The blessing of salvation belongs to believing Gentiles as well as to believing Jews, and all because of Jesus who alone purchased their salvation by His death and resurrection.

3. RESPONDING THROUGH GOD'S POWER (EPHESIANS 3:7-10)

At this point, Paul turned to discuss God's placement of him in God's service, his sense of personal unworthiness, and his realization that he effectively served only by God's power.

Verse 7: *I was made a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace that was given to me by the working of His power.*

Paul paid a heavy price in serving the Lord by preaching the good news of this wonderful mystery now revealed. He briefly wrote of his sufferings at the hands of the Jews in 2 Corinthians 11:24-25a: "Five times I received from the Jews 40 lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned." As he wrote the Letter to the Ephesians, the apostle was chained and awaiting trial because of the Jews' hatred for him and the message of equality in Christ for all believers (Eph. 6:20).

Paul explicitly stated that his call to share the gospel with Gentiles and Jews was a gift of God's grace. The word translated "servant" is not the word for a bondservant or slave, but rather it refers to one who works for the benefit of others. Such persons advance others' interests even at the sacrifice of their own. The word used here also may be translated "deacon" or "minister." God made Paul a minister of the gospel and enabled him to carry out this responsibility by the working of His power. Paul realized that effective service for the Lord depends on His power. When God gives you and me responsibilities and opportunities to serve, He also provides His power to carry them out. Thank God, He both calls us to share "the mystery of the Messiah" (3:4) and empowers us to do so effectively. How wonderful is His grace!

Verse 8: *This grace was given to me—the least of all the saints!—to proclaim to the Gentiles the incalculable riches of the Messiah,*

Paul was humbled by privileges God had given to him because he viewed himself as the least of all the saints! Paul expressed himself with a sudden outburst of amazement that God would use him to proclaim Christ the Lord and Savior. This statement was no feigned humility on Paul's part. He really felt this way because he "was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an arrogant man" (1 Tim. 1:13; see also 1 Cor. 15:9).

Paul was deeply conscious that he had not merited God's grace in saving him and in calling him to service. Such grace is identified here as the privilege of proclaiming the incalculable riches of the Messiah. These riches are not only what Christ has done for us but also Christ Himself. Christ's riches are incalculable. This word in the Greek language also means "untrackable" or "untraceable."

Christ's gifts to us as well as the Giver are unfathomable, infinite, inscrutable, beyond our abilities to investigate or comprehend. They are like the oceans — too vast and deep to fathom. When sinners come to Christ, they are never impoverished but always immeasurably enriched. The gospel is the greatest of all treasures.

Verse 9: *and to shed light for all about the administration of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things.*

Paul not only was to preach the wealth of Christ to Gentiles, but he also was to shed light for all about the administration of the mystery. God commissioned Paul to bring to light, to enable hearers of the gospel to

understand God's administration or plan regarding the make-up of Christ's church — consisting of both believing Jews and Gentiles. Paul previously had repeated to King Agrippa the words Jesus had spoken to him regarding the apostle's ministry: "to open their eyes that they may turn from darkness to light ... that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a share among those who are sanctified by faith in Me" (Acts 26:18). God who created all things has created something new — a new community of believing Jews and Gentiles who enjoy spiritual equality as His people.

Verse 10: *This is so that God's multi-faceted wisdom may now be made known through the church to the rulers and authorities in the heavens.*

One purpose of Paul's ministry is that the church might display God's multi-faceted wisdom. The Greek word translated "multi-faceted" also means "many-colored," "diverse," or "intricate" and points to the diversity and splendor of God's wisdom in creating His church. The multi-cultural, multi-racial church of Christ reflects the many-splendored wisdom of God, with its constantly unfolding beauty.

The rulers and authorities in the heavens marvel at God's multi-faceted wisdom as they observe God's church formed and growing and sweeping into its family reconciled peoples of all ages and cultures. These rulers and authorities watch with fascination as Jews and Gentiles come into Christ's church as reconciled sinners with spiritual equality. Heavenly beings must marvel at this audiovisual display of God's wonderful wisdom.

Paul stated that his ministry to the Gentiles, which he had gladly accepted, was an experience of God's grace and an expression of God's power as well as an extension of God's plan.

4. REJOICING THROUGH GOD'S POWER (EPHESIANS 3:11-13)

The church, God's new and reconciled people who live in union with Christ and one another, is His eternal purpose in history. God's multinational community of believers is the centerpiece of His plan in time and space. History is "His story."

Verse 11: *This is according to the purpose of the ages, which He made in the Messiah, Jesus our Lord,*

This plan to create the church was not a last-minute idea God developed. Rather it was His plan from eternity, or as

Paul stated, "according to the purpose of the ages." Christ is the Agent of this eternal purpose. In verse 11 Paul spelled out His identity. Each of these names or titles adds to our understanding of His work. His name is Jesus, meaning "salvation." He is the promised Messiah or "Anointed One" who achieved reconciliation on the cross for Jews and Gentiles. Christ also is "our Lord," a phrase stressing His personal relationship with all believers.

Verse 12: *in whom we have boldness, access, and confidence through faith in Him.*

Believers live in a personal relationship with Christ and enjoy, among many other blessings, three wonderful privileges: boldness, access, and confidence. The Greek word translated "boldness" can be defined as "speaking openly or frankly without concealment" or "telling all." It refers to candor, confidence, and freedom to speak without restraint. It is because of our union with Christ, and only because of this union, that we are free to speak openly to our Heavenly Father. The fact that we are in Christ assures us we have our Father's listening ear.

The second privilege is access. All believers are free to approach God because their being in Christ assures them of having God's favor. Together the two words strengthen the idea of freedom of access to the living God. The third privilege is confidence.

These three great privileges, Paul said, we have. The form of this verb in the Greek language signifies continuous action. Paul was reminding these Gentile believers, once far away from God (Eph. 2:11-13), to come to the Lord in prayer and to come often.

Verse 13: *So then I ask you not to be discouraged over my afflictions on your behalf, for they are your glory.*

With the words "so then," Paul concluded his digression begun in verse 2. He encouraged the Ephesians not to lose heart about his imprisonment. Rather, they should look on the positive side. Paul's imprisonment was one of the results of his preaching to the Gentiles the riches of Christ.

The apostle had challenged the world's physical and spiritual power structures that opposed God's plan. As a result Paul was paying the price of imprisonment. However, also because of his preaching, Ephesian Gentiles had become Christians. Thus Paul's afflictions were indeed their gain and glory. Paul's chains were visible proof of how precious the Ephesians were to God.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR OCTOBER 10

EPHESIANS 3:14-21

THE BACKGROUND

Paul was busy in Rome. His being in prison restricted his movement but did not curtail his serving the Lord. The end of the Book of Acts reveals Paul busily engaged in evangelism. “Then he stayed two whole years in his own rented house. And he welcomed all who visited him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching the things concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with full boldness and without hindrance” (Acts 28:30-31).

Paul also wrote three letters to churches and one to an individual while in prison. Those letters are Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. While imprisoned at Rome, the apostle also faithfully prayed for the churches. He prayed for the church at Philippi (Phil. 1:3-5), for the church at Colossae (Col. 1:3,9-12), and for a believer named Philemon who lived at Colossae and whom Paul had led to Christ (Philem. 4-7). Paul also prayed for the church at Ephesus (Eph. 1:15-23; 3:14-21) and his prayer recorded in Ephesians 3 is our focus in this week’s study.

1. WHAT WE NEED (EPHESIANS 3:14-16)

Verse 14: *For this reason I bow my knees before the Father*

As Paul prayed, he knelt before God. His Jewish contemporaries usually stood as they prayed (Matt. 6:5; Luke 18:11; contrast this posture with that in the following: Ezra 9:5; Ps. 95:6; Dan. 6:10; Luke 22:41; Acts 7:60; 9:40). Bowing his knees to pray showed Paul’s deep earnestness and reverent humility before the Father. The word “Father” suggests Paul’s intimate relationship with the One to whom he was speaking. Jesus also addressed God in prayer as “Father” and taught His disciples to do the same (Matt. 6:9). Christians do not pray to their Heavenly Father in fear He will turn them away and reject their prayers. Instead they come to One who is compassionate, accepting, and pleased that they seek Him and His blessing.

Verse 15: *from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named.*

Paul further identified the One to whom he prayed as the Father — from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named. The phrase expresses a difficult concept, and Bible

scholars hold different opinions about its meaning. However the words are interpreted, Paul evidently included them to exalt God’s greatness. Because God created all things (Eph. 3:9), He names every family in heaven and on earth.

The early Christians prayed, “Master, You are the One who made the heaven, the earth, and the sea, and everything in them” (Acts 4:24). It was to this sovereign Lord, the Creator of every family and of all else, that Paul prayed. As God, how mighty is His power! As Father, how compassionate is His heart! No wonder Paul prayed — he was certain the Lord could and would answer his prayer for the Ephesians believers. What did Paul request for them?

Verse 16: *I pray that He may grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man,*

In this verse the apostle informed the Ephesians of exactly what he was requesting of God on their behalf. Before he stated the gist of the request, however, Paul asked that God grant it according to the riches of His glory. The phrase is properly translated “according to His riches” rather than “out of His riches.”

However, Paul wasn’t finished. He also asked God to answer his prayer according to the wealth of His glory. The word glory refers to God’s essential nature or weighty importance, His divine power and majesty, the sum of His character and attributes. In other words, Paul asked God to give according to the wealth of Himself.

According to all the wealth of God’s glory, Paul asked that the Ephesians be strengthened with power through His Spirit. Two Greek words relating to God’s enabling of His children appear in this phrase. First, the verb translated “be strengthened” comes from a root meaning “to be strong.” It is in the passive form in the original language, stressing that the subject is the recipient of the action. The other term is translated “power,” and from it is derived the English word “dynamite.” As the passive form of the verb indicates, this strength is not self-endowed. It comes from God alone, which the phrase through His Spirit reinforces. It is through God’s Spirit that believers experience strength.

Even when he prayed for himself, the apostle often prayed to be a better servant of God and His people. For example, in this letter Paul asked the Ephesians to “pray also for me, that the message may be given to me when I open my mouth to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel” (Eph. 6:19; see also Col. 4:3-4).

2. WHAT WE RECEIVE (EPHESIANS 3:17-19)

Verse 17: *and that the Messiah may dwell in your hearts through faith. I pray that you, being rooted and firmly established in love,*

Paul first requested that the believers “be strengthened with power through His Spirit” (3:16). Continuing his address to them, Paul next stated the result he asked God to accomplish in their lives by strengthening them. It was that “the Messiah may dwell in your hearts.” What exactly did Paul mean by this expression? Of course, Christ lived in the believers at Ephesus from the moment He saved them. Christ comes to live in all believers at the moment of each one’s conversion (Rom. 8:9-10). Thus Paul was not praying for them to become Christians. They already had received Him as Savior.

The Greek word translated “dwell” helps us understand Paul’s meaning. The Greek term is a compound word formed from two other words. One word means “down” and the other means “to settle” or “to reside.” Thus dwell refers to inhabiting or settling down in a place. It has the concept of permanence, an abiding residence as opposed to a temporary one. The implication is definitely not that the Messiah might leave these believers. They were eternally secure as are all true believers. Rather, Paul’s concern was with how much of their lives they were letting the Lord control. Was He only present in the Ephesian believers lives or was He pre-eminent? Paul wanted these believers to grow in the settled assurance that Christ was completely at home in their lives as sovereign Lord.

Paul’s prayer included the petition that these believers might allow the Lord to strengthen them every day of their lives, that Christ might empower every human faculty they possessed — heart, mind, and will — so that they would become more and more like Him in love for God and for one another. They could experience these blessings of growth in Christlikeness through faith.

Paul prayed for the Father to strengthen the Ephesians by His Spirit so Christ might be deeply established in their lives. All three Persons of the Trinity are involved in believers’ lives to strengthen them spiritually: the Father (Eph. 3:14), the Spirit (3:16), and the Son (3:17).

As the Ephesians are rooted and firmly established in love, they will be able to better comprehend God’s love. Whose love did Paul have in mind with the phrase “in love”

— God’s, Christ’s, or the believers’? Probably the correct understanding here is the Ephesian believers’ love for one another. However, even their love, and ours, has its source in God’s love, which was demonstrated in Christ’s death for us (Rom. 5:8). The one Source of Christian love always is God.

The Ephesians’ love was rooted and firmly established. The two metaphors express the same thought using different word pictures. One picture is agricultural. The image is that of believers as plants rooted in the soil of love. The other picture is architectural. In this image believers are portrayed as buildings resting on the foundation of love. Love was the soil into which their lives were rooted and the foundation on which their lives were built (see also 1 Cor. 3:9; Col. 2:7).

The apostle was not praying for the believers to be rooted and established; they already were rooted and grounded in love. They loved, however, because God first loved them (1 John 4:19). God loved them so much that He had blessed them with every spiritual blessing (Eph. 1:3), which included God’s choosing them (1:4), predestining and adopting them (1:5), redeeming and forgiving them (1:7), and sealing them with the Spirit (1:13). Furthermore, God had placed them into Christ’s body, His church. These everlastingly rich favors resulted in their love, so Paul made another appeal.

Verses 18-19: *may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the length and width, height and depth of God’s love, and to know the Messiah’s love that surpasses knowledge, so you may be filled with all the fullness of God.*

The apostle’s next request, his second step on the staircase, was for the Ephesians to experience a deeper understanding of God’s love. Specifically, Paul voiced to God his heartfelt desire that the believers comprehend with all the saints the length and width and height and depth of God’s love. The word “comprehend” means “to grasp.” Paul desired that the Ephesians grasp the significance of God’s love.

Bible scholars express the significance of Paul’s long clause in various ways. One expression is that God’s love is broad enough to reach out to all the peoples of the earth, long enough to last forever, deep enough to save the most vile sinner, and high enough to bring sinners into God’s very presence in heaven. The measurements to which Paul referred are not specific. The apostle’s deliberate imprecision likely is intended to indicate the vastness of God’s love, a love so great that it is beyond our measuring, describing, and estimating.

God’s love in Christ surpasses knowledge. His love in its

fullness is unknowable, just as His riches are “incalculable” (3:8). To fully comprehend the Messiah’s love is beyond human capability. Even the one act of Christ’s love expressing itself in dying for sinners on the cross is beyond our complete comprehension.

Bible scholars think of God’s attributes as including both communicable and incommunicable attributes. His communicable attributes are love, mercy, knowledge, truthfulness, and holiness. In these qualities we can become more like God. The incommunicable qualities include God’s self-existence, unchangeableness, eternity, omnipresence, omnipotence, and omniscience.

3. WHO TO ASK (EPHESIANS 3:20-21)

Paul had just prayed that the believers might be filled with all God’s fullness, a bold request, perhaps the boldest any believer can ask. Did the apostle really believe God was powerful enough to answer his prayer? We know Paul had rock-solid confidence God could answer his prayer because of the apostle’s doxology in Ephesians 3:20-21. His lofty hymn of praise extols God’s infinite power.

Verse 20: *Now to Him who is able to do above and beyond all that we ask or think—according to the power that works in you—*

First, God is able to do. Second, God can do above and beyond what we request. He can achieve without limits. The phrase “above and beyond” also has the meanings “infinitely more,” “exceedingly above,” “beyond all measure,” or “superabundantly.” God can do above and beyond what we ask of Him and then more on top of that! God has no limits on His power to do what He wills to do. Third, God can achieve all we ask of Him, even all we think to ask. In other words, God can do all we have in our minds to ask and even beyond our imaginations. God never overexerts Himself to answer our prayers. He fulfills them with ease.

The Greek text in the first part of verse 20 also can be rendered: “But to him who is able above all things to do exceedingly above what we ask or think.” God’s awesome, infinite ability to work for us exceedingly beyond our requests and thoughts, even our dreams, is according to the power that works in you. The locale of God’s power is “in you,” meaning the Ephesian believers. Consequently, Paul was fully confident God would answer his bold prayer that the saints at Ephesus might “be strengthened” (3:16), enabled to “comprehend” (3:18), and “be filled with all the fullness of God”

(3:19). God’s mighty power was resident and active in them. Paul also was right to praise God, not only for His powerful actions of grace in saving the Ephesians, but also for His present power at work in their lives. That power raised Christ from the dead (1:20), seated Him at God’s right hand (1:20), and seated the believers (you and I as well) with Christ in heavenly places (2:6). Our future is no less wonderful. It will be immeasurably more wonderful than we could ever think.

Verse 21: *to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*

Paul expressed adoration to God because of the splendor of His power and purpose for the Ephesians. The apostle ended the letter with words of praise: to Him be glory. Because the power to answer his prayer belonged to God alone, the glory belonged to God alone. God’s glory here refers specifically to His radiance, splendor, or power. Where God is to be praised is in the church and in Christ Jesus. Paul gave God praise for creating the church in which believing Gentiles and Jews were powerfully united into one body and for Christ Jesus through whom this blessed union was so graciously and powerfully accomplished. Paul wanted God to receive praise throughout all generations and forever and ever, continuing into eternity.

The Hebrew word “amen” marks the end of Paul’s prayer and doxology. The term means “truly,” or “let it be.” It was Paul’s deeply and joyfully felt “yes” to the praise of God. Perhaps the apostle also included the amen to encourage the Ephesians to respond in praise to God as well. What is your response to Paul’s doxology? After studying these six lessons about God’s redemptive plan and power, let’s get in the plan! How can we not become all God wants us to be for His glory and praise?

Paul expressed complete confidence in God’s power to supply the spiritual strength he requested and much more too. We need not hesitate in asking God for more spiritual strength because He always has the power to give it and much more to us.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR OCTOBER 17 EPHESIANS 4:1-16

THE BACKGROUND

In the first three chapters of Ephesians, Paul unfolded the great doctrines of the Christian faith. He answered the question: What has God done for us through Christ, His Son? God's gracious and powerful actions for sinners include the facts that He has chosen, predestined, adopted, redeemed, forgiven, sealed with the Spirit, made alive with Christ, seated with Christ in the heavens, reconciled, created access to Himself, made believers His dwelling, and brought them into His new body, which is God's church of Jews and Gentiles equally accepted in Christ. However, the letter does not end here. Paul turned from doctrine to duty, from explanation to exhortation, from what God has done to what we need to do. Because God has worked so graciously and powerfully on our behalf, we have obligations to fulfill and requirements to live up to as the people of God. Consequently, Paul laid out clearly in chapters 4–6 what God expects of us.

1. LIVE UP TO YOUR CALL (EPHESIANS 4:1-6)

Verse 1: *I, therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, urge you to walk worthy of the calling you have received,*

The word “therefore” likely refers to the three preceding chapters. Many believers struggle to achieve balance between head knowledge about God's saving actions and holy living for God. One Christian may cram his or her head with theology but live carelessly regarding right behavior. Another believer may live on emotions alone as the right way to please God, never bothering to know and value biblical instruction regarding Christian behavior.

One way Paul encouraged his readers to maintain balance was by devoting proportional space in his letters to each of these areas.

Paul stated again that he was a prisoner in the Lord (see Eph. 3:1). He described himself as the Lord's prisoner not to arouse pity, but to stress the importance of the doctrines he had already taught and the exhortations he was about to make. The expression added intensity to his appeal for right living. To Paul, living as a Christian was worth the cost, even when that cost was imprisonment,

because of the inestimable value of knowing Christ. If the Ephesian believers valued Christ above all, as Paul's imprisonment showed he did, they would readily follow the exhortations he was about to give them. What exhortations did Paul give the believers in Ephesus and us as well? In Ephesians 4:1 Paul directed the believers to walk worthy of the calling they had received, and in 4:2-3 he gave five specific ways to achieve this lifestyle. The Greek word translated “urge” also means “exhort” “appeal,” or “entreat.” Here, Paul was not pleading for a favor; he was exhorting with urgency and authority.

Paul further wrote that believers should live worthy of their calling. In this context, “calling” refers to God's calling us to salvation, resulting in our being in the body of Christ, the church, which means “called-out ones.” Paul next stated some specifics concerning the manner in which they were to live.

Verse 2: *with all humility and gentleness, with patience, accepting one another in love,*

First, the believers were to live with all “humility” and gentleness. The Greek noun translated humility did not seem to have been used before the New Testament era, and the corresponding adjective nearly always was viewed as a negative trait. Humility was not a virtue to Greeks. Jesus, however, taught that lowliness was a virtue, and He demonstrated humility by the way He lived. Even though He was the Son of God, Jesus served and sacrificed without thought of personal prestige.

Paul expressed the nature of that life of servanthood in his Letter to the Philippians: Jesus “emptied Himself by assuming the form of a slave” and “humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death — even to death on a cross” (Phil. 2:7-8). All believers are called to “walk just as He walked” (1 John 2:6). Humility is not the world's way. The world encourages people to exalt themselves, to be arrogant, boastful, and showy. Believers, in contrast, are to “boast in the Lord” (2 Cor. 10:17).

The trait of gentleness does not refer to weakness or cowardice. Jesus was gentle (Matt. 11:29), but He certainly was not weak. Gentleness is power under control. It is evidenced in demonstrating restraint when provoked or refusing to seek revenge for wrongs suffered.

Paul urged the believers to act with patience, accepting one another in love to live in conformity to God's call. The word “patience” refers to longsuffering or waiting patiently

without seeing immediate change. The patient Christian is longsuffering toward aggravating, contrary people.

Verse 3: *diligently keeping the unity of the Spirit with the peace that binds us.*

Binding believers together in unity is the powerful work of the Spirit. Believers cannot create unity among diverse members of Christ's body, but they can and should maintain the unity already created by the Spirit. Thus Paul urged the Ephesians to relate to one another by diligently keeping the unity they enjoyed. The Greek word translated “diligently” conveys the idea of zealous effort. Keeping in this verse means to preserve what already exists, namely the Spirit-created unity.

Verses 4-6: *There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope at your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.*

Paul used a sevenfold repetition of the word “one,” with 4:4 centering on the Holy Spirit, 4:5 on the Son, and 4:6 on the Father. The church of Christ is one body, an analogy of the spiritual unity of its members consisting of believing Jews and Gentiles. The church exists because of the one Spirit who calls believers to one hope — the hope of bodily resurrection and eternity in heaven.

“One Lord” is Jesus Christ who provided salvation and is head over His church. “One faith” probably refers to Christians' faith in Christ and “one baptism” to believers' public identification with Christ's death, burial, and resurrection. The phrase “one God and Father of all” is Paul's climactic expression concerning the church's unity. There is only one God, and He is the Father of all believers. God is above all, meaning He is sovereign over all, works in and through all believers, and dwells in the lives of all believers. The Trinity, one God in three Persons, is integral to church unity.

2. APPRECIATE SPIRITUAL GIFTS (EPHESIANS 4:7-12)

The strong emphasis on the church's unity in Ephesians 4:1-6, and especially verse 6, contrasts sharply with the focus on the church's diversity in 4:7-12. All believers are united in Christ in one body, but they have different personalities, temperaments, and cultures. The church is not a blob of uniformity. The ascended Christ has bestowed on all members of this one body diverse spiritual gifts for enriching and maintaining the church's unity. In verses 7-12

Paul identified various spiritual gifts and their purpose.

Verse 7: *Now grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of the Messiah's gift.*

Paul made clear in 1 Corinthians 12:4-31 and Romans 12:3-8 what he assumed here in Ephesians 4: All spiritual gifts are important to and needed by the church. Paul began his teaching about spiritual gifts by noting that the Messiah has given to each believer grace for various types of ministry. Christ's gifts are particular manifestations of Christ's grace. By His grace our Lord saved us for heaven and enabled us for service. Grace is the basis of the church's unity, and grace is also the basis of the church's diversity. Each believer has received this grace; no believer is excluded. Christ's gifts are not just for church leaders.

Verses 8-10: *For it says: When He ascended on high, He took prisoners into captivity; He gave gifts to people. But what does "He ascended" mean except that He descended to the lower parts of the earth? The One who descended is the same as the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.*

Paul supported his teaching by alluding to Psalm 68:18. This psalm pictures God as a triumphant Conqueror returning home in victory after the defeating His enemies. As the victorious Conqueror, Christ has received gifts that He can bestow on others. He has returned to heaven and now graciously bestows on His people various gifts of service.

Paul added that Christ has "ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things." Christ ascended to the highest possible place of exaltation and thus is exercising His divine sovereignty. In His possession of authority, Christ fills the universe with His beneficent rule and gives His people gifts of service for the good of the church and the blessing of the world.

Verse 11: *And He personally gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers,*

This verse refers to people who have been gifted to serve Christ's church in beneficial ways. The term "apostle" means "one who is sent" and designates a messenger authorized and empowered to deliver Christ's message. The Bible mentions two kinds of apostles. First, the word was used in a more limited sense to designate those whom Jesus personally chose and authorized for ministry with Him. These men are often identified as the Twelve

and were eyewitnesses of the risen Lord Jesus (with the exception of Judas). Paul belongs to this group because he had seen the risen Lord.

We might think of these individuals as having the office of an apostle. In a broader sense, we might describe another group of apostles as having the gift of apostleship. This latter group would include men such as Barnabas (Acts 14:14).

In addition to apostles, Christ gifted others to serve as prophets. Their primary function was to communicate divine revelation to the church for the purpose of encouragement, comfort, and edification. Occasionally they predicted the future (Acts 11:27-28). Evangelists are especially gifted to share the gospel and call people to repentance and faith.

Based on the grammatical construction of the phrase in the Greek language, the reference to pastors and teachers likely describes the same gifted persons. The pastor serves Christ's church much as a shepherd cares for sheep. The pastor's role includes comforting the troubled and ministering to the grieving, as well as instructing believers regarding God's revelation.

Verse 12: *for the training of the saints in the work of ministry, to build up the body of Christ,*

Following the identification of these spiritually gifted persons, Paul next stated the purpose of their ministries. The correct progression here is that Christ gives gifted people to His church. These gifted leaders have the responsibility of training each believer for his or her own ministry to achieve the final goal, which is to build up the body of Christ in unity and spiritual maturity. Obviously, Paul taught that every believer has a gift, or gifts, to use on behalf of others, and every believer should be exercising his or her gift(s).

The idea that ministry is the work of only the clergy is out of step with New Testament teaching. God's church is an ongoing training camp where believers are prepared to serve. Idleness and laziness have no place in the body of Christ. The church is to be an active body abuzz with ministry for the good of believers, for the good of the world, and for the glory of God.

3. WORK TOGETHER (EPHESIANS 4:13-16)

Paul's teaching in Ephesians 4:11-16 is one sentence in the original language. It's tough to mentally grab hold of Paul's run-on statements and continue to hold on to the end of

verse 16.

Verses 13-16: *until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of God's Son, growing into a mature man with a stature measured by Christ's fullness. Then we will no longer be little children, tossed by the waves and blown around by every wind of teaching, by human cunning with cleverness in the techniques of deceit. But speaking the truth in love, let us grow in every way into Him who is the head—Christ. From Him the whole body, fitted and knit together by every supporting ligament, promotes the growth of the body for building up itself in love by the proper working of each individual part.*

In Ephesians, Paul has been writing about God's extraordinary act of creating in Christ one new humanity consisting of Jews and Gentiles equally sharing in Christ's gracious and powerful salvation. As citizens of this new family, we are to live with humility, gentleness, patience, and love as we accept one another and thereby maintain this unity (4:2-3), which is created by the one God who exists in the unity of three Persons (4:4-6). As citizens of God's household, we have work to do, and Christ has gifted us with abilities to serve.

These gifted leaders train the saints in the work of ministry so they too can use their own spiritual gifts in ministry. (For additional lists of spiritual gifts, see Rom. 12:6-8 and 1 Cor. 12:4-11,28.) What is Christ's purpose in endowing believers with specific gifts? As believers minister to one another, they mature spiritually; they grow in every way into Him who is the head — Christ. To put the goal another way, they build the church up in love.

Paul answered the question regarding the church's purpose a bit differently. He depicted the church's purpose using the imagery of a body that requires its members to exercise their various gifts in order for the body to grow in Christlikeness and attain maturity. Spiritual leaders train believers to use their individual gifts for the purpose of building up the body of Christ until we all reach maturity.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR OCTOBER 24 EPHESIANS 4:17-32

THE BACKGROUND

Ephesus was a political, religious, and commercial center in the Roman Empire. The city was wealthy, beautiful, and pervasively pagan. The great temple of Artemis was there, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, but also a centerpiece of idolatry. The city served as a sanctuary for criminals as well. Murderers and thieves made their homes there because the temple served as a refuge for them.

To this pagan and immoral city the apostle Paul had brought the gospel and established a church. The believers' lives had been powerfully changed. Paul wanted to help these believers remain true to Christ and demonstrate a Christlike lifestyle as they lived shoulder to shoulder with unbelievers whose lives were anything but Christian. The apostle's concern was valid because these believers once had been part of the pagan society surrounding them. They no doubt faced daily pressures to return to their former lifestyles.

1. A NEW WAY TO LIVE (EPHESIANS 4:17-19)

Why are Christians to live holy lives? Is the answer because holiness leads to personal happiness? success? safety? popularity? a prominent position in the church? Such results may occur. However, a primary motivation for living a Christian lifestyle is because of what God has done for us in Christ. We have been reborn, forgiven, redeemed, adopted, reconciled, sealed with the Spirit, and made God's inheritance. A worldly lifestyle opposes God. A Christlike lifestyle pleases God.

Verse 17: *Therefore, I say this and testify in the Lord: You should no longer walk as the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their thoughts.*

Paul's "therefore" continues the thought begun in Ephesians 4:1-3. In verse 1 Paul exhorted the Ephesians to "walk worthy" of their calling from the Lord. Here in 4:17 the apostle had more to say about walking worthy as believers. The Ephesians must not live as unbelieving Gentiles because their doing so would be unworthy of God's calling. Paul was serious in regarding his exhortation to these believers, and he wanted them to know it.

The apostle stressed his seriousness with the words "testify in the Lord." He called the Lord to be his witness as he solemnly declared to these believers that they were no longer to follow their former pagan way of life.

In 4:17-19 Paul depicted the lifestyle of unsaved Gentiles. He encouraged the Ephesian believers to no longer walk as the unbelieving Gentiles walk. In the context "walk" refers to conducting one's life. The believers were not to live as they formerly did. The present tense of the verb "walk" indicates Paul wanted the believers to habitually avoid living like non-Christian Gentiles. Such unbelievers are first characterized as those who lived in the futility of their thoughts. The term translated "futility" also means "vanity" or "emptiness." It refers to that which is devoid of truth and appropriateness and also conveys the idea of aimlessness or purposelessness. These unbelievers did not discern moral and spiritual truth. Their thoughts wandered here and there without conviction regarding God and His purpose for their lives.

Verse 18: *They are darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them and because of the hardness of their hearts.*

These unbelievers are identified as "darkened in their understanding." Their thinking processes were in a dreadful state. They lacked discernment and thus were unable to distinguish between right and wrong. These non-Christians lived with futile thoughts because their minds were full of moral and spiritual darkness. They could not find their way to right living and to God.

Also, these pagan Gentiles were "excluded" from the life of God. The form of the verb translated excluded indicates a continuing darkened condition from which they could not free themselves. Why did they experience this awful condition? Paul stated two reasons for the Gentiles' spiritual darkness. One was because of their ignorance regarding God's revelation and will for them. They were to some degree accountable for their ignorance of God. It was by choice rather than by lack of opportunity to know the truth. A second reason for their spiritual darkness was the hardness of their hearts. God's revelation and will for the Gentiles never penetrated their hardened hearts. They had stiffened their resistance to the Lord and refused to repent.

Verse 19: *They became callous and gave themselves over to promiscuity for the practice of every kind of impu-*

riety with a desire for more and more.

These unbelievers are depicted as becoming callous. They were past feeling any shame for evil. They had no appreciation for the truth of God. To what exactly did these Gentiles give their lives? Paul used four key words in his description of the Gentiles' perversions. Their own initiative propelled them into unrestrained living, tagged here as "promiscuity." The word describes people who live without moral boundaries, with no shame concerning what God or people think of their indecent actions.

The second term is "practice," referring to an ongoing pursuit of and occupation with immoral behavior and specifically identified with "impurity," the third word. The Gentiles' impurity was not just sexual; it was of every kind. The fourth term is translated "a desire for more and more," and also could be rendered "covetousness," "greediness," or "lust." The Gentiles' primary focus was their personal pleasures, rather than God's or others'.

2. WHY WE'RE DIFFERENT (EPHESIANS 4:20-24)

Verses 20-21: *But that is not how you learned about the Messiah, assuming you heard Him and were taught by Him, because the truth is in Jesus:*

Paul knew a great divide existed between the Ephesian believers and the unsaved Gentiles. Consequently, he emphatically contrasted the two groups: "But that is not how you learned about the Messiah." In the original language the word "you" is first in the sentence. The contrast is so stark that we might almost visualize Paul, if he were speaking in the presence of the Ephesians, pointing his index finger at them and, as his eyes stared at one and then another, saying forcefully, "But because of Christ, YOU are different!" The term "assuming" does not introduce doubt but adds certainty, and thus conveys the idea: "You heard about Christ, and I certainly know you have."

Paul knew because he had preached Christ to them over an extended period of time! Paul's teaching was all about Jesus. In Ephesians 4:18 Paul had pointed out that unsaved Gentiles were willfully ignorant of God, but that was not true of the Ephesian believers. They had heard and learned the truth that is in Jesus. Jesus is the embodiment of truth. He said of Himself, "I am ... the truth" (John 14:6).

Verses 22-24: *you took off your former way of life, the old man that is corrupted by deceitful desires; you are being renewed in the spirit of your minds; you put on the*

new man, the one created according to God's likeness in righteousness and purity of the truth.

In Ephesians 4:20-21 Paul wrote the believers at Ephesus had learned about Jesus the Messiah. In 4:22-24 Paul stated the content of their learning. In understanding Paul's picture of the Ephesians' life-altering encounter with the living Christ, give close attention to the verb forms in the phrases "you took off" and "you put on." In both phrases the verb form refers to a decisive act, an accomplished event. Thus when Paul preached the gospel of Christ to the Ephesians, they believed the good news. What was the result? Paul indicated they "took off their former way of life" and "put on the new man." Just as a person takes off soiled clothes and dresses in clean garments, the Ephesians, when they came to Christ, turned their backs on their former way of life, described here as "the old man that is corrupted by deceitful desires."

The Ephesian believers didn't stop there, however. They also put on the new man. The old-man and new-man expressions were Paul's way of depicting manner of life, behavior, or conduct. At one time the Ephesians lived as the unsaved Gentiles in 4:17-19. When Paul arrived in Ephesus and preached Christ, a great reversal occurred for those who believed — the living Christ dressed them in the new, clean, white garment of salvation. Their lives took on righteousness and purity in their relationships with God and others. In fact, they were created according to God's likeness (see also 2 Cor. 5:17). When Paul wrote to them, the believers were still experiencing God's saving power, for they were being renewed in the spirit of their minds, which enabled them to continue to know God's truth and appropriate it in their daily lives. In saving them, God made their lives different, and the believers were still in the process of becoming more Christlike.

3. GETTING SPECIFIC (EPHESIANS 4:25-29)

Verse 25: *Since you put away lying, Speak the truth, each one to his neighbor, because we are members of one another.*

First, rather than lying, Christians were to speak the truth. Here Paul quoted Zechariah 8:16. Lying can take many forms, including exaggeration, cheating on income tax returns, making promises with no intention of keeping them, and flattery. Jesus' followers should be known as people whose words are true and trustworthy. Paul stated one reason Christians are to speak the truth: because

we are members of one another. Christian fellowship is based on trust, and trust is based on truth. Lies undermine that fellowship. Perhaps nothing so separates believers as does misrepresentation, falsehood, and deception. For the body of believers to function harmoniously, believers must speak the truth.

Verses 26-27: *Be angry and do not sin. Don't let the sun go down on your anger, and don't give the Devil an opportunity.*

Second, Paul directed believers to be angry and ... not sin, a quotation from Psalm 4:4. Paul's teaching here does not command believers to become angry, but should they do so, they are not to allow their anger to become sinful. Believers are to control and rid themselves of anger so that it does not lead to sin. The Old Testament has various examples of God's righteous anger at wicked people and at the Israelites when they persisted in disobedience. On several occasions Jesus was angry (Matt. 21:12-13; Mark 3:5). In Ephesians 5:6 Paul referred to God's wrath. Christians should feel anger over blatant wickedness in our world, rather than being tolerant or apathetic. However, anger that is selfish and uncontrolled is always sinful.

Paul qualified his instruction "be angry" with three negatives, the first being "do not sin." In other words, anger should not become selfish, prideful, cherished, spiteful, malicious, hateful, or revengeful. The second qualifier is "don't let the sun go down on your anger." Paul set a time frame on the believer's anger. His point is that anger should be short-lived. The embers of anger are not to smolder in our hearts. The third qualifier is "don't give the Devil an opportunity." Nursed grievances give him a foothold in our lives that can lead to additional wrong attitudes and actions that hurt for years and destroy loving relationships within the body of Christ.

Verse 28: *The thief must no longer steal. Instead, he must do honest work with his own hands, so that he has something to share with anyone in need.*

Third, Paul instructed the believers about theft. He wrote that the thief must no longer steal. Paul's teaching is in accord with the Eighth Commandment: "Do not steal" (Ex. 20:15). Theft can take many forms, including tax evasion, unfair wages, reneging on a debt, grand larceny, misuse of trust funds, overcharging, and trashing another's reputation. Was someone in the church at Ephesus stealing from other believers? If so, the sin must stop, Paul directed, but that was not enough. The former

thief also must do honest work with his own hands. Instead of sponging off others, he must engage in hard, honest toil. In another letter Paul also urged believers to work hard with their own hands (1 Thess. 4:11), an ethic he exemplified (Acts 20:34-35; 1 Cor. 4:12).

What is the purpose of hard work? So one has something to share with anyone in need. Christians who work hard not only support their own needs but also have resources to help others. Some people work to live the good life, buy things, and build their self-esteem. However, Christ has given believers new lives so they can become benefactors. They are to work not only to meet their needs but also to meet others' needs. At Miletus, Paul's last recorded words to the Ephesian elders were: "You yourselves know that these hands have provided for my needs, and for those who were with me. In every way I've shown you that by laboring like this, it is necessary to help the weak and to keep in mind the words of the Lord Jesus, for He said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'" (Acts 20:34-35).

Verse 29: *No rotten talk should come from your mouth, but only what is good for the building up of someone in need, in order to give grace to those who hear.*

Paul's fourth instruction to believers focused on their speech. No rotten talk should come from their mouths. Profanity, dirty jokes, vulgarity, and hateful speech — these kinds of words Christians should never use. Rather, believers must speak words that build up others. By speaking beneficial words, believers nurture other Christians, rather than hurt or discourage them. Merely refraining from rotten talk is not good enough. Beneficial words give grace to those who hear.

4. BUILDING UP, NOT DESTROYING (EPHESIANS 4:30-32)

Verse 30: *And don't grieve God's Holy Spirit, who sealed you for the day of redemption.*

In the hymn "Search Me, O God" the hymn writer expressed his prayer for God to search his life for sin, cleanse him, and set him free. In Ephesians 4:30-32 Paul had much the same goal in mind for the Christians at Ephesus — they were to cast aside specific sins and embrace specific virtuous actions. First, Paul directed them not to grieve God's Holy Spirit. Christians grieve the Spirit when they act in sinful ways such as those mentioned in the preceding verses. Believers are not to behave contrary to the nature of the Spirit in whose

likeness and by whose power they are being changed. Instead, they are to please the Spirit by living in purity.

Paul added that the Spirit had sealed the Ephesian believers. The Spirit's presence in believers' lives is the seal, which denotes ownership. Believers are sealed for the day of redemption. Of course, believers already have been redeemed in the sense of being set free from sin's guilt. Paul here referred to being set free from sin's presence. Our final redemption certainly will come, for if we are sealed for the purpose of that day, then we are sealed until that day. Meanwhile, we are not to grieve the Spirit by sinful thoughts, words, and behaviors.

Verse 31: *All bitterness, anger and wrath, insult and slander must be removed from you, along with all wickedness.*

Paul listed six vices believers were to remove from their lives. The Greek word translated "removed" conveys the idea of lifting up and carrying away. Just as the flood "swept ... away" people (see Matt. 24:39, the same Greek word translated "removed" in Eph. 4:31), so the Ephesians should sweep out of their lives these sins. The first is bitterness, referring to a sour, resentful spirit that refuses to be reconciled. The second and third, anger and wrath, may be used synonymously here.

A possible difference is that anger refers to passionate outburst that flares up and quickly dies whereas wrath is a settled state of anger that persists. Insult literally refers to shouting or screaming at someone, and slander is abusive, profane speech. The sixth word is wickedness, also meaning "evil" or "malice," and is probably an all-inclusive word for bad behavior unfit for any Christian. These sins grieve the Holy Spirit of God. The Spirit can enable you to please Him in all you say and do.

Verse 32: *And be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as God also forgave you in Christ.*

In place of the behavior described in Ephesians 4:31, Paul exhorted the believers to be kind and compassionate to one another. Kindness is love demonstrated in practical actions and is characteristic of God. God also is compassionate. When we act in kindness and compassion, especially toward other believers, we surely please God's Spirit. Again, God Himself is believers' example of right action, for He "forgave" our sins because of Christ. The Greek word translated forgave has a wider meaning of dealing graciously with a person, which includes forgiveness. God's graciousness in saving believers through Christ provides the model for how

we are to relate to one another. Acting in grace is being different indeed from the kind of behavior we witness in the world on a daily basis!

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR OCTOBER 31 EPHESIANS 5:1-14

THE BACKGROUND

In chapter 4 of his Letter to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul pointed to the unity and diversity of Christ's body, His church, consisting of both saved Jews and Gentiles. That unity was an essential aspect of their calling in Christ, a calling in which they were to walk in a worthy manner. In other words, the Ephesian believers were citizens of God's new community who had put off their old lives and had put on new lives in Christ. As believers, they were to live the new life. They had lots of help, for Paul also taught that God gave to them gifted servants who had the resources to lead them to grow "into a mature man with a stature measured by Christ's fullness" (Eph. 4:13b). This new man was "one created according to God's likeness in righteousness and purity of the truth" (4:24b). They were to wear or demonstrate this lifestyle each day. Unity needed to join hands with purity.

What exactly does this new life look like? What are its characteristics, actions, and attitudes? Paul answered this question in chapters 4–6. The biblical principles the apostle expressed in chapters 1–3 needed to be lived out in the practical instructions reported in chapters 4–6. Doctrine needed to unite with duty. In Ephesians 4:25 Paul began to point out specifically the kind of behavior God was calling the Ephesian believers to follow. He continued this instruction in Ephesians 5:1.

1. LIVE IN LOVE (EPHESIANS 5:1-2)

Verse 1: *Therefore, be imitators of God, as dearly loved children.*

Paul's "therefore" in Ephesians 5:1 builds on 4:17-32, where he urged the believers not to live as unbelievers. He concluded in 4:32 by reminding these Christians they were to demonstrate kindness and graciousness to one another just as God had demonstrated such attitudes to them in Christ.

In Ephesians 5:1 Paul instructed the Ephesian Christians to be imitators of God. The word "imitators" translates a Greek word related to the English word "mimic" — someone who copies characteristics of another person or someone who acts like another. The verb "rendered" can also be translated "become." The verb is a command, and by using

the particular verb form that he did, Paul was exhorting the Ephesians to continuously develop in imitating God. This command is startling because it is the highest standard possible. Further, the Ephesians were to imitate God as dearly loved children. Each believer is precious to the Lord.

In what sense can believers imitate the sovereign God, the One who alone is God? Certainly we cannot become eternal in the sense that God, who has no beginning, is eternal. We cannot become self-sufficient like God, who doesn't need food, water, oxygen, or shelter. God depends on nothing. He needs nothing to sustain Himself.

Furthermore, we cannot become all-knowing like God. God also is everywhere present, but we are finite. God is all-powerful, but we have limitations. We cannot do many actions He has done, such as creating the universe and maintaining it, saving unbelievers, or creating a new heaven and earth, which He has promised to do. Even in ways we can imitate God we are humbled. To compare, for example, our goodness with God's perfect goodness awes us. As God's children, however, Paul commanded believers to imitate God.

Verse 2: *And walk in love, as the Messiah also loved us and gave Himself for us, a sacrificial and fragrant offering to God.*

What exactly did Paul have in mind when he commanded, "Be imitators of God" (5:1)? Though not the only way believers can become like God, Paul had one principle way in mind — love. God's nature of love, displayed supremely in the Messiah, was the key way Paul wanted the Ephesians to mimic God. God's kind of love was revealed by Christ, who loved us and gave Himself for us, a sacrificial and fragrant offering to God. Christ's love was self-sacrificing; on the cross He gave Himself. And Christ gave up His position at God's right hand and left the glory of heaven to come to earth.

Love's greatest expression is not the giving of things or even the giving up of things for someone else, but rather the giving of one's self. Jesus took the initiative in handing Himself over to His enemies and to the cross. No one forced His death, not even the might of the Roman Empire. Of His own will, Jesus laid down His life for us. He gave Himself because He placed our well-being ahead of His own.

Paul described Jesus' self-giving as a sacrificial and fragrant offering to God. Christ's willingness to give Himself even to death on the cross was a fragrant offering to God,

meaning that His Self-giving was pleasing and acceptable to the Father. Thus Christ's death secured our forgiveness, for it satisfied God's just demands against us because of our sins. Because of Jesus' self-sacrificing love, we who have been forgiven are to walk in love, which includes "forgiving one another" (Eph. 4:32). Loving as God loves involves forgiving as God forgives.

"For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring you to God" (1 Pet. 3:18). God, whose case against us was absolutely just, loved us so much that He sacrificed His Son to provide a way for us to be in right relationship with God. The payment God's righteousness demanded, God's love satisfied.

2. LIVE WITHOUT IMPURITY (EPHESIANS 5:3-7)

Verse 3: *But sexual immorality and any impurity or greed should not even be heard of among you, as is proper for saints.*

In verses 3-4 Paul pointed to six vices that were not to be a part of believers' lifestyles. The first three pertain to conduct; the last three concern speech.

The term translated "sexual immorality" is one word in the Greek language. This Greek term "porneia" is related to the English word "pornography," although the Greek word does not refer to lewd films, writing, or pictures. It refers to illicit sexual activity and includes premarital sexual involvement, homosexual relationships, extramarital sexual relationships, and incest. Sexual immorality destroys marriages, homes, and friends. Because of it, children are neglected, spouses are abandoned, and extended families are alienated.

The second vice is impurity, a more general and encompassing term than sexual immorality. The word is generally used in the New Testament in a moral sense. In contrast to such impurity, purity involves the control of sexual impulses and behaviors in accord with God's law and God's purposes.

The third vice is greed, the intense desire to acquire more and more. From such a self-centered attitude springs all kinds of evil behavior. Some Bible scholars think Paul had in mind specifically the greed for sex that seeks to satisfy itself at the expense of someone else. Certainly, the word does not point to genuine love for another person. However, the term in this context may refer to the intense desire to accumulate material possessions without thought of sharing them with

others. It can also convey the idea of trying to grasp more power and influence to get one's own way.

Verse 4: *And coarse and foolish talking or crude joking are not suitable, but rather giving thanks.*

Paul next turned to sinful speech, which also was not to be heard among the Ephesian believers. The fourth vice is coarse talking. The precise Greek word translated “coarse” occurs only here in the New Testament. It is a general word that refers to what is base and shameful. The fifth vice is foolish talking, a term that refers to silly, senseless conversation that has no relevance or significance regarding faith and purity. Such speech is neither sensible or profitable. It hinders what is good and noble. Crude joking is the final vice in this list. This sin is jesting gone too far, vulgar humor, wit at its lowest, which is often heard on today's television shows.

Vulgarity and obscenity are out of place in believers' lives. Dirty jokes, cursing, and smutty remarks are unsuitable for Christians. Believers are to have closed mouths and ears when it comes to speaking as Paul described in Ephesians 5:4. Such talking is not proper for saints.

If immoral, impure behavior and filthy speech are off-limits for believers, what is appropriate? Paul's answer is giving thanks. The six vices are self-centered, while gratitude is God-centered and acknowledges His gracious generosity. Gratitude needs to be a basic characteristic of the believer's life. How much better to live with grateful hearts than to live with self-seeking hearts! Believers can give God thanks for sex within marriage as God designed it, rather than live in immoral ways. They can thank God for His generosity, rather than display an attitude of greed by attempting to acquire more and more. Believers can speak words of thanksgiving to God for His grace in Christ, rather than use their tongues for voicing obscenities.

Verses 5-7: *For know and recognize this: no sexually immoral or impure or greedy person, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of the Messiah and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty arguments, for because of these things God's wrath is coming on the disobedient. Therefore, do not become their partners.*

Why are believers to live in purity? One answer, according to Paul, is that the vices just listed characterize unbelievers and exclude them from an inheritance in the kingdom of the Messiah and of God. (See also 1 Cor. 5:9-13; 6:9-10; Gal. 5:19-21; Col. 3:5-8). People whose lifestyles

are characterized by the description given in Ephesians 5:3-5 have no place in the Christian's eternal inheritance secured for them through Christ.

This fact does not mean that Christ's kingdom is for those who have not sinned, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). Christ's kingdom is for sinners who have accepted the redemption Christ made possible by His death on the cross. Consistently practicing an immoral lifestyle is clear evidence that a person is an unbeliever regardless of that individual's claim to be a Christian. People who blatantly reject Christ's teachings and His authority demonstrate by their lifestyles that they do not belong to His kingdom.

Paul exhorted the Ephesians, “Let no one deceive you with empty arguments.” Sin is intolerable to the living God. He does not include unrepentant sinners in His kingdom. Paul was sure that God's wrath was coming on those who habitually lived and promoted sinful lifestyles. In light of God's coming judgment on those who live in defiance of God, the Ephesians should not become partners, or accomplices, in their sinful lifestyles. Christians are saints, not participants with sinners in their sins. Believers are to live with purity.

Paul gave several examples of impure behavior, all of which are inappropriate for those in God's kingdom. We reflect God's holy nature when we avoid living in impure ways.

3. LIVE AS LIGHT (EPHESIANS 5:8-14)

Paul often referred to the Christian life as a walk. He encouraged the Ephesians to walk in unity (Eph. 4:1-16), in purity (4:17-32), and in love (5:1-7). Here in 5:8-14 the apostle exhorted believers to walk in light. They are “children of light” (5:8) and thus should demonstrate this fact each day by steadfastly refusing to participate in the sinful actions and attitudes of unbelievers.

Verse 8: *For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light—*

This verse provides the reason believers should not share the same lifestyles as unbelievers. The Ephesian believers were once darkness, but now they are light in the Lord. Paul did not write that the Ephesians once lived in darkness, though that was true before they came to know the living Christ. Neither did he write that they now lived in light, although that also was true because Christ

had saved them. Rather Paul wrote that before conversion the Ephesians *were darkness*, but after experiencing Christ's gracious salvation, they *are light*. Something had happened within the believers themselves.

Before they experienced salvation in Christ, the Ephesians were not only in darkness but also darkness was in them. However, because of Christ, the believers were not only in light, they had become light — luminaries of the Lord. Because Paul knew they were light in the Lord, he directed the believers to live out what they had become — they were to walk as children of light. They could live as light because they were in vital union with the Lord who is the Light of the world (see Matt. 5:14; John 8:12), a union so vital they were identified as God's children. Being light-transmitters of the living Christ, the Ephesians were to live as people who belonged to Him. They were to radiate Him; their lives were to conform to their identity with the Savior.

Verses 9-10: *for the fruit of the light results in all goodness, righteousness, and truth—discerning what is pleasing to the Lord.*

What does living as light (or as Paul put it, the fruit of the light) mean in daily practice? How does a person know he or she is walking as a child of light? In verse 9, Paul explained specifically: light produces the fruit of goodness, righteousness, and truth. Goodness, a general term, is moral excellence combined with kindness in action or generosity toward others. Jesus “went about doing good” (Acts 10:38). Righteousness refers to right conduct and right actions toward others. All that is unjust and corrupt in relationships must have no place in believers' lives. Doing right replaces doing wrong. Truth stands in contrast to deceit and error. Acting in truth is relating to others in integrity, honesty, reliability, and sincerity. These three words — goodness, righteousness, and truth — define what it means to walk in light, to be in Christ. This fruit is clear evidence of Christ's life in a believer. Where life exists, evidence of life exists, and the evidences of spiritual life are goodness, righteousness, and truth.

In verse 10 Paul reconnected his instruction with the command walk in 5:8. As believers daily walk in the light, they must be discerning of what is pleasing to the Lord. The Greek word translated “discerning” refers to testing or examining something to approve it. In this context the word has the idea of approving or verifying. Paul wanted the believers to think carefully, to discern, or to approve

Christ's will in this matter and that matter so they could please Him in their daily decisions and actions (see also Rom. 12:2). Was such discernment possible? Yes! Walking as children of light includes discerning what pleases Christ.

Verses 11-12: *Don't participate in the fruitless works of darkness, but instead, expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what is done by them in secret.*

Children of light, Paul further instructed, are not to participate in the fruitless works of darkness. The form of the word translated "participate" in the original language commands believers to make it a practice not to share in others' dark deeds, a point similarly made in Ephesians 5:7. Works of darkness are fruitless, which means they are unproductive or useless. Why should the Ephesian believers or Christians today participate in the sins which formerly were bound them? Paul used another imperative in this verse when he commanded believers to consistently expose works of darkness. The apostle's statement includes exposing others' sins through one's conduct and may also include verbal discussion. This command does not allow, however, for an arrogant attitude and is not an appeal for condemnation or cruel criticism.

God's will is that believers live as light, not as darkness, thus bringing to light through their walk and talk the sins of others, and perhaps especially the sins of others in the church. Why expose another's blatant sin? Sin hurts others. Sin causes immeasurable pain, loss, sorrow, tears, deprivation, neurosis, and many other kinds of harm in believers' lives. Worse, sin offends and grieves God. Consequently, to expose sin in a humble spirit with the desire of seeing it eradicated in a person's life and replaced with goodness, righteousness, and truth is an action to embrace because it is in the best interests of the offender. Doing so with the right motivation is positive, not negative.

Some sinful practices, Paul wrote, are so disgraceful that it is shameful even to mention what is done in secret. If such is the case, why expose such sins? Perhaps Paul meant that some sins are so shameful it is better to live as light without verbal censure, thus showing by contrast of one life to another the darkness of these sins.

Verses 13-14: *Everything exposed by the light is made clear, for what makes everything clear is light. Therefore it is said: Get up, sleeper, and rise up from the dead, and the Messiah will shine on you.*

Bible scholars find these two verses challenging

to interpret. The sense seems to be that the effect of Christians' walking as children of light is that sin exposed by the light is made clear. That obviously is true because what makes everything clear is light. Consequently, when people are exposed to the light, they can submit to the light, and thus become light. Paul next used a quotation as a closing remark. The quotation in Ephesians 5:14b possibly is an early Christian hymn based on several passages in the Book of Isaiah (see Isa. 9:2; 26:19; 51:17; 52:1; 60:1). Paul directed the quotation to some in the church at Ephesus who had become partners in unfruitful actions. They should wake from their spiritual stupor so the Messiah will shine on them, an expression perhaps meaning that He will be pleased and approve of them.