

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR SEPTEMBER 5 EPHESIANS 1:1-14

THE BACKGROUND

Paul was an itinerant missionary who traveled from city to city preaching the gospel. Ephesus [EF uh suhs] was one of the cities he visited. The apostle first visited the city on his second missionary journey (Acts 18:18-21). He returned to Ephesus on his third missionary journey. So effective was his missionary witness that he stayed in the city about three years. Less than ten years later, Paul was “in chains” at Rome (Eph. 6:20). Although a journey of roughly a thousand miles or more separated Paul from the Ephesian believers, the apostle’s heart was still full of love for them. Although he couldn’t preach to them, he could write them; and Paul did so — the Letter to the Ephesians.

Some Bible scholars believe this book originally was intended not only for believers in the city of Ephesus, but also for other churches in the region of Asia where Ephesus was located. The words “at Ephesus” (Eph. 1:1) do not appear in some of the earliest manuscripts we possess. Therefore some Bible scholars have suggested that this letter was intended to be circulated among other churches in addition to the church at Ephesus. Whether this book was intended to be a circular letter to several cities or sent to Ephesus alone is a moot point today. We know that under the Holy Spirit’s inspiration, it was intended for all believers everywhere. What a priceless treasure Tychicus [TIK ih kuh] carried and placed in the hands of the believers at Ephesus! Now that letter is in our hands too. No doubt the Ephesians read it with great joy; so do we.

1. WHO’S YOUR DADDY? (EPHESIANS 1:1-2)

Verse 1: *Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by God’s will: To the saints and believers in Christ Jesus at Ephesus.*

The apostle introduced himself and greeted the believers at Ephesus in Ephesians 1:1-2. Paul was his Roman or Latin name; his Hebrew or Jewish name was Saul. The designation Paul means “small.” That fact in addition to other information such as the statement “his physical presence is weak” (2 Cor. 10:10) have led some Bible students to believe Paul was short in stature.

Paul identified himself as an apostle, the same designa-

tion Jesus previously applied to the Twelve (Luke 6:12-13). The term apostle means “one who is sent” and refers to a messenger or ambassador commissioned to act as another’s representative. Paul was chosen, called, and sent to preach and teach with authority as a representative of Jesus Christ specifically to the Gentile world. Years prior to his writing the Letter to the Ephesians, Paul had received his apostleship by divine appointment when the living Christ appeared to him on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:15).

Clearly Paul’s credentials for ministry were not his prior rabbinical leadership or academic training. Paul’s appointment as an apostle was by God’s will. Paul wasn’t an apostle because he aspired to the calling, was nominated to it by his peers, or prepared himself for it. His ministry was God’s doing, not his own choosing. Later in this epistle, Paul shared his personal feeling about God’s call: “This grace was given to me—the least of all the saints!—to proclaim to the Gentiles the incalculable riches of the Messiah” (Eph. 3:8).

The Letter to the Ephesians is not merely the personal opinions of a first-century believer. Although they reflect Paul’s heart, the words Christians read here are from Christ Himself, given to them through his servant who wrote under divine authority and inspiration. Since Ephesians came to believers from one personally commissioned by Christ to speak and write His words, every Christian should humbly and obediently hear and heed its message.

After identifying himself as the writer, Paul next turned his thoughts to the addressees identified as the saints and believers in Christ Jesus at Ephesus. The word saints literally means “holy ones.” They are people set apart by God and for God. All true believers are saints. The word doesn’t refer to a few in the church who are exceptionally pure in character or to a few who may be viewed as spiritually elite. New Testament writers used the Greek word translated saints to refer to believers, such as the believers who lived at Ephesus where Paul previously had preached the gospel.

The saints, Paul wrote, were in Christ, a phrase further defining the addressees. This description occurs repeatedly in Paul’s Letters. To be in Christ is to be in vital union with Him. This relationship defines the believer’s identity because Christ provides the context in which we live and the motivation for how we live. The believer’s vital union with Christ is the result of God’s eternal plan to favor undeserving sinners with salvation. After we experience salvation, we are in Christ and belong to God’s new family.

In verses 3-13 we discover some of the benefits of our eternal and intimate connection with Christ. These benefits are riches far beyond mere earthly treasures. By virtue of union with the living Christ, we have “every spiritual blessing” (1:3) such as election (1:4), redemption (1:7), insight into God’s glorious purpose (1:8), and being sealed (1:13). Christ is perfect sufficiency for all believers’ needs both now and forever.

Verse 2: *Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

The Greek term translated grace appears often in the New Testament and 12 times in Ephesians. Grace is God’s undeserved favor that makes salvation available for sinners through Jesus’ sacrificial death on their behalf. If you want to sum up the gospel in one word, grace is the word. Grace is the cause of salvation; peace is the result. Peace is the translation of a Greek word equivalent to the Hebrew word shalom. Peace denotes wholeness and well-being. Could there be a better summary of the best reality Christians enjoy — peace through God’s grace? The Ephesian believers enjoyed grace and peace when they first accepted the good news of the gospel as a result of Paul’s preaching Christ to them. Centuries later, in our time the same gospel blesses with the same result. Think of it — grace and peace are ours as believers too. These benefits belong to us as believers for the specific reason that we are in Christ.

Paul opened his letter with greetings to his readers, identifying them as being “in Christ” (1:1). As believers, we have a close relationship with Christ as a result of God’s eternal plan to provide salvation. As a result of God’s grace and peace given you in Christ, lay aside your study for a few moments and speak words of praise to God for these best of all gifts.

2. GETTING REALLY GOOD GIFTS (EPHESIANS 1:3-6)

After the greeting, Paul began in verse 3 to elaborate specifically on God’s rich blessings for those who belong to Him. From verse 3 through verse 14, he pointed to God’s choice, predestination, adoption, redemption, forgiveness, and sealing, all to the praise of His glory.

In the Greek text, unlike our English translations, verse 3 begins one long sentence that concludes at verse 14. As Paul thought about God’s blessings, it was as though the Holy Spirit carried him along to consider one blessing after another. He wrote as if he had opened the top of a huge treasure chest, dug into the piled-high jewels, and lifted them

out. The apostle began to explain to the Ephesians, and to us, God's spiritual jewels with which He blesses those who are in Christ.

Verse 3: *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavens, in Christ;*

Paul first blessed God because He is worthy of praise. As with Paul so with us — right doctrine correctly understood leads to doxology and rightly so. When believers understand clearly who God is and what He graciously has done for them, they gladly praise Him.

Let's make room for Paul's words that come from a "heart aflame" to fill our hearts with overflowing praise to God, who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The description of God as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ calls attention to the fact that it is God whose nature has been revealed to us in Jesus Christ whom Paul praises. Paul also identified Jesus as our Lord, stressing both the personal and preeminent nature of His relationship with all believers.

This God is also the God who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing. God is often recognized, and rightly so, as the Giver of physical or material blessings. Jesus assured His followers that they could trust God to meet their basic physical needs (see Matt. 6:25-34). However, the blessings Paul referred to here are spiritual, not material. These blessings are in the heavens, an expression that occurs five times in the Letter to the Ephesians (Eph. 1:3,20; 2:6; 3:10; 6:12). What does the phrase mean? The most likely interpretation is that our blessings from God are heavenly in origin. They come from the invisible realm of spiritual reality.

The heavenly origin of our every spiritual blessing is the reason Paul blessed or praised God. In the following verses in Ephesians 1, Paul began to elaborate specifically on how God's heavenly blessings bless us as believers. First, he pointed out in verse 3 that God's every spiritual blessing comes only in Christ. In verses 4-14 the apostle presented an expanded description of blessings associated with being in Christ.

Paul pinpointed the source of the believer's blessing — in Christ, a term that is one of Paul's favorite expressions for the believer's close relationship with Christ. This relationship defines our identity because Christ provides the context in which we live and the motivation for how we live. If we are in the Son, every spiritual blessing is ours. No spiritual blessing has been withheld from us. Yes, believers will grow

in spiritual maturity. They will have rich experiences with Christ along the way to stronger faith, steady obedience, and deeper love. But if we are in Christ, then every spiritual blessing is ours! All of God's blessings for all Christians are "in Him" (1:7), "in Him" (1:11), and "in Him" (Eph. 1:13).

Verse 4: *for He chose us in Him, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and blameless in His sight. In love*

In verse 4 Paul began to identify how God has blessed us and why. He went all the way through verse 14 in one long sentence in the Greek text before he stopped. First on the list of blessings is God's election of us, or as the HCSB translators rendered the Greek text: He chose us. Let's park here for a few moments to deal with God's choosing us, a wonderful act that should create a sense of awe within us.

Observe five truths in Paul's declaration that God chose us in Him, before the foundation of the world. First, God's choice of us occurred before our choice of Him. Before we believed, before our physical births, before Christ's cross, before God said, "Let there be light" (Gen. 1:3), before time began, God chose us to be His. In eternity God formed a purpose in His mind that involved us who are believers and that purpose was to make us His. This week's lesson title is correct — "God's Plan Is Eternal." Second, the form of the Greek verb translated chose stresses God's choice was a completed decision. Third, the Greek verb expresses the concept that God chose us with deep personal interest rather than with a random, arbitrary, impersonal choice. The Greek verb also has the prefix ek, which means "out of," conveying the idea of God's choosing us out of the world of sinners. Fourth, nothing in Paul's statement indicates any disdain by God for those not chosen. Finally, God chose us in Him, meaning in connection with His Son who would accomplish redemption for believers. (For a few other references on election see John 15:16; 2 Thess. 2:13-14; 1 Pet. 2:4-10.) What a wonder to know that God had us in His heart long ago when Christ died on the cross and even aeons before that time!

Election is a mystery we cannot understand fully. The best theological minds of Christianity have not been able to completely fathom this teaching of the Scriptures. Election is the gracious purpose of God, according to which He regenerates, justifies, sanctifies, and ultimately glorifies sinners. Yet it is also consistent with the free agency of human beings. What is the proper response to God's election of us?

Election calls us to humility, for God chose us long, long before we existed or could lay claim to any personal merit

as the basis of His choice of us before our choice of Him. Election also motivates us to deep gratitude to God for His amazing grace. Were it not for God's choosing us, we could not and would not choose Him. A humble, adoring gratitude is the Christian's right response to a wonderfully gracious God who decided and delighted to save sinners.

Paul next stated the purpose of God's election — that His chosen people would be holy and blameless in His sight. God chose us, not because we were morally and ethically the kind of people we should be, but because we weren't. Because of Christ, God justifies us; He declares us righteous. However salvation also results in personal spiritual transformation. The word holy means "set apart" or "different."

God's people are to be different from unbelievers. God's choice of us does not encourage a sinful lifestyle but rather forbids it. One purpose of election is to bring about changed lives. God's people are to be blameless, meaning "without reproach" or "unblemished." The term was used in connection with Old Testament sacrifices. The expression does not mean that we never sin but that our sin has been paid for by Christ's death. Thus God's election is the initiating decision that results in a changed status and in a changed life. Thank you, Lord, for making us Your own and for remaking us too.

Verses 5-6: *He predestined us to be adopted through Jesus Christ for Himself, according to His favor and will, to the praise of His glorious grace that He favored us with in the Beloved.*

In addition to the word "chose" (Eph. 1:4), Paul used another word to explain God's precreation actions on our behalf — the word predestined, which means "to determine or to decide beforehand." God's plan for His people is from eternity. This word, like the term election, is a paradox the New Testament does not resolve for us and that our finite minds do not fully grasp. God predetermined the final destiny of those He chose, namely to be adopted through Jesus Christ for Himself. Because of God's predetermination, believers are adopted sons and daughters in His family. Nothing could be finer than to belong to God!

3. BAILED OUT BY GOD (EPHESIANS 1:7-12)

Christians have experienced many facets of God's eternal plan to provide salvation. One is that Christians are "in Christ" (1:3), and another is that believers are "blessed" (1:3). A third facet is redemption and its effects, which Paul explained in verses 7-12. To sum up these verses, Paul taught that God has redeemed believers to provide Himself

an inheritance, which is part of what He always has planned to accomplish through Christ.

Verses 7-10: *In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace that He lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding. He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure that He planned in Him for the administration of the days of fulfillment—to bring everything together in the Messiah, both things in heaven and things on earth in Him.*

The word redemption conveys the ideas of “setting free” or “release based on a payment,” the payment being Jesus’ blood. Jesus’ death on the cross secured our redemption. His death paid the price to release us from sin and death. The result of redemption is forgiveness of our trespasses. The Greek word translated forgiveness refers to the loosing of a person from that which binds the individual. Jesus’ death permanently releases those who accept Him as Savior from the penalty of eternal death for all their trespasses (“false steps” or “misdeeds”). Christ’s sacrificial death declares that God does not view sin lightly. The cross also shows the riches of His grace. Our Father redeemed and forgave us according to the wealth of His grace. That wealth He unsparingly lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding so we could know the mystery of His will.

What is this mystery that God planned in Him (Christ), a mystery known only by God’s revealing it? Paul explained by using the word administration, a term designating the management of a household. Here it refers to God’s plan to bring everything together in the Messiah and to do so in the days of fulfillment. In other words, God’s ultimate purpose is to bring together everything in Christ — things in heaven and things on earth (see also Rom. 8:19-23; 1 Cor. 15:24-28; Rev. 19–21). When will the time of restoration and harmony under Christ the Lord occur? The Bible does not reveal the time; only that God’s purpose for His universe will come to pass one future day.

Verses 11-12: *In Him we were also made His inheritance, predestined according to the purpose of the One who works out everything in agreement with the decision of His will, so that we who had already put our hope in the Messiah might bring praise to His glory.*

In addition to our redemption, Paul wrote that believers are made His inheritance. The HCSB footnote also translates the Greek “we also were chosen as an inheritance” or “we also

received an inheritance.” Some Bible scholars understand the verse as a reference to an inheritance Christians receive. They point to verse 14 that shows Paul also accepted this truth (also see Matt. 25:34; Col. 1:12; 1 Pet. 1:4). Both views are biblical, and neither one contradicts the other.

Why are we God’s inheritance? The stated reason is that God predestined us to be His inheritance. God’s possession of us as His inheritance is because of His own purpose, the decision of His will He made in eternity past. We are God’s heritage because He worked out His own eternal plan regarding us. God’s ultimate purpose for including us in His plan is that we might bring praise to His glory. We, God’s redeemed people, are His inheritance for a high purpose beyond ourselves. May we understand and offer praise to God for this special and gracious privilege.

4. STRONGER THAN SUBCULTURE (EPHESIANS 1:13-14)

We are blessed because of God’s eternal choice of us (Eph. 1:4), Jesus’ redemption accomplished for us and applied to us (1:7), and the Holy Spirit’s sealing us (1:13). Observe four statements Paul made regarding the Holy Spirit.

Verses 13-14: *In Him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation—in Him when you believed—were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit. He is the down payment of our inheritance, for the redemption of the possession, to the praise of His glory.*

First, when the Ephesians believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, they were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit. He is the promised Holy Spirit because Old Testament prophets announced His coming to believers (see Joel 2:28-29) as did Jesus (John 14:16-18). That coming occurred on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 1:4-5; 2:33,38-39). All who trust Christ are sealed with the Holy Spirit.

Second, the Holy Spirit Himself is God’s seal. Being sealed is a mark of security, ownership, and authentication. God puts His Spirit within the hearts of believers to mark them as His own. God will complete His eternal plan for us. We can count on it.

Third, the Holy Spirit is the down payment of the believer’s inheritance. In other words, the Spirit living in believers is God’s pledge, or guarantee, that God will surely bring His adopted children to their full and future inheritance in Christ.

The Holy Spirit’s presence in God’s people is the distinguishing mark that they are His and will be His forever.

Fourth, the Holy Spirit is the redemption of the possession.

In this context the meaning of the term redemption includes the full release from sin’s very presence (Rom. 8:23).

In Ephesians 1:14 Paul answered the question: Why has God made us part of His adopted family? The answer is to the praise of His glory (see also Eph. 1:6,12). Our salvation is ultimately for God’s glory.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR SEPTEMBER 12 EPHESIANS 1:15-23

THE BACKGROUND

On his third missionary journey, Paul had ministered three years at Ephesus in Asia Minor (modern Turkey). The apostle then left Ephesus for a final swing through Greece, back to Asia Minor, and finally to Jerusalem to deliver a relief offering for the church there. As he approached Ephesus again on this return trip toward biblical Palestine, the ship on which Paul was sailing docked at Miletus [migh LEE tuhs], located on the coast of the Aegean Sea approximately 30 miles from Ephesus. From there the apostle sent word to Ephesus for the elders of the church to meet him. Paul greatly desired to see the Ephesian believers. Special and tender memories of his ministry in that city filled his heart. He longed to see the believers one last time before he faced whatever awaited him at Jerusalem.

If there were such a thing as a time machine, wouldn't it be great to go to that seaport town of Miletus and look on as the Ephesian elders and the apostle Paul met together? When Paul first saw them and they him, the warm greetings likely continued for some time. Then the church leaders sat down with Paul to hear gladly what was on his heart. You can read Paul's farewell address to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:18-35.

When the apostle had finished speaking, the scene was one of the most unforgettable and tender in the New Testament: "After he said this, he knelt down and prayed with all of them. There was a great deal of weeping by everyone. And embracing Paul, they kissed him, grieving most of all over his statement that they would never see his face again" (Acts 20:36-38a). How great was their love for one another!

Fast-forward several years from this moving scene. By this time Paul was imprisoned and awaiting trial in Rome. The apostle had time on his hands — time to think back over his life's ministries in various cities and the Jews and Gentiles won to Christ in response to his preaching. His thoughts drifted here and there with names and faces fondly remembered. Among them were the believers at Ephesus, those whom God had chosen, redeemed, and sealed with the Holy Spirit. With joyful memories in his heart, Paul prayed for his far-away but still beloved Ephesians. He thanked God for

them and asked that they would have the spiritual insight to better understand the immeasurable extent of God's plan and power.

From prison in Rome Paul wrote the Letter to the Ephesians and in it the heartfelt prayer he was voicing to God for them. What were Paul's specific requests of God for the believers at Ephesus whom he had loved so much and for so long?

1. EYES WIDE OPEN (EPHESIANS 1:15-17)

Paul had just elaborated on the grace and spiritual gifts God had bestowed upon the Ephesians (Eph. 1:3-14). In fact, they had "every spiritual blessing in the heavens, in Christ" (1:3). In verses 15-16 he pointed to his prayer for them.

Verses 15-16: *This is why, since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, I never stop giving thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers.*

The phrase *this is why* refers to verses 3-14 and perhaps particularly to 13-14. Because of the many spiritual benefits God had given the Ephesians, including the facts that they had been redeemed, forgiven, adopted, and sealed with the Holy Spirit, Paul had good reasons to give thanks and to pray for them to receive even greater spiritual insight.

Paul desired that God would open the Ephesian believers' spiritual eyes to understand more fully their blessings in Christ. The apostle wanted these Christians to value, to treasure in their hearts the spiritual benefits they possessed. Such insight would help them live powerful lives of righteousness.

The phrase *this is why* also points to some good things Paul had heard about the Ephesians that motivated him to pray on their behalf. Paul delighted in praising those he loved. Later in the letter as we will see, the apostle had some concerns to bring to the Ephesian believers' attention. At this point in chapter 1, however, he focused on the positive. How often today do Christians focus on correcting bad instead of on complimenting good? Do you need to follow Paul's example of emphasizing positive characteristics with others in your church, at home, and in the workplace?

What were those good things Paul had heard about the Ephesians? The apostle referred specifically to two characteristics — the believers' faith and love. At the time of writing this letter the apostle was in prison at Rome. A journey of roughly a thousand miles or more separated Paul from the Ephesian believers. Nevertheless, he had received information about the church. Hearing of the church's

continuing faith and love, two cardinal marks of Christ's presence in believers, motivated the apostle to never stop giving thanks for them.

Faith and love define the character of a church, and both need to be present for the church to be what Christ wants it to be. However theologically correct a church's belief is, however noble its worship, however happy its fellowship or stirring its music, a church is not what it needs to be unless faith and love pervade its life and ministry.

Paul first referred to the Ephesians' faith. The apostle wrote that their faith was in the Lord Jesus. His readers had at one time initially trusted Christ (1:13) and also had maintained faith in Him. They demonstrated their faith in Christ in everyday living. Reports Paul had received about their faith and ongoing love for one another gave clear and ample evidence of Christ's living presence in the Ephesians' lives. Something dramatic had occurred in these believers — they had turned from trust in idols such as Artemis, with whom the Roman goddess Diana came to be identified (see Acts 19:21-41), to faith in the One who is Lord — Jesus!

The Ephesian believers were saved by placing their faith in the Lord. People who are saved today are saved in the same way — by trusting in the Lord Jesus. That salvation is of the Lord and not of ourselves is a clear and dominant teaching of the Holy Scriptures (Eph. 2:8).

A second distinguishing trait of the Ephesians was their love for all the saints. The Greek word translated love is the same word used in Ephesians 1:4. It is the kind of love that desires to give, to serve, and to seek the highest good for the person loved. To truly love is to love as Jesus loves — sacrificially and genuinely. It is far more than a mere feeling or attraction. The word for indicates direction. The believers showed love to all the saints in the church, both Jews and Gentiles without distinction. They did not merely show love toward those who seemed more lovable. Finally, the Ephesians' love was directed toward the saints, a term used biblically to refer to all believers in Christ. Sadly, approximately 30 years after Paul wrote the Letter to the Ephesians, the risen Christ announced to the church at Ephesus through the apostle John, "But I have this against you: you have abandoned the love you had at first" (Rev. 2:4). They had lost their love for Jesus and their fellow Christians. May we earnestly pray that the Lord would keep us steadfast in our love for Him and for all believers.

The believers at Ephesus had the right balance — faith

and love. Thus the apostle expressed gratitude, “I never stop giving thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers.” Paul did not mean he gave thanks and prayed around the clock for the Ephesian believers. Rather he meant he never took a vacation from praying for them. How often have you promised to pray for someone and then forgotten to do so after a day or two? Paul consistently and unweariedly prayed for the Ephesian believers. The apostle did not forget to include them on his prayer list and to pray for them at his regular prayer times. He included others in his prayers as well (Phil. 1:3-5; Col. 1:3-4; 2 Tim. 1:3; Philem. 4).

Verse 17: *I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, would give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him.*

Paul voiced his petitions to the God of our Lord Jesus Christ (see also Eph. 1:3; Rom. 15:6; 2 Cor. 1:3; 11:31). This description does not deny or minimize Jesus’ divinity. Rather, it means that in His incarnation Jesus acknowledged God as His Father and perfectly did the will of God (see Phil. 2:5-11). Furthermore the expression the God of our Lord Jesus Christ emphasizes that God has been revealed to us supremely in Christ, who is the perfect image of the Father (see John 1:18). A second description of God follows: the glorious Father. God’s glory denotes the shining majesty and weighty importance that accompany His presence. The phrase the glorious Father depicts God as the Source of His own radiance, power, and splendor. Paul prayed to One whose characteristic feature is glory and to whom all glory belongs.

The first request Paul asked of this glorious God was to give the Ephesians a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him. In making prayer requests, believers typically ask God to do such things as give employment to those who are unemployed, health to those who are sick, comfort to those who are hurting, and direction to people who are confused. Such requests are right and good, and God responds graciously to them. Paul’s prayer, however, was for something nobler and higher. His request had to do with the heart’s understanding of God Himself. The focus was heavenly, not earthly.

Wisdom refers to insight into what is true; revelation refers to an unveiling of something previously hidden. As a result of God’s answering Paul’s prayer, the believers would have a greater knowledge of Him. In this context knowledge refers to discernment or perception. Paul prayed that the Ephesians would know not only facts about God and His

works but would have the spiritual insight to know God Himself more intimately and personally. Only God is able, Paul recognized, to accomplish this worthy goal. What request could be higher than to pray that we grow in the knowledge of God, that we know Him more intimately and personally? What request could be more pleasing to God than that we pray for the spiritual insight needed for a better understanding of God’s plan and power?

2. GREAT MINDS THINK ALIKE (EPHESIANS 1:18-19)

Verse 18: *I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened so you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the glorious riches of His inheritance among the saints,*

Paul was not finished praying for the Ephesians’ spiritual insight to know God. He continued his prayer in this verse. Verses 18-19 reveal more of Paul’s heartfelt yearnings for the Ephesian believers.

Paul prayed that the eyes of their heart may be enlightened. The phrase eyes of their heart is a vivid expression. In the New Testament, the word heart often refers to the whole person. It is the center of a person’s physical, mental, and spiritual life. To pray for the eyes of the heart to be enlightened is to pray for deep inner spiritual awareness. Paul realized that the Christians’ inner eyes needed to be opened so they could grasp God’s truth about Himself and His extraordinary actions on their behalf. When Jesus reclined and dined with two disciples from Emmaus, “their eyes were opened, and they recognized Him” (Luke 24:31). Then they said, “Weren’t our hearts ablaze within us while He was talking with us on the road and explaining the Scriptures to us?” (24:32). That same kind of enlightening of the eyes of the heart was Paul’s request for the believers at Ephesus. Of course, these followers already had been enlightened to the Person and work of Jesus when they first believed in Him. Paul was praying for their expanded understanding “in the knowledge of Him” (Eph. 1:17).

What was the purpose of such knowledge? Paul wanted his readers to know three things God had given them, each one introduced by the word what. The first is so you may know what is the hope of His calling. The word hope in this verse is the assurance, the certainty, that God will fulfill all His wonderful promises. For the believer, hope is not merely wishful thinking, such as the world’s hope, but the absolute certainty God will keep His promises to His people.

Further, the Christian’s hope is produced by God’s call-

ing, which in this verse refers to an invitation or a summons by God. Paul used the word three times in Ephesians (here and in 4:1,4). In the context of Ephesians 1:18, hope is linked to God’s call to salvation. The Ephesians were chosen to be His (1:4), adopted into His family (1:5), and sealed with the Holy Spirit (1:13). Because God has called us to salvation, we have hope. The Christian’s hope in this verse is certain and absolute — we have the sure calling to life with Christ forever! What a blessing for those who heed God’s call in Christ!

Secondly, Paul prayed the Ephesian Christians might comprehend what are the glorious riches of His inheritance among the saints. Believers are God’s inheritance; they belong to Him. As Christians, we are His possession now and forever. What a weighty and glorious thought! Not only do believers have an inheritance, God has an inheritance — His saints. Clearly, believers in Christ are valuable to God. He purchased them through Jesus’ death on the cross. When the time comes to remove His children from earth and into His very presence, God will fully gain His inheritance. (See also the comments on Eph. 1:11-12 on p. 18.)

Verse 19: *and what is the immeasurable greatness of His power to us who believe, according to the working of His vast strength.*

Paul’s prayer first focused on the past when God’s calling of the Ephesians to Himself produced hope in their hearts (1:18). His second request focused on the future when God will fully gain His inheritance — believers for whom His Son died and rose again. Third, Paul prayed about the present — God’s power toward those who belong to Him. The apostle asked God to help the Ephesian Christians know what is the immeasurable greatness of His power to those who believe. Paul piled word on word to express the greatness of God’s power to all believers.

The first word is immeasurable, meaning “exceeding” or “surpassing.” Only Paul used this word in the New Testament, with three occurrences in Ephesians (here and in 2:7; 3:19). God’s strength or power surpasses greatness. By using the term greatness the apostle wanted his readers to grasp something of the massive nature of God’s power. The next word is power, the translation of a Greek word from which we get the English word dynamite. The term power expresses the reality that God is capable of doing whatever needs to be done. God can achieve without fail whatever He chooses to do. He achieves His pur-

poses — each and every one.

Three more words appear in the latter part of verse 19 to describe God's power. The term working is the translation of a Greek word related to the English word energy. The Greek term implies effective power. Vast refers to God's power being mighty, dominating, and victorious. Strength points to vigor or inherent ability. It is power one possesses. These three words apparently overlap in meaning and strengthen the idea of magnitude of God's power. Every believer has experienced, is enjoying, and will delight forever in the benefits of this power.

3. EXERCISING POWER (EPHESIANS 1:20-23)

Although not all interpreters agree, this lesson assumes verses 20-23 are also part of Paul's prayer and that they conclude his first prayer for these readers. Paul was not finished praying. He wanted the Ephesian believers to begin to comprehend the magnitude of God's power. It's one thing to talk about power but another to see power in operation. Paul pointed out several ways in which God has demonstrated His mighty power in Christ — through Jesus' resurrection, exaltation, and headship.

Verse 20: *He demonstrated this power in the Messiah by raising Him from the dead and seating Him at His right hand in the heavens—*

God showed His power in the Messiah by raising Him from the dead. By raising Jesus from the dead, the Father thereby declared His approval of His Son, His acknowledgment of Him as His Son, and the lordship of His Son over all (see Rom. 1:4; Phil. 2:9-11). Thus God declared His approval of Christ's Person, words, and works. By reminding believers about the manifestation of God's awesome power in raising Jesus, it was as if Paul said, "Don't lose heart. Acknowledge God's power. One future day He will bring you into your full inheritance (see Eph. 1:14). No doubt about it."

God did more than raise Jesus to life on earth. He also demonstrated His extraordinary might by seating Him at His right hand in the heavens. God's action stated here involves His honoring Christ with the greatest possible honor as well as demonstrating His awesome power. The fact that Christ is seated indicates that He has completed His redemptive work of making atonement for sin and is reigning victoriously (see Heb. 1:3-4). The phrase in the heavens denotes God's dwelling place.

Verse 21: *far above every ruler and authority, power and*

dominion, and every title given, not only in this age but also in the one to come.

Seated at God's right hand, Christ is far above every ruler and authority, power and dominion, and every title given. Here Paul listed powers over which the exalted Christ now rules. The picture is that of the seated Christ ruling over all authorities, human and spiritual, that exist in the universe.

The first power Paul listed is ruler, the translation of a Greek word referring to primacy or rank in rule. It can denote a human or an angelic ruler. The One who sits at God's right hand is first place in power. The second word is authority, which basically refers to the right to act or to the liberty of doing as one desires. In the context of Ephesians 1:21 the term may pertain to human authority but more likely to spiritual powers. The third term is power and again likely refers to spiritual beings. The fourth designation is dominion and also may refer in this context to spiritual powers, as do the previous three words. In the context of Ephesians, it seems likely to me the spiritual powers to which Paul was specifically referring were demonic beings (see Eph. 6:11-12,16).

In Psalm 110:1 David under divine inspiration portrayed the Messiah as seated at God's right hand where the Messiah's enemies are made His footstool. In any case, the exalted Christ rules over all powers — human and spiritual, whether good or evil — and the final victory belongs to Him.

Meanwhile, we as believers, Christ's redeemed family, have in Him the power to live victoriously. The external and exalted Christ is above all powers and remains at God's right hand. He one day will return in power and glory to judge the world and to consummate His redemptive mission. He rules with justice and one day will suppress all powers that stand against Him. In that wonderful age to come where righteousness is at home (2 Pet. 3:13), Christ will remain the exalted, enthroned Lord of all.

Verse 22: *And He put everything under His feet and appointed Him as head over everything for the church,*

God raised Christ from death and gave Him the place of highest honor — His right hand. Paul further portrayed the authority of the risen Christ with the expression He put everything under His feet, a quotation from Psalm 8:6. God has subjected everything to Christ's authority (see also 1 Pet. 3:22). The expression put ... under means "to subordinate" and implies absolute subjection. The phrase under His feet is a vivid picture of victory over one's enemies. After the Israelites defeated a coalition of five Amorite kings, Joshua

ordered his military commanders to put their feet on the necks of these kings (Josh. 10:24). That action was a clear gesture of victory.

Jesus is Victor. However, in our present situations, we may not think Christ's defeat of His enemies is always evident. People continue to defy God, rail against Him, and perpetuate injustices. Believers continue to experience disasters, deal with illnesses, and lose cherished relationships. Nevertheless, God is still in control, and Christ is still the exalted Lord. When He returns, His lordship will be evident to all.

Paul stated one final demonstration of God's power. He has appointed Him as head over everything for the church. As head of His church, Christ has authority over the church. As the church acts in obedience to Christ, it has power to overcome all opposition because its head is Lord of all.

Verse 23: *which is His body, the fullness of the One who fills all things in every way.*

The church is identified as the body of Christ. The picture of the church as a body conveys believers as having an integral relationship with Christ and with one another. This body is the fullness of the One who fills all things in every way. What is the meaning of this expression? Is the Greek word translated fullness to be understood passively ("that which is filled") or actively ("that which fills")? Is the church filled by Christ or conversely does the church fill Christ? The answer is not an easy one, for the expression can refer to the church as filling Christ, to Christ as filling the church, or to Christ as the fullness of God. To translate the expression actively thereby conveying the idea that the church is Christ's complement does not detract from Christ's Deity.

As the resurrected and exalted Lord, Christ is without need and is dependent on nothing. However, just as a bridegroom in one sense is incomplete without the bride and a vine is incomplete without its branches, so Christ the head has His complete expression in His body. Regardless of how Paul's statement in this verse is interpreted, the essential truth remains that a vital and unbreakable bond exists between Christ and His people.

In this study of Ephesians 1:15-23, we have stepped in close to examine words and phrases Paul used as he prayed passionately for the Ephesian believers. Let's step back for a moment to see the big picture of his prayer. Upon what did the apostle base his confident assurance that God would answer his prayer? Paul was motivated to pray because He knew God loved the Ephesian believers. However, it

was God's power that had brought and would bring further changes in the believers' lives.

God's love motivated Him to give His Son to save us (John 3:16), but it was God's power that raised Jesus from the dead and seated Him at the Father's right hand. The gospel is "God's power for salvation" (Rom. 1:16). Love motivates God to carry out His plan. Love motivates Him to exercise His great power to redeem sinners, reconcile, regenerate, adopt, seal with the Spirit, raise from death, give believers' resurrected bodies, and bring believers into His presence forever. We could not be Christians without God's power. Consequently, Paul trusted God would answer his prayer because God could answer his prayer. God has the power to accomplish His purposes.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR SEPTEMBER 19 EPHESIANS 2:1-10

THE BACKGROUND

Paul's prayer for the Ephesians (Eph. 1:15-23) contained one overall request that, if God graciously answered, would result in three wonderful benefits. The apostle's main desire was for God to enlighten the believers' inward eyes to know Him intimately. Gaining deeper insight, they would, first, know the implications of God's call in their lives. Second, the Ephesians would understand the glorious inheritance awaiting them in heaven. Third, they would appreciate God's mighty power.

Furthermore, Paul pointed out that God gave a historical demonstration of His mighty power — He raised Jesus from death and exalted Jesus to His right hand, far above all powers and titles then and forever. However, God was not done displaying His power. He also made Christ head over the church and thus head over all believers.

Jesus died, but God raised and exalted Him. The Ephesians were spiritually dead in their sins, but God in Christ raised them and seated them with Him. In Ephesians 2:1-10 the apostle Paul described how the Ephesian believers, sinners who deserved nothing but God's wrath, became living demonstrations of God's glorious power, which He exercised because of His grace. Let's take an up-close look at his teaching.

1. DEATH BY SIN (EPHESIANS 2:1-3)

In his passionate prayer for the Ephesians, Paul voiced the desire that they might know "what is the immeasurable greatness of His power to us who believe" (1:19). God mightily demonstrated that power by raising Jesus from death and by seating the Son of God at the Father's right hand (1:20). That's awesome power! But Paul was not yet finished communicating with the Ephesians about God's great strength. In 2:1-10 he pointed out in detail how God's power had transformed the believers' lives. The apostle described their sinful lifestyles ("and you," 2:1) before salvation and then depicted how God ("but God," 2:4) powerfully changed their hearts and lives by His saving grace. They were dead. God made them alive! They became a new creation in Christ. Only God can do

this great work!

Verse 1: *And you were dead in your trespasses and sins*

The apostle painted a depressing, pathetic picture of the Ephesians before they experienced God's transforming power. He wrote that they were dead. The descriptive word dead does not refer only to some particularly wicked society. The term refers to all people everywhere apart from Christ. Paul's "we too" and "the others" in verse 3 include the whole human race. Dead depicts the universal human condition apart from God.

All unbelievers are spiritually dead as far as their relationship with God is concerned. Alienated from God, lost sinners are the living dead. They are walking corpses, lifeless toward God. Some people believe the human race is basically OK. Such individuals know humans are not perfect, but they believe that human beings in general are getting better as time passes. However, the biblical view is that apart from Christ, humans are dead regarding their relationships to God (see Eph. 2:5; 4:18; Rom. 6:23; 7:10,24; Col. 2:13). People who are spiritually dead have no life within themselves. Just as Lazarus had no capacity to raise himself from physical death (John 11), so those alienated from God cannot bring themselves to spiritual life. What we cannot do for ourselves, however, God can do because of His great power.

Jesus taught Nicodemus that spiritual rebirth was necessary for entering God's kingdom. He said to this religious man, "I assure you: Unless someone is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). Without a new birth, we cannot enter God's kingdom. Jesus said the Spirit's work is like the wind — unseen but powerful (3:8). Nonetheless, He calls us and the result is a desire for Christ in our hearts that was not previously present. The depth of our sin has not buried us so deeply in death that God's call cannot reach us.

Paul continued to describe the Ephesians' condition before they trusted Christ. They were dead in trespasses and sins. The Greek word translated trespasses refers to slipping or deviating from the right path. It also could be translated "false steps." The term rendered sins depicts a missing of the mark. The nouns describe the realm of existence in which the spiritually dead exist. People sin because they are sinners. We as Adam's posterity inherit a nature and an environment inclined toward sin. As soon as we are capable of moral action, we make the wrong choices. We become transgressors

and are under condemnation.

Verse 2: *in which you previously walked according to this worldly age, according to the ruler of the atmospheric domain, the spirit now working in the disobedient.*

False steps characterized the Ephesians' way of life before they believed in Christ for they daily walked in that manner. Paul used the word walked metaphorically to refer to conduct and lifestyle. Step after step the Ephesians had walked away from God.

Paul further described the nature of the believers' former lifestyles. First, they had lived according to this worldly age. This phrase means the Ephesians had lived in conformity to the world's standards, not according to God's value system. They had embraced temporal values and thus went along with whatever was acceptable and fashionable, regardless of how morally evil it was. Second, the Ephesians had lived according to the ruler of the atmospheric domain. This phrase refers to the Devil's authority in the world. In other words, the Ephesians lived under the Devil's influence. The Devil or Satan is the unseen operator behind the world's alluring us to sin. Further, this ruler is the spirit now working in the disobedient. The Ephesians were characterized as disobedient toward God. Under the influence of their ruler, the Ephesians' unbelief in God led to their defiance of God. But no wonder — their commander was the very prototype of rebellion against God! Others see the designation the spirit as a reference to an atmosphere created and energized by Satan rather than as a reference to Satan himself. Regardless of Paul's specific intent, the truth remains clear. The Devil or Satan is behind all actions and attitudes characterized by disobedience to God.

Verse 3: *We too all previously lived among them in our fleshly desires, carrying out the inclinations of our flesh and thoughts, and by nature we were children under wrath, as the others were also.*

In verse 3 Paul expanded his subject to include not just the Ephesians, not just Gentiles, but himself as well as his fellow Jews. All of us are sinners (Rom. 3:23). We are not merely victims of the Evil One. We too all ... lived ... in our fleshly desires and also were carrying out the inclinations of our flesh and thoughts. The flesh in this context refers to our sinful nature, that which opposes God. Prior to believing in Christ, we wanted to follow our sinful desires, and we did so.

Finally, before we became believers we were all by nature ... children under wrath. The Greek word translated wrath refers to God's fixed and settled opposition to sin. God's wrath against sinners is not that He occasionally gets angry. It is a permanent and consistent element in His nature. One day that wrath will spill out on those who refuse to accept Christ as Savior. It will not come drop by drop but like a dam that bursts.

Paul revealed to the Ephesians the depth of their sin before Christ saved them, and it was deep indeed. The apostle wrote that they were dead in their sins. Consequently, they acted the way the world around them behaved. They followed the Devil's bidding. They enjoyed their sins. In themselves the Ephesians had no hope of escape from those sinful inclinations. Only God's intervening grace delivered them, and Paul next pointed out how His grace had worked so powerfully in their lives.

2. LIFE BY GRACE (EPHESIANS 2:4-7)

The depth of sin is so deep that, try as they might, sinners cannot pull themselves out of that pit. However, in Ephesians 2:4-7 Paul pointed to the only One capable of changing a sinner's desperate plight — God.

Verse 4: *But God, who is abundant in mercy, because of His great love that He had for us,*

The phrase but God introduces a strong contrast to the plight of sinful humanity described in verses 1-3. Verses 4-7 present God's actions on behalf of sinners. God makes all the difference because He has acted in Christ to move us from death to life. He has come to us to save us from the awful condition and ultimate consequences of our own making. The two little words but God introduce us to the gospel; they bring to our attention the wonderfully good news that God has intervened in our human predicament. The remainder of verse 4 describes God's nature that motivated Him to act for our eternal benefit in Christ.

God is abundant in mercy. The word mercy refers to God's compassion or pity on those who are suffering the misfortunes and calamities of their own disobedience. Mercy indicates the emotion aroused by someone's great need along with a desire to relieve the person's plight. Mercy motivates action to relieve the person's desperate situation. God's mercy is abundant; its supply is inexhaustible. His mercy is beyond measure.

The rest of verse 4 states the motivation behind God's demonstration of mercy — because of His great love that He had for us. The Greek word translated love refers to love that seeks another's highest good even though that person does not deserve it. The intensity of God's love for sinners is shown by the word great. God's intense love motivated Him to send His Son to die for us. Praise God that His mercy and love still are abundantly available to people today. Paul's us includes not only himself and the Ephesians, but also you and me.

Verses 5-6: *made us alive with the Messiah even though we were dead in trespasses. By grace you are saved! He also raised us up with Him and seated us with Him in the heavens, in Christ Jesus,*

What specifically did God do for us whom He loved unconditionally? God's three actions were: made us alive with the Messiah, raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him. These three actions, of course, usually refer to what God did for Jesus. But here Paul's focus is on us. We were made ... alive, raised, and seated with Christ. Let's take a closer look at these three realities that are fundamental to our faith in Christ.

First, God made us alive with the Messiah. God did so even though we were dead in trespasses (see Eph. 2:1). The phrase made us alive is an action God does for spiritually dead people and an action only God can do. Spiritually dead people cannot bring themselves to spiritual life. But God can raise them to life with the Messiah. In what sense are we to understand this union? When Paul said God made the believers at Ephesus alive with the Messiah, he referred to their experiential union with Him, not to their future bodily resurrection. Believers' union with Christ makes dramatic differences in their lives. Sinners who trust Christ are turned in a different direction (away from sin) and toward righteousness while living in a vital relationship with the One who has made and is making these life-altering, powerful changes.

At the end of Ephesians 2:5, Paul exclaimed, "By grace you are saved!" Thinking of how God makes people who are dead in their sins alive in Christ, the apostle's heart overflowed with the wonder of God's grace. He couldn't contain his gratitude for God's gracious power in saving sinners. So this overflow of sound truth and emotion spilled out of his heart and mind. We can experience salvation only because of the amazing grace of God.

What specifically did God do for us whom He loved unconditionally? Paul's second answer is He also raised us up with Him. The meaning is that in Christ we have a new environment. Believers belong to a heavenly realm and are merely passing through this world. We now belong to God's kingdom. Therefore our lives are to reflect its values rather than worldly standards.

The third answer to the question of how God showed His unconditional love for believers is that He seated us with Him. God's action for us in the form in which it appears in the original language means believers already sit with Christ. This position is ours as believers now. It is a foretaste of the bliss of heaven itself. Seated with Christ we have privilege, security, and victory. But even more, we have intimacy with our Lord, a sensitive awareness of His living reality.

Verse 7: *so that in the coming ages He might display the immeasurable riches of His grace in His kindness to us in Christ Jesus.*

Why did God take these three actions? He did so because of His great mercy (2:4), love (2:4), and grace (2:5). God also had another reason or purpose. He saved us so that in the coming ages He might display the immeasurable riches of His grace in His kindness to us in Christ Jesus. Thus a fundamental reason God brought to life, raised, and seated believers with Christ is to demonstrate His grace in the coming ages. God will put us on display, will make us exhibits, of His grace and kindness. Can we think of a more awesome privilege?

You and I can have salvation only because of God's amazing grace. In a display of His grace, God has acted on the basis of His love and given new life to believers. Are you alive in Christ? Are you raised with Christ? Are you seated with Christ? If Christ has not saved you, come to Him in faith and receive new life that will last forever.

3. WHY WE WORK (EPHESIANS 2:8-10)

In Ephesians 2:5 Paul seems to have interrupted momentarily but deliberately his pointing out God's three powerful actions on behalf of sinners (2:5-6). In a kind of parenthetical outburst, his heart overflowed with the truth "By grace you are saved!" Then the apostle returned to expand and expound on God's acts for sinners. In verses 8-10, Paul gave a fuller explanation of God's salvation by His grace alone. This text is among the most widely known

and memorized in the Bible and rightly so because its message is the best good news one could possibly hear. Paul's words give us the basis of salvation (grace), the means by which grace reaches us (faith), and a means by which we cannot be saved (works). Let's take a closer look at this significant biblical passage.

Verses 8-9: *For by grace you are saved through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God's gift—not from works, so that no one can boast.*

"For by grace you are saved through faith," Paul exclaimed. Grace is God's favor through Christ given to those who are incapable of meriting His saving benefits. It is undeserved acceptance and love. Christians are saved from something. They are delivered from spiritual death (Eph. 2:1), slavery to sin (2:2), and wrath (2:3). We are also saved for something. That purpose includes good works (2:10).

Grace is the basis of salvation, and faith is the means to salvation. The salvation achieved by Christ's redemptive death on the cross is universal in its provision but not in its application. God's salvation is not automatically applied because Christ died for lost sinners. Rather, a person is saved only when he or she trusts in the living Lord Jesus Christ who secured salvation. Just as a person who believes a chair is reliable demonstrates that faith by sitting on it, so someone who believes Christ's salvation is trustworthy demonstrates that faith by placing trust in Him. An individual can do nothing to earn salvation. A person does not work to earn God's salvation any more than one works to support himself or herself in a chair.

To make crystal clear that faith is the only path to salvation, Paul presented qualifying negative phrases in verses 8 and 9 that stress the impossibility of salvation through personal merits. The first phrase is and this is not from yourselves. Paul was clear and point-blank — the source of salvation is not from humans. The word this most likely refers to the entire previous clause for by grace you are saved through faith. The whole experience of salvation is God's gift. Because salvation is God's gift, it can only be received, not earned. The origin of God's gracious salvation is in Him alone and can only be received by faith. Since no room is left for human merit, there is no room either for human boasting — so that no one can boast. If we boast, let us boast in the Lord (1 Cor. 1:30-31; 2 Cor. 10:17; Phil. 3:3).

Verse 10: *For we are His creation—created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of time so that we should walk in them.*

Christians cannot do anything to earn salvation, but they do good works to show they have salvation. Good actions have their proper, necessary place in all believers' lives. Believers are God's creation or workmanship. From the Greek word translated creation we get the English word poem, a piece of literary workmanship. The Greek word translated creation occurs only here and in Romans 1:20. In Romans 1:20 the term is rendered "what He has made" and refers to the created universe. In Ephesians the word indicates God's new spiritual creation in believers' lives. Christians are God's masterwork, His craftsmanship. God created them in the beginning (Gen. 1:27), but they were ruined by choosing to sin. However, God's new divine act of creation makes believers new persons (see 2 Cor. 5:17).

God's new creating action is in Christ Jesus. Paul emphasized this truth previously in Ephesians 2:5-6. There believers are described as having been made alive, raised, and seated in the heavens with Him. Believers are God's workmanship because they are His new creations in Christ. Previously we were spiritually blind, but now we see with spiritual eyes. Previously we were spiritually deaf, but now we hear and respond to God. Previously our hearts were hardened in opposition to God, but now they are softened and yielded to Him. Believers, being in Christ, are indeed God's new creations.

God loves beauty. One needs only to see Wyoming's majestic mountains in Grand Teton National Park, Washington's breathtaking Olympic National Park, or the mighty Pacific Ocean washing ashore at Half Moon Bay in California to know God loves beauty. However, God's most beautiful action in all His universe is to create a saint out of a sinner, to change the ugliness of ungodliness to the goodness of upright behavior, to transform a foul tongue angrily cursing others and God to one voicing love for God and love for people. The beauty of a life in right relationship with God and with other people has no equal.

We can do nothing to earn salvation but we are to do all we can to demonstrate we have received salvation. We are not saved by good works but rather for good works which God prepared ahead of time so that we should walk in them. God's goal in saving sinners is for actions that

benefit others as well as themselves. Good works are the consequence and evidence of new life in Christ. In eternity past, God prepared ahead of time that those who experienced His salvation would do good works as evidence of His grace.

The Scripture reveals that at least in some cases, God planned out specific works for an individual to do before that person was born (see Jer. 1:5). All believers are to walk in good works. The word walk refers to lifestyle or manner of living. Good works are not the ground of salvation but the evidence of salvation. Thus God's power is evident not only in giving us new life but also in helping us walk in good works. Christianity involves God's gracious power from start to finish.

An account in another of Paul's Prison Epistles illustrates God's power to change people. In addition to the Letter to the Ephesians, Paul also wrote the Letter to Philemon while imprisoned at Rome. This letter, only one chapter in length, beautifully pictures God's transforming power.

Philemon [figh LEE muhn], who apparently owed his conversion to Christianity to Paul (Philem. 19), owned a slave named Onesimus [oh NESSih muhs]. Philemon lived in Colossae [koh LAHS sih]. Onesimus apparently had stolen money from his master and fled to Rome, where he came into contact with the apostle. Paul evidently talked with Onesimus about his need of Christ, and he trusted the Savior. Paul also persuaded Onesimus to do the right thing — return to Philemon and resume serving his master. This new believer agreed. Onesimus took with him a letter Paul wrote to Philemon on his behalf.

Imagine with me what might have happened in the rest of the story. After a lengthy period of time, Philemon at Colossae noticed a man approaching his house and recognized the figure. The runaway slave and thief, now a Christian, walked up and stood before Philemon. Onesimus handed Philemon a document and explained it was a letter from Paul. Philemon took the letter and began to read that letter — the letter we have in the New Testament, the Letter to Philemon). In the letter were the following words of Paul regarding Onesimus, "no longer as a slave, but more than a slave — as a dearly loved brother" (Philem. 16). A thief transformed, a slave of man turned into a servant of Christ, a rebellious sinner into an obedient saint — that's the gracious power of God in salvation.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR SEPTEMBER 26 EPHESIANS 2:11-22

THE BACKGROUND

When Saul, who came to be known as Paul, journeyed to Damascus, he carried with him letters “to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, either men or women, he might bring them as prisoners to Jerusalem” (Acts 9:2). Presumably, these letters signed by the high priest introduced Paul to the Jews in that city and explained Paul’s purpose in Damascus. The letters likely had another purpose — to secure the local Jews’ assistance in identifying and locating Jewish Christians in Damascus. The synagogue leaders’ help would make Saul’s task easier and ruthlessly efficient. But on the way to Damascus, suddenly the living Christ appeared to Saul, and he was converted. A seeker of prisoners, Paul himself ultimately became a prisoner of the living Christ, the One who had sought him (see Ephesians 3:1).

Years later, Paul entered another city, this time to preach the good news of Christ to both Jews and Gentiles. At Ephesus “he entered the synagogue and spoke boldly over a period of three months, engaging in discussion and trying to persuade them about the things related to the kingdom of God” (Acts 19:8). Some did believe, but others “became hardened and would not believe” (19:9). However, Paul kept preaching for two years so that “both Jews and Greeks, heard the word of the Lord” (19:10). God birthed a church in Ephesus, a church consisting of both Jews and Gentiles. When Paul wrote Ephesians, the apostle was a prisoner of Rome where he awaited trial. There Paul thought about his beloved Christian brothers and sisters in Ephesus. Both Gentiles, “who were far away” (Ephesians 2:17), and Jews, “those who were near” (2:17), were serving Christ in unity. Only God’s awesome power could have united Jews and Gentiles into His one, new people. One of Paul’s purposes in writing to the Ephesians was to encourage them to maintain unity (4:3), to continue relating to one another in ways that expressed unity in Christ.

1. BROUGHT TOGETHER (EPHESIANS 2:11-13)

What was Paul’s purpose in writing this passage under the

Holy Spirit’s inspiration? Was it to encourage or was there something more, something else in his heart? Yes, he wrote to encourage the Ephesians, but I think more than the desire to encourage filled his heart. He was overwhelmed with awe as he witnessed God’s mighty power at work. The living God had created something altogether new in the universe. God had reconciled both Gentiles and Jews into one body through the cross of Christ. That unity is the result of divine creative power!

Perhaps Paul laid his writing instrument aside for a moment, looked at the chain attached to his wrist, and reflected momentarily on why he was in Rome. Paul had ended up in prison as a result of his obedience to take the message of salvation to the Gentiles as well as to the Jews (see Acts 9:15-16). The Lord had called Paul to share the good news of His love and grace. So the apostle went with a burning heart and called both Gentiles and Jews to faith in Christ (see Acts 26:15-19). However, Paul met resistance so determined to silence him that he ultimately was arrested and sent to Rome for trial (see Acts. 26:20-21). The chain on the apostle’s wrist was in part a reminder of God’s extraordinary might to create a new family on the earth — a family consisting of both Gentile and Jewish believers. The Ephesians must never forget the transformation the Lord had brought about in their lives; therefore, Paul reminded them of who they had been and of who they had become — all because of God’s matchless power and grace.

Verse 11: *So then, remember that at one time you were Gentiles in the flesh—called “the uncircumcised” by those called “the circumcised,” done by hand in the flesh.*

Before the Ephesians trusted Christ, they had been alienated from God. They were dead to Him and much alive to sin. However, God had saved them by His grace through their faith (Eph. 2:8-9) and had brought them into a right relationship with Him. Before they had become believers, Jews and Gentiles also had lived in hostility to one another. God’s salvation also had changed those relationships. In Christ the Ephesian believers, both Jews and Gentiles, had become a family of faith. Paul called them to remember the former great divide, a social and spiritual gulf so wide, so deep, that only God could bridge it.

The Jews had derisively called the Gentiles “the uncircumcised,” a designation of contempt calling attention to the Gentiles’ lack of the physical mark of God’s covenant with His people. In contrast the Jews proudly

boasted they were “the circumcised,” indicating they were God’s people and had the physical mark to prove it. However, circumcision was only an outward mark, not an inward mark, and it was of the flesh only, not of the heart. If the outward sign was not joined with inward faith, it was worthless. The circumcision that really mattered was the circumcision of the heart — forsaking sin and living in faith and obedience to the Lord (see Deut. 10:16; Jer. 4:4).

Verse 12: *At that time you were without the Messiah, excluded from the citizenship of Israel, and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, with no hope and without God in the world.*

More important than the way the Jews regarded them, the Gentiles’ lack of this outward sign meant they lacked certain privileges Israelites enjoyed. Paul called these Gentile believers to remember specifically where they had been. First, the Gentiles were without the Messiah. They had no national hope of the Messiah as did the Jews. For centuries the Jews had cherished the hope of the coming Messiah. God’s people had clung to the Old Testament promises of this coming One (see Gen. 49:10; Pss. 2; 110; Isa. 7:14; 9:1-7; 11:1-9; Dan. 7:13-14; Mic. 5:1-4; Zech. 9:9-10). They had drawn strength and courage from this expectation even in their darkest hours. In contrast, the Gentiles were without any expectation of such a deliverer.

Second, the Gentiles were excluded from the citizenship of Israel. The Gentiles lived outside the special privileges belonging to the Jews. Although some became proselytes of Judaism, as a whole the Gentiles did not share in Israel’s blessings and had no hope of participating in them. Furthermore, even for those Gentiles who became proselytes the sense of alienation or separation was not completely removed.

Third, the Gentiles were foreigners to the covenants of the promise. The word promise likely emphasized the promise element that is foundational to the covenants God made with His people. The covenants included those made with Abram or Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3; 15:1-21; 17:1-27), the people of Israel (Ex. 19:1-6), and David (2 Sam. 7:12-16). Such covenants typically expressed God’s desire for fellowship with His people.

Fourth, the Gentiles had no hope of a blessed future, as did Israel. The covenants of the promise were not made with Gentiles but with God’s people who came to be known as Israelites and later as Jews. Thus the Gentiles lacked the

expectation based on the certainty of God's promises.

Fifth, the Gentiles were without God in the world. Although they worshiped many gods, they lacked a saving relationship with the one true God.

The word picture Paul presented of these Gentiles without Christ is indeed bleak. They were hopelessly spiritually bankrupt.

Verse 13: *But now in Christ Jesus, you who were far away have been brought near by the blood of the Messiah.*

As desperate as the situation depicted by these five phrases was, it was not beyond God's power to change. He did so in Jesus Christ. Thus Paul continued his Letter to the Ephesians with the assuring words but now in Christ Jesus. As a result of Jesus' death on the cross, or as Paul put it, the blood of the Messiah, Gentile believers no longer were far away but had been brought near — near to God and near to other believers whether Jews or Gentiles. Jesus' death accomplished redemption for those who put their faith in Him, reconciled them to God, and also reconciled believing Jews and Gentiles to one another.

In verses 11-13 Paul taught that though once separated from God and His people, Gentile believers had been brought into God's new people through the death of Jesus Christ. Before we accepted Christ as Savior, we too were in the same plight as the Gentiles Paul described. We were lifeless toward God. Yet He reached down, found us, and saved us by His grace when we responded to Him in faith. As believers we have been brought into God's new people, and as a result we have received enormous privileges. We belong to His family — the greatest of all privileges, now and forever.

2. JOINED TOGETHER (EPHESIANS 2:14-18)

In these verses Paul focused on the union of Jews and Gentiles that replaced their old animosities. After receiving Christ as Savior, Jews and Gentiles became one in the body of Christ. Christians became their new name and new identity. Since the coming of Christ and His creation of His church, the world now consists of three entities — Gentiles, Jews, and Christians (believing Jews and Gentiles), who make up the one body of Christ.

The designation Jew is ultimately derived from a Hebrew word translated Judah, one of Jacob's 12 sons. These sons essentially became the founders of the twelve tribes of ancient Israel. The word Gentile refers to any nation or clan

of people who are not Jewish.

The history of the Jewish/Gentile relationship is laced with hostility, mudslinging, and resentment. In the first century, Jews thought of Gentiles as "dogs" and "unclean." Jews regarded close association with Gentiles as a source of defilement (see John 18:28, where entering the Roman governor's headquarters would have rendered the Jews defiled and thus prohibited from participating in the Passover). This kind of estrangement between Jews and Gentiles was no doubt also present in the city of Ephesus when Paul arrived to preach the gospel. When he did, the wall of hostility tumbled down for those who trusted Christ. How could such a dramatic change occur? Paul answered that question in Ephesians 2:14-18.

Verse 14: *For He is our peace, who made both groups one and tore down the dividing wall of hostility. In His flesh,*

The apostle began with the bold statement for He is our peace. Paul placed the word He at the beginning of the Greek sentence for emphasis. The apostle wanted readers to understand clearly that genuine, lasting peace comes only in the Person of Christ. The peace Paul had in mind in this context was primarily between Jewish and Gentile believers and secondarily between people and God although the two are closely related. The word peace involves more than a cessation of hostility among people who formerly were hostile. It includes mutual acceptance of one another. That Christ is our peace is true of all believers whether Gentiles or Jews. The expression who made both groups one further emphasizes Christ's peacemaking accomplished by His death on the cross approximately two thousand years ago.

Paul continued with the statement that Christ tore down the dividing wall of hostility. Bible scholars suggest various interpretations of this expression. The first two interpretations focus on the dividing wall as one that separates Jews and Gentiles. The third interpretation views the dividing wall as separating God and humanity. The first suggestion is that it refers to the wall in the Jerusalem temple that separated the court of the Jews from the court of the Gentiles. Archeologists have uncovered inscriptions that prohibited foreigners into the court of the Jews on penalty of death. Such warning notices were posted along that dividing wall.

A second understanding is that the wall referred to the law. The legal system set forth in the Mosaic law given by

God was designed to protect the people of Israel from the paganism of the surrounding cultures. However, this law, misinterpreted and abused, eventually became a source of Jewish pride and exclusiveness. Such misuse resulted in a wide relational chasm between Jews and Gentiles. A third interpretation is that the dividing wall was the curtain in the Jerusalem temple between the holy place and the holy of holies.

The context of verse 14 suggests that the second interpretation of the dividing wall probably is what Paul intended. The Jews' pride and sense of superiority led to misuse of the law resulting in hostile attitudes and engendering in turn Gentile hostility toward the Jews. It was this wall, the wall of hostility, which Christ tore down. The law was not at fault; rather, the wrong use of the law caused hostility on both sides.

In His flesh Christ destroyed that which separated Jews and Gentiles in order to reconcile them to God and to unite them into one people in His body, the church. The phrase in His flesh refers to the crucified Christ and conveys the same idea as "the blood of the Messiah" (2:13) and "through the cross" (2:16). Through Christ believers have peace with God, are united with all of God's people, and express these God-given realities by living in peace with one another. If you are a believer in Christ, you are one with all other believers. God's desire is that you live in harmony with His people even if you don't always see eye-to-eye with them. Your union with Christians is greater than all other unions on earth. Your witness to the world is to live in harmony with brothers and sisters in Christ so the world can see you all belong to one spiritual family.

If you are not a Christian, you are divided from millions of believers and alienated from God. Turn to the living Christ and trust Him as Savior. He will remove the barrier that exists between you, believers, and God, and will make you part of His family now and forever.

Verses 15-16: *He did away with the law of the commandments in regulations, so that He might create in Himself one new man from the two, resulting in peace. He did this so that He might reconcile both to God in one body through the cross and put the hostility to death by it.*

On the cross Christ did away with the law of the commandments in regulations. The words did away with translate a Greek verb meaning "render inoperative" or "nullify." How are we to understand this statement? Bible

scholars have answered this question in different ways. Some take the view that the law was made ineffective. Another view is that the law's cultural demands have ceased. Still others believe the whole law has been nullified. A final interpretation is that specific commandments are no longer valid. The burden of those specific commandments was taken away at the cross.

In any case, Christ had specific reasons for rendering the law inoperative. Paul listed two reasons in Ephesians 2:15-16. The first purpose was to create in Himself one new man from the two. Christ has created a wholly new humanity completely different from Jews and Gentiles. Paul did not mean that in Christ, Jews become Gentiles or Gentiles become Jews. Rather, he meant that Christ has created a new race, a new unity — the church. The wonderful result of this new creation is peace. This peace is not universal. Only redeemed Jews and Gentiles in the community of faith in Christ experience and rejoice in this peace.

The second purpose for rendering the law inoperative was to reconcile both to God in one body through the cross. Not only has God brought peace between believing Gentiles and believing Jews, they also are at peace with God. Both the reconciliation to one another and to God became a reality because of Jesus' death on the cross — indeed a high price to pay. Jesus' death put the hostility to death between Jewish and Gentile Christians.

Verse 17: *When Christ came, He proclaimed the good news of peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near.*

Christ not only accomplished peace, He also proclaimed the good news of peace to those far away (Gentiles) and to those ... near (Jews). In pointing to the preaching of peace, Paul likely referred to a time after the cross when Jesus' apostles preached His accomplished peace to Jews and Gentiles. Jesus came into the world, created peace by His reconciling death on the cross, and then preached through His apostles this good news of peace. Without the cross and resurrection, no peace existed to preach. The glorious good news went out to both Jews and Gentiles, for both groups needed to be reconciled to one another and to God.

Verse 18: *For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father.*

The result of Christ's message of peace is an entirely new entity, a new humanity — the church of Christ on earth. In this new humanity, redeemed Jews and Gentiles have equal

access by one Spirit to the Father. Paul again emphasized this remarkable privilege is only through Him. Reconciled to God by Christ's cross, united to one another by one Spirit (the Holy Spirit), all believing Gentiles and Jews have access to the Father. No news can top this good news!

3. BUILT TOGETHER (EPHESIANS 2:19-22)

Verse 19: *So then you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with the saints, and members of God's household,*

Paul's so then began his concluding discussion about God's work in Christ to unite Jews and Gentiles into His one, new people. Because believing Gentiles and believing Jews had been brought together and joined together into one community, the church, Gentiles were no longer what they once were — foreigners and strangers. Instead, believing Gentiles had become fellow citizens who belonged to God's household. The expression foreigners and strangers is a comprehensive one that includes all persons who for various reasons did not enjoy the full privileges of citizenship in a particular country. The Ephesians had once been foreigners and strangers in relationship to God's kingdom. However, since becoming believers their status had changed dramatically.

God had acted wonderfully and powerfully to create change. The Ephesians had become true citizens and members of God's household. They once were like resident aliens in a foreign nation, but their status changed to that of family members. They lived as citizens with the saints, all the people of God. Believers are neither Jews nor Gentiles. They are Christians. If God accepts each one, how can we refuse to accept one another?

Verses 20-21: *built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself as the cornerstone. The whole building is being fitted together in Him and is growing into a holy sanctuary in the Lord,*

Paul described the church as a holy sanctuary where God dwells. The image of the church Paul painted is of a building standing on a foundation and a cornerstone. The foundation, which provides durability and strength, rests on the New Testament apostles and prophets, and the building's cornerstone is Christ Jesus Himself. In the first century, a building's cornerstone lay at the corner of two primary walls. The cornerstone supported and strengthened the structure. The cornerstone also played

an important role in determining the building's final shape. The stability of the entire structure depended on the cornerstone.

The church is here compared with a building whose cornerstone is Jesus Christ. He is the church's unity, cohesion, and stability. Without Christ the church's existence is impossible. But with Him the church's unity of Jew and Gentile is established, secured, and eternal. However, this building is not yet finished. It is growing into a holy sanctuary in the Lord. New believers from various races, nations, and cultures over all the earth are continually being added. God's sanctuary is international.

The statement that Jesus is the church's cornerstone has several applications to believers. A primary one is that Jesus is the Source of stability for the church. Another is that Jesus provides direction for His people. He also is the Source of unity in the church. Reflect on additional ways the metaphor of the cornerstone shows how essential Jesus is to the church.

Verse 22: *in whom you also are being built together for God's dwelling in the Spirit.*

This sanctuary is like no other edifice. It has no physical materials and no physical locale. It needs none, for this sanctuary is a spiritual building where God dwells. He lives in this community of believers wherever they are on the earth. Christians are God's dwelling in the Spirit. Think of it! I am awestruck! Aren't you?

Believing first-century Gentiles and Jews had become citizens of God's kingdom and members of God's family and were being built together into a temple of God. Today's Christians also are being made into the earthly dwelling place of God, which we reveal by relating to one another in ways consistent with the Spirit's presence.

Paul directed the Ephesians to remember what they were before Christ saved them. Recall your life before salvation and reflect on how your relationships with God and believers have changed since you became a Christian. Only when believers live in unity, in peace and love with one another, will we give evidence to the world that God's Spirit dwells in us. Only then will the world believe in Christ as their Peacemaker, the One who came to make peace — peace between persons and God, and peace with one another.