

Pray “in the Spirit.” As Barclay says, “Let the Spirit be the atmosphere in which you pray.” Build up your relationship with God. Be open to him! Listen to his word! Seek his will! So it’s beyond you – bigger, harder than you thought? Then be strong in the Lord – committed to his will, yet knowing that, apart from him, you can’t do it!

Paul, the “ambassador in chains”, requests prayer for himself (vv. 19-20). He isn’t requesting release from prison, but that he will declare the gospel “fearlessly”.

The letter is being sent with Tychicus (vv. 21-22) who was also carrying the letter to Colossae (Col. 4.7-9) and a personal letter to Philemon.

“Peace to the brothers, and love with faith from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Eph. 6.23). There is a struggle on in this world. We are actively engaged in it, but we are called to “peace and love” – to receive them “with faith” from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, to live them out in Christian fellowship, to reach out with them to others.

“Peace”, “love” and “faith” are three of the key words in the epistle, but then he adds a fourth – “Grace to all who love our Lord Jesus with an undying love” (v. 24). The letter began with praise to God “who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ” (1.3). It concludes with a benediction of God’s grace – his unmerited favour, freely given to us in Christ.

Peace, love, faith and grace... There is a struggle, but Christ has won the victory! Look up and don’t give up!

# By Grace...

## The Message of Ephesians

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## The Riches of God's Grace

### Reading: Ephesians 1

Sometimes we hear the older generation complaining that today's youth "doesn't know what's good for them." Usually the reference is to a belief that life should just "fall into their lap" without too much hard work.

But then, haven't we sometimes thought it would be nice to have a joint account with a millionaire? "Wouldn't it be nice to win a million dollars?" the gambling interests entice us. Or, if quizzes are your forte, "Who wants to be a millionaire?" As I understand it, nobody in this congregation has "taken the bait"!

You don't get anything for nothing. There's always some catch, some cost.

The introduction of GST (goods and services tax) has promised a fairer tax system into the future – but nobody is suggesting a reduction of government revenue. Even the Opposition knows that, to "roll back" the GST as they propose, revenue will have to rise somewhere else. And, as far as gambling is concerned, there can only be big winners if there are a whole lot of losers.

### God's Riches

Yet there are situations where someone else has paid the cost but we experience the benefit.

Perhaps we have received an inheritance, the fruit of an earlier generation's labour. Farming is always hard work, but many farmers are building on the work of parents and grandparents as well. The community passes on benefits too (sometimes debts as well for future generations!). Nevertheless, much of the infrastructure of our society is given for us to continue to use and develop. We share a rich cultural heritage of music, art and literature. There are those today who continue to add to our cultural treasure chest.

So the concept of receiving free what others have provided at great personal cost isn't as foreign to us as we thought.

Paul was a prisoner in Rome when he wrote to the Ephesians. The theme that keeps coming through his letter is "grace" – twelve times in all! We used to learn the definition – "grace is the unmerited favour of God." Someone has defined "grace" in a simple mnemonic, "God's Riches at Christ's Expense." Grace is free to us, but provided by God at great expense – "through his blood" (v. 7), through the death of Christ the Son of God.

What are "the riches of God's grace" to which Paul is drawing our attention here? "In [Christ] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins..." (v. 7). The word for "redemption" was used for the price paid to set free a prisoner of war, a slave or a criminal condemned to death. Sin is the failure to meet God's requirements, to live as God expects – whether by wilful rebellion or moral weakness. Paul concludes elsewhere that "all have sinned" (Rom. 3.23). He describes us as being in bondage to sin and hence in bondage to the consequences of sin. But in Christ – specifically in his death – we are set free, forgiven, no longer impelled by sinful inclinations.

But not only so – Paul describes us as having been adopted into the family of God. God has made us his children – again it is "through Jesus Christ". Jesus is the Son of

We are to stand firm "with **the breastplate of righteousness** in place" (v. 14b). In our society, righteousness has rather a bad name. It makes us think of someone rather smug and superior. Righteousness is "rightness". That is the character of God. None of us can claim it about ourselves. In Romans Paul concludes that "there is no one righteous, not even one" (Rom. 3.10). As he said earlier in the present letter, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast" (Eph. 2.8-9). We are made right (righteous) only by grace, only by what God has done for us in Christ. But the purpose of God's grace is to lead to transformation – "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (v. 10). So the breastplate of righteousness protects our life because it is our status before God in Christ our Saviour, but it also expresses the character of our heavenly Father before the world.

We are to stand firm "with our feet fitted with **the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace**" (6.15). Christ himself "is our peace" (2.14). "He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near" (v. 18). Isaiah said, "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, 'Your God reigns!'" (Is. 52.7). This gospel of peace is important preparation for the struggle – it is the only sure foothold for the campaign in which we are engaged. It also offers good news to all we meet.

"In addition to all this, take up **the shield of faith**, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one" (Eph. 6.16). "In addition to all this" could mean "to cover all the rest" (E.F. Scott) or "through thick and thin" (William Barclay). Faith is our active dependence on the truth of who God is and what he has done for us. The attacks of the evil one – whether through accusation, temptation, doubt, discouragement... – can have no effect when the shield of faith protects us.

"Take **the helmet of salvation**" (v. 17a). Our minds and our thinking are to be controlled by what God has done for us in Christ.

"...and **the sword of the Spirit**, which is the word of God" (v. 17b). When Jesus was tempted, he used the words of Scripture to counter the enticing suggestions of the tempter (Matt. 4.4-10). The Word of God – the Scripture – is God's revelation of his nature, his purposes, his redemptive love... It is a weapon used by the Spirit for both defence and attack.

### Keep on Praying

Above all, **pray**. "And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints" (Eph. 6.18).

Don't stop praying! Remember that we have to **be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power**. We need strength beyond our own, wisdom beyond our own – it is not a battle against flesh and blood.

That's why we have this struggle "against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (v. 12).

The devil is beaten, but he doesn't want us to believe in Jesus as our Saviour. He doesn't want us to live an effective Christian life. He doesn't want us to spread the good news of Jesus.

### Full Battle Dress

Paul was a prisoner under house arrest in Rome. He was writing a letter to his Christian friends in Ephesus. He watched the soldier guarding the house. As a house guard, this soldier probably wasn't wearing in full battle dress. But Paul was reminded of all that he had seen outside when the Roman armies patrolled the roads. They wore the full armour – *panoplia* in Greek.

The belt tied tightly around the waist showed the soldier was ready for action. It gathered in the tunic and helped keep the breastplate in place. It carried the scabbard for the sword.

The breastplate covered the body from neck to thigh. It was the heart-protector – usually made of bronze.

According to the Jewish historian Josephus, the soldier's strong army boots were "thickly studded with sharp nails." Roman armies were noted for being able to take long marches over rough terrain at amazing speed.

The soldier needed a shield for protection. The Great Shield, as it was called, was body-length. It was made of two layers of wood glued together, covered with linen and hide and bound with iron. Soldiers could move forward together towards a fortified city under a wall of shields. They were safe from the enemy's incendiary darts tipped in pitch. The shield also served for carrying a wounded soldier from the battlefield.

To protect his head, he wore a helmet made of bronze with leather attachments.

His weapon was a sword – a short two-edged sword. He also carried a spear, though this doesn't figure in Paul's description.

That's it! Paul thought. We are involved in a struggle "against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." We need the protection of God's full armour.

### God's Full Armour

So what is the Christian's armour?

"Stand, then, with the **belt of truth** buckled around your waist" (v. 14a).

Already Paul has said that we are no longer to be "tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming." Instead we are to "speak the truth in love" (4.14-15). Our new life as children of the light is to be "in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus" (v. 21). No more dishonesty, corruption, deception... Our lives are to be consistent with God's revealed purposes, flowing from his redemptive truth in Jesus Christ. Both the breastplate of righteousness and the sword of the Spirit depend on the truth.

God in a unique sense – God the Son, the second person of the Trinity. Jesus had such a close relationship with the Father that in prayer he used the intimate family word, "Abba." This was an Aramaic word rather like "Daddy". In Rom. 8.15 Paul says that we have received a Spirit of adoption by whom we cry, "Abba, Father." He goes on, "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory" (vv. 16-17).

And God has revealed his purposes to us. God's "mystery" is now an "open secret". His purpose is not just for the here and now, but includes the hereafter. His readers are described as those "who were the first to hope in Christ" (v. 12). That's not wishful thinking but a confident trust in Christ forever.

Paul gives praise to the Father for his eternal purpose (v. 3), praise for the redemption made available through the Son (v. 6) and praise for the work of the promised Holy Spirit, described here as "the deposit guaranteeing our inheritance" (v. 14). Part of "the riches of his grace" is that the Spirit of God indwells every believer. The issue isn't tongues or healings or miracles. If you believe in Christ, the Spirit indwells you, seeking to bring to completion in you the redemptive work of Christ for you. Increasingly our lives should give evidence of the "fruit of the Spirit" (Gal. 5.22,23) – "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."

### Knowing...

A number of years ago, some Japanese soldiers were found living in a dugout on a remote Pacific Island. They were quite unaware that the War was long since over, that peace treaties had been signed, that global reconstruction was well-advanced.

In their case, of course, their country had capitulated because of the mass destruction caused by two atomic bombs. In our case, the victory was won by the one who laid down his life. At his expense God's riches have been made available to us. But do we know it? Do we live it? Have we entered into our glorious inheritance?

In the latter part of Ephesians 1, Paul gives thanks for them – for their faith and their practical love. But he also prays earnestly for them.

He prays that they will know God better (v. 17). One recent translation puts it, "I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you spiritual wisdom and revelation in your growing knowledge of him" (NET). Eternal life, Jesus told us, has to do with knowing God (Jn 17.3). How we need to know him better!

But he goes on to pray that "you may know the hope to which he has called you..." – a hope expressed in "the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe" (vv. 18,19). "The saints" and "us who believe" refers to the same group of people. It has been suggested it could be paraphrased as, "Since you are enlightened by God's Spirit, I pray that you may comprehend the hope to which he has called you, the spiritual riches that await the saints in glory, and the spiritual power that is available to the saints now" (NET notes).

And what is this power that is “for us” – available to us now? “That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms...” (vv. 19b,20).

There is a quest today for inner spiritual resources of power. This is part of what the “new age” movement is all about. Some Christian groups seem to be caught up in the same quest. It ends up as a kind of spiritualised humanism. It doesn’t centre on God or glorify God. Instead, it centres on us and glorifies us.

But God’s power is available to us. Jesus didn’t live a “superman” life. He emptied himself, divesting himself of heavenly glory and powers. He lived here with the same resources, with the same access to the presence and power of God that is available to us. It is a relationship. We don’t hold a little cache of divine power which we can carry around with us. We live in relationship with God and his power is available in our lives. Christ, of course, was unique. His status is “far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way”(vv. 21-23).

The church is the body of Christ, the means by which he works in the world. One older writer has put it this way, “Here the conception is that this plenitude of the divine powers and qualities which is in Christ is imparted by him to his church, so that the latter is pervaded by his presence, animated by his life, filled with his gifts and energies and graces” (S.D.F. Salmond, *EGF*).

Do you live under God’s grace – with the awareness of God’s riches at Christ’s expense? Do you know the riches of his grace to you in Christ – in a deepening knowledge of God and availability to be and act as his agents in this world? To what extent is the Christian church in the Burdekin “the fullness of him who fills everything in every way”?

We’ve got a long way to go! And yet, that is our calling! Let us step forward together confidently with him!

## The Whole Armour of God Ephesians 6.10-24

There is a struggle on in this world. It expresses itself in many different ways.

Ten years ago we might have imagined that it was a conflict between capitalism and Communism. Not long after that we saw Communism breaking down in many parts of the world. Who could have imagined then that Communism would crumble in the Soviet Union? And yet it did, through a series of unexpected and amazing events!

Does that mean that the conflict was over in Russia and the former Soviet republics? Whatever we thought as the events unfolded, it is clear to us now that there are many continuing problems. The repression of Communism had held back both evil and good. Civil rights and freedoms would not guarantee the viability and integrity of the new regime.

Over twenty years ago I read an article written by a Romanian Baptist pastor and released to the Western media. Communism had promised, he said, that repressive measures would be needed in society for thirty years. After this, the “socialist man” would have been created – content and compliant – and the restrictions would be able to be lifted. He challenged the Romanian government, “Where is the socialist man you promised?”

For all the evils of Communism – particularly savage in Romania – the new freedom has not been the end of the struggle.

### The Struggle

The basic struggle in this world is not with Communism, capitalism, or any other particular “ism”. It isn’t a struggle against human beings. Paul describes it as a struggle “against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Eph. 6.12).

Down across the years, I have heard many theories about an underlying conspiracy in the world. For some it has been the Communist, for others the capitalist or the international Jew or the Catholic or the Protestant... – always, by the way, not the speaker’s group!

Paul doesn’t deny the involvement of particular people and groups in the struggle. But it is too simple and comfortable to say that the problem is “over there” with that group. Note that Paul is warning us about “the devil’s schemes” (v. 11) – “the devil’s evil tricks”, as the Good News Bible puts it.

Do you know that the devil is a liar? Jesus called him the father of lies – he is the one who inspires them all! Do you ever tell lies? You thought you were being clever. You got what you wanted. Or you got yourself out of trouble. But you were tricked. The devil got you that time, didn’t he? The struggle isn’t only out there – it is “in here” too!

Part of the devil’s trickery is that he has already been beaten when Jesus died on the cross! He doesn’t want us to know that. He doesn’t want us to believe that. Because he and his spiritual forces are destined for the eternal fire, he’s determined to take as many with him as he can.

Such an attitude towards relationships isn't typical of our age. It is said that Abraham Lincoln was once criticised for his attitude to his enemies. "Why do you try to make friends with them?" a colleague asked. "You should try to destroy them." To which Lincoln replied, "Am I not destroying my enemies when I make them my friends?"

Christ has set us free. When we exercise our Christian freedom in service to others, we will see a transformation in human relationships such as we could never imagine. The principle is not restricted to the three basic human relationships to which Paul refers.

Rights go hand in hand with responsibilities. Christ has set us free. Let's use our freedom in mutual submission and willing service.

## **Saved and Included**

### **Reading: Ephesians 2**

Some people "make a statement" by putting a bumper-sticker on their car. They may be letting us know their preferences for a republic or a new flag. Or it could be a smart "take-off" of a popular opinion. Or they may be advertising a business or product – or their membership of a community organisation. Sometimes the intention is obvious. At other times...

A few years ago I saw a sticker that said, "Jesus saves, but not on my income." Is that meant to be smart, corny or what? Is the person taking a Christian catch-phrase and simply commenting on their inadequate income? Is it a statement, "I'm not a Christian myself and I think Christians are rather amusing"?

The word "save" is used commonly enough. We "save" by being careful not to spend all our money. In a different way, the life savers "save" someone in trouble by rescuing them from dangerous seas. The medical staff in an emergency ward may likewise "save" a casualty brought in from a serious accident.

In our common usage, we don't use the noun "salvation" – that has become an exclusively religious word. The shop doesn't entice you to make "great salvations" – no, you hope to make "savings". In spite of their name, the life savers "rescue" rather than "save" people. Even when a medical team "saves" a life, we stick to the verb, not the noun.

### **Objects of Wrath**

Our talk about salvation is against the grim picture of the human situation. There are those today who would prefer us to talk about "affirmation". Many people, it is true, suffer from low self-esteem – so badly that they can't function properly. That is a serious, but different, problem. "God doesn't make junk," one affirming slogan goes. True enough, but are we – and the world we live in – just the way God made us to be?

Paul describes his readers as having been "dead in your trespasses and sins," following "the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air" (i.e. Satan), "gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desire and thoughts"... We were "by nature"... – in other words, by the character and manner of our life – we were "objects of wrath."

God didn't make junk. But remember what he said about Noah's generation? In Genesis 6.6-7 we read, "The Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain. So the Lord said, 'I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth – men and animals, and creatures that move along the ground, and birds of the air – for I am grieved that I have made them.' God is the Creator. He has the perfect right to judge and dispose of what he has created.

Our society is in two minds about the issue of punishment and reform of criminals. There should always be hope for reform, but is the sentence fair to the victim? Is it a just punishment? And how are we to handle emotions? On the one hand, we are supposed to

be warm and affirming. On the other, we are told to express our anger, to tell people what we are really feeling.

So – living apart from God we are spiritually dead and face the future prospect of God’s judgment and the “wages of sin” which are “death” (Rom. 6.23).

### **Saved by Grace**

“But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved” (vv. 4-5). By “grace”, Paul doesn’t mean a kind of divine “niceness” or “affirmation”! “Grace”, as we noted last week, is “God’s riches at Christ’s expense.”

We are “made alive with Christ” (v. 5), “raised up with Christ” (v. 6). Paul is saying that Christ died for our sins – he died our death so that we could share his resurrection. What he has done shows for all time “the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus” (v. 7, cf. 1.7).

“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast” (vv. 8-9).

Grace is a gift of God. We don’t deserve it. We can’t earn it. But we do need to receive it – “through faith”, receiving and depending on what Christ has done for us.

We aren’t saved **by** good works, but we are saved **for** good works. “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (v. 10).

God’s “workmanship” – the original is the word from which we get our English word “poem”. The creative purpose of God in our salvation in Christ is life the way he always meant it to be.

### **Included by Grace**

But life in grace is more than personal salvation and reformation. It is not simply having a relationship with God. It also brings us into a new relationship with God’s people.

We hear a great deal about inclusiveness and “inclusive language” today – not only in schools and universities, but in the church as well. And in the sexuality debate, the lobby groups in the church have focussed very much on the issue of inclusiveness, rather than on questions of ethics and genetics. People should be welcomed and affirmed, we are told, and that’s all.

In Paul’s day there was an issue of inclusiveness too. The Jews knew themselves to be the “chosen people”. However, they had forgotten that they were chosen to take the news of God’s revelation and redemption to the whole world. They had, of course, to live true to the message and that meant avoiding sinful distortions from the surrounding culture. But they forgot why they were chosen. They became very snobbish about it. We are “the people”. Others are “the nations” – “Gentiles” as it is translated. Circumcision of their males was not only a sign that they were “chosen” – it showed that they belonged to God’s “exclusive club.”

### **Within Families**

Paul goes on to extend the principle of mutual submission to family relationships. “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right” (6.1). “Fathers, do not exasperate your children (in other words, don’t make them angry); instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord” (v. 4).

This refers to the family situation. We have a continuing obligation to “honour father and mother” (Ex. 20.12). Jesus criticised the religious leaders of his time for avoiding the clear obligations of this commandment (Mt. 15.4-6). Marriage, of course, involves “leaving father and mother” – such “leaving” often occurs much earlier in our society, as people take over responsibility for their own lives. A new kind of adult-to-adult relationship develops with mother and father – involving “honour” or “respect” rather than “obedience”. As parents, we have to release our children to their new roles and responsibilities.

Here in Eph. 6 Paul is writing to children and young people. We have had talk about children’s “rights” that should flow from the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. But Paul is writing about children’s responses and responsibilities within the family. Home is a primary learning-ground for life. That is God’s purpose for homes and families. Obedience is part of your response to the Lord.

On the other side, if home is to be a growing, nurturing, training place for life, then parents are to be sensitive and caring towards their children – and will progressively allow them more responsibility. We react against statements like, “A mother’s place is in the home.” But I want to stress that “A father’s place is in the home”! These days we talk about “parenting”, to try to redress an imbalance in mothers’ and fathers’ caring roles for their children. This was a problem in Paul’s day too, but I’m not at all sure our modern solution has worked. The time has come to say loud and clear to men that children need “fathering” as well as “mothering”.

### **In the Workplace**

Another important situation where our freedom to serve needs to be expressed is in the work place.

For Paul’s readers the issue was the relationship between slaves and their masters. Though the Christian gospel eventually and inevitably led to the abolition of slavery, we don’t hear Paul campaigning – that couldn’t happen until the Christian movement had the numbers to influence society in that way. But relationships could begin to change. Paul dealt with this in detail when returning the now-converted runaway slave, Onesimus, to his master, Philemon. He was to receive him back “no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother” (Philem. 16a).

But, even where slave or master wasn’t a Christian, the other could still apply the principle of freedom to serve. The slave was to “Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men” (Eph. 6.7). The masters likewise were to treat their slaves as those who were serving the Lord. “Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favouritism with him” (v. 9).

“No one can serve two masters,” Jesus taught (Mt. 6.24a). We are to be “free from sin and slaves to God”, as Paul puts it elsewhere (Rom. 6.22). We have glorious freedom – within God’s boundaries!

And now, “out of reverence for Christ,” we are to submit ourselves to one another. This is an extension and particular application of Paul’s teaching elsewhere that we are the “body of Christ”, serving others with our diverse gifts so that the unity of the body will be effectively displayed and the body will grow and be “built up in love.” All, however, is under Christ as head. “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.”

## In Marriage

Marriage is one of the areas in which this freedom to serve is to be displayed. Paul writes, “Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord” (v. 22) and “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (v. 25).

Does Paul expect more of wives than he does of husbands? I don’t think so. He expects both husbands and wives to relate to one another with a commitment that is undivided and complete. Each is to submit to the other out of reverence for Christ. There is no issue here of status or rights, no reference to what either can expect or demand – only what each is free to give.

It may well be that Paul’s first readers were aware of most of the issues confronting the modern reader. There must have been an immediate reason for writing the way he did – as well as God’s reason for our future instruction.

The question of marriage was a pressing one in the early church. For some, the immorality of their pagan past – and of the surrounding pagan culture – was such that it seemed better not to be married (that was an issue in Corinth – see 1 Cor. 7). For others also, celibacy seemed a sensible option in view of the prospect of Christ’s imminent return.

But for Paul, marriage is part of God’s good creative purpose. He quotes from Gen. 2.24, “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh” (Eph. 5.31). Jesus used the same verse when referring to God’s purpose that the marriage relationship be permanent (Matt. 19.5).

In Christ, both women and men experienced a new freedom and equality which was expressed in the life of the Christian community – “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3.28). What does this liberty mean within the marriage relationship? The two have become one. “Wives, submit to your husbands.” Use your freedom in Christ to live out your commitment. “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.” Don’t dominate and boss your wife around. In marriage you have become one. Give yourself – even, if need be, to the point of death!

The problems of unfaithfulness and domestic violence aren’t new. There are situations where the marriage bond is broken because of human hardness. But such situations don’t diminish the divine intention which we are to seek in our own lives.

So we hear Paul writing to these Gentile believers, “at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.” That was their situation, their status. “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ” (vv. 12,13).

It is not that the Jews had suddenly become friendly. By grace – by what God has done in Christ – the Gentiles had a new relationship with God and therefore a new relationship with all other believers.

“For he himself is our peace” – isn’t that a striking phrase? “In his flesh” – in his own death – Christ has taken up all that the Law required to be done for both Jewish and Gentile sinners. He has “destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility.” All who have received this work of grace are now reconciled to God through the cross, by which God has made an end of their hostility to himself and to one another. His deed and word of peace is for all – “peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit” (vv. 14-18).

Saved and included – not because we are “affirmed”, in spite of all we may be and do. Saved and included – because in his grace God, who says we are sinners and deserving of death, has loved us and gave his Son Jesus, the sinless one, to die in our stead. Saved and included – because in his grace God simply asks that we repent of sin and believe in Christ our Saviour. Saved and included – because in his grace God has given us his Holy Spirit who is working on us to transform us into the people he means us to be.

The church has always been in danger of becoming yet another a human institution which seeks approval and relevance by responding to the political wisdom of the time. The church is called to be the body of Christ making known his truth, his gospel and his grace within an alienated world. We have to find relevant ways of telling the message of human offence and divine forgiveness, but we cannot change it and be truly part of the body of Christ.

By grace, we “are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household” (v. 19). But not only so – we become “a holy temple in the Lord”, “a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit” (v. 22).

Saved by grace. Included by grace. Built together into Christ’s body to carry his grace into an alienated world. Let us be sure to support and pray for one another as we step forward together with our Lord!

## The Secret is Out!

### Reading: Ephesians 3

How good are we at keeping a secret?

I recall from boyhood years all the lengths to which we went to disguise the Christmas present we were giving. Sometimes the tin and smooth became the fat and crinkly by the time the present was put under the tree.

From time to time at a family birthday we may have a younger child whom we believe can be trusted with a secret. But, as the mystery is being opened amid much guessing, the child suddenly blurts out the secret – unable to hold back any longer.

Some of our members went to a surprise birthday party last week. The guest of honour thought she was going to a small family celebration, but, when taken upstairs to see the view, was greeted with over 120 well-wishers – “Surprise! Surprise!”

### God's Open Secret

Already, when we were considering Ephesians 1, we came across Paul's reference to God's “mystery” – God “made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfilment – to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ” (1.9,10). I commented that “God's mystery is now an open secret.”

In chapter 3 Paul picks up the theme again. Because of all he has said about how God has brought Jews and Gentiles together in Christ, Paul starts off to say something and then breaks off. “For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles –” (v. 1). Verses 2 to 13 are a digression. In v. 14, he picks up what he began to say – “For this reason I kneel before the Father...”

He digresses because he wants to be sure the Gentile believers understand the “mystery” – God's “open secret” – the reason why he, a Jew, ministers to the Gentiles, and why he is a prisoner “for the sake of you Gentiles.”

He speaks of “the mystery made known to me by revelation” (v. 3), “the mystery of Christ... now revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets” (vv. 4-5).

The earthly ministry of Jesus was physically limited, because his time was limited to about three-and-a-half years. So we hear him sending his disciples ahead to prepare with way – “Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel” (Mt. 10.5-6). In his encounter with the Canaanite woman who sought the healing of her daughter, we sense the same urgency and limitation (Mt. 14.21-28).

In fact, in the gospel record we have just two incidents which point to the breadth of his redemptive love for humanity. One is his meeting with the woman of Samaria. It was right there in Samaria that Jesus said to his disciples, “I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest” (Jn 4.35). The other is when some Greeks came to see Jesus (Jn 12.20ff). We have no record of the meeting, because it was so significant for Jesus that he commented, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified” (v.23).

## Freed to Serve

### Reading: Ephesians 5.21-6.9

On 10 December 1948, the United Nations adopted and proclaimed the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. This important document set out the intention of the nations to ensure certain basic rights and freedoms for every human being on the face of the earth.

The Preamble begins by acknowledging that “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world” and that “disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people.”

In many ways world history since that time has been marked by a variety of movements seeking to establish these rights in practice – movements for liberation of one kind or another, for self-determination, separation, anti-discrimination....

We haven't seen the end of what needs to be done, by any means – or what special interest groups want to be done. But we begin to face some other issues. Towards the end of the *Declaration*, we read, “In the exercise of his rights and freedoms, everyone shall be subject only to such limitations as are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society” (Art. 29 [2]). Realistically, freedom cannot be unlimited. Yet what are reasonable and fair boundaries? Is it unreasonable to have rights without responsibilities? Can human beings be trusted to be just and fair with personal self-regulation?

Paul has been telling us that we are alive in Christ so that we can obey God (Eph. 2.1ff). We are saved so that we can “do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do” (v. 10). We are to put off the old life so that we can put on the new (4.25ff). In 1 Cor. 9.19, Paul makes the astounding statement, “Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible.” Elsewhere he regards himself as a bond-slave (*doulos*) or servant of Jesus Christ (as in Rom. 1.1, Gal. 1.10, Phil. 1.1).

### Mutual Submission

It is against this background that we approach Paul's teaching on human relationships in today's reading. “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph. 5.21).

Paul wants us to understand that, in all three types of relationship he is about to describe, mutual submission is expected. Sadly, there are those who have applauded or condemned what Paul writes here, but have failed to grasp this foundational statement.

Christ has set us free – free from guilt, free from death, free from bondage to an old way of living – and an old way of relating to others. We are free to become and be what God always intended us to be – his service is “perfect freedom”.

Communism popularised the slogan that “religion is the opiate of the people.” They saw religion as a tool of management to keep the working class content and compliant.

Paul is saying that Christians are daytime people – alert, awake, living in the light of Christ – not living in pretence or denial, but knowing the truth and living by grace.

So, “Be very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil” (vv. 15-16) – “redeeming the time” as the old Bible put it – making the best use of every moment, measured by the will of God.

The driving, enabling spirit in our life is not to be alcoholic, but God’s Holy Spirit (v. 18). The verb has a continuous sense, “Be continually being filled with the Spirit.”

And let your life overflow in both heartfelt joy and thanksgiving to one another and to God (vv. 19-20).

Choices – we are making them all the time! But have we made that first choice – to receive Jesus Christ as our Saviour and Lord? And have we allowed that choice to shape and mould every other choice we make? Put off the old self and put on the new. Allow his Spirit to bring about real change in our life. The Lord hasn’t finished with any of us yet. Let’s step out together each day with him!

In the Great Commission, however, the global scope of the mission and gospel is quite clear to us, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations...” (Mt. 28.18-20). But how clearly did they understand this global scope? It took time – and a vision to both Roman centurion Cornelius and Jewish believer Peter (Acts 10), and the responsiveness of Christians in Antioch (the first place where believers were called “Christians”) who began reaching out to Gentiles as well as to Jews (Acts 11.19ff). So many were converted that Barnabas was sent to encourage them, and he went to Tarsus to fetch Paul to help teach all these new believers. Not surprisingly, it was also in Antioch that Christians first recognised God’s call to go out on mission beyond their borders into the Gentile world.

So what is the “mystery”? “This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus” (v. 6).

Paul is just amazed – why me? The gift of God’s grace to him has been “to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ” (v. 8).

In the Fall, not only have humanity and human relationships been broken, but the whole creation has become disjointed. The costly redemptive ministry of Christ aims at restoration – bringing “all things in heaven and earth under one head, even Christ” (1.10, cf. Rom. 8.19ff) and, specifically, bringing Jew and Gentile together into one body (3.6).

## Prayer for the Family

So as Paul comes to his prayer for the Ephesians, he has acknowledged them, not as a second-best divine afterthought, but fully belonging in the purposes of God, fully part of the family of God – “heirs together”, “members together”, “sharers together” (v. 6).

Paul addresses “the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name” (vv. 14-15). The footnote has “from whom all fatherhood.” There is much broken “fatherhood” in our world. For too many the word “father” evokes painful memories. There are many absent fathers and single-parent families. The Greek word for “family” (*patria*) comes from the word “father” (*pater*). The divine purpose was always that fathers be there for their families with responsibility, wisdom, strength and love. God is both the source and model of true fatherhood. His Fatherhood is experienced by “the whole family” of believers – whether Jew or Gentile.

At this point Paul has two particular prayers for them – both involving “power” or “strength” (two different words are used) which is fully available from the Father’s “glorious riches”.

“I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith” (vv. 16-17a). A Christian is indwelt by Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.

On the day of Pentecost, Peter said that the gift of the Holy Spirit is “for you and your children and for all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call” (Acts 2.39). In the midst of some recent teaching on the Holy Spirit, we have somehow got the impression that there are first-class and second-class Christians. We have needed to understand our inheritance – that the Holy Spirit is given to all who believe in Christ,

that when we “receive Christ” it is by the Holy Spirit that Christ lives within us. Instead of being divided by teaching about the one given to unite us, we need to live in the power of the one who is already at work “in our inner being.”

Paul’s second prayer for them – “I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God” (vv. 17b-19).

Receiving Christ into our hearts through faith is the foundation of Christian life and experience – “rooted and established in love” – that’s God’s redemptive love for us and now active within us.

“Power, together with all the saints” – that’s all believers, whether Jews or Gentiles. He is praying for the Ephesians, but not for a different experience or measure of God’s love from what he would pray for all God’s people.

He wants them to grasp the all-encompassing magnitude of the love of Christ (“how wide and long and high and deep” it is) – yet it is far greater than we can grasp (it “surpasses knowledge”). What he wants for them is not just an intellectual appreciation of Christ’s great love, but to know that love in experience, and, knowing it, to become the expression of it in the world – “filled to the measure of all the fullness of God” (v. 19b).

Do you watch the News? There are some people who don’t watch the News on principle – it’s too depressing! Often we wonder, not what will happen, but where it will happen next! Until the recent tragic killing of a young New Zealand soldier, the world had all but forgotten East Timor for Ambon and the Fiji crisis.

Of course, we don’t have to look “out there”. We can recognise in our own country, our own community – and ourselves – the evidence of human brokenness, of self-seeking, self-centred living.

That has never been God’s purpose – we know that! If we didn’t know it before, we ought to know it now, because the secret is out! The plan for reconciliation is fulfilled! All are now called to repent and believe the good news. The promise is that God will live, not just “with” us, but “within” us. There can now be a different way of life, a different kind of living – God’s kind of living and loving and unselfish caring.

Surprise! Surprise! The secret is out! Come to the party!

Already, in chapter 4, we have seen how Paul says we should “put off” our old self and “put on” the new self (4.22-24). To describe this transformation as a change of clothes may make it appear simpler than we find it in practice. But it is a reminder that the “first choice” commits us to a whole series of other choices down the line.

The other day one of the charities was advertising their need to restock after a major warehouse fire. The gist of it was a challenge to empty out of our wardrobes those clothes we no longer need but have held on to for years. Perhaps even with clothes, we may have taken them off, but then still hold on to them for sentimental reasons or “just in case.”

When Paul writes about our spiritual “putting off” what belonged to the old life, he means “getting rid of” them. For some that may mean destroying unhelpful CDs, books or magazines. For others, the termination of unhealthy relationships.

We are called to “a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (5.2). This “life of love” isn’t some “warm fuzzy” feeling towards others. It is a life shaped by the love of Christ – he had no illusions about human sin, but gave himself redemptively for the forgiveness and transformation of sinners.

So in our “life of love” there must not be “even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God’s holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving” (vv. 3-4).

It has become trendy to speak about “affirmation” rather than “salvation” these days. But God “affirmed” us in a cross – a statement about both the extreme seriousness of human sin and the greatness of his redemptive love for us. God’s affirming love doesn’t condone sin, but brings forgiveness and looks for real change.

“For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person – such a man is an idolater – has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God’s wrath comes on those who are disobedient” (vv. 5-6).

God offers us his love, his grace, his forgiveness, his salvation – a whole new self. We cannot “go it alone” without suffering the consequences.

## The New Self

“For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord” (vv. 8-10).

This new life will be visible in “all goodness, righteousness and truth”. It will be good and wholesome – guaranteed to be also fulfilling and exciting! It will be “right” – expressing what God always meant life to be. It will be “true” – without deceptions and cover-ups.

We do not know the origin or use of the song or saying in v. 14 –

“Wake up, O sleeper,  
rise from the dead,  
and Christ will shine on you.”

## Children of the Light

Reading: Ephesians 5.1-20

Our lives are full of choices – some big, some small, some indifferent, some life-changing. Some choices are temporary – for the day or moment. Others have a profound effect on every other choice we make.

We go into a car showroom. The salesperson extols his model – it has dual air-bags, CD player, remote central locking, chip-resistant paint, super-comfort easy-care upholstery, colour TV, drink cooler... We ask, “Does it have an engine?” Foolish, unnecessary question! No new car comes without an engine!

And yet... many folk seem to have an idea that faith in God is just an optional – and unnecessary – extra! Little wonder society sometimes seems like an engineless, powerless, undirected vehicle – only able to wander aimlessly downhill, unable to function with true purpose and freedom.

### That First Choice

Paul is writing to people who have already made that first choice. They have put their trust in Christ as their Saviour and Lord. They are “saved by grace through faith” (Eph. 2.8). They have made the choice that affects every other choice they will make from that time forward.

Making that choice is coming “home”: Living out that choice is natural – it is living the way we were always meant to live. There are, of course, habits and life-styles that will have to change. This may well take time. But it’s not as if you are standing on your head or walking on your hands!

From time to time we receive advertising brochures which, among many other things, promote a “night scope” – a cheaper version of what defence personnel use to “see” at night without using a light which would alert others to their presence.

The technology is clever, but it serves to highlight the fact that human beings are creatures of the light. Blind folk may develop a sort of “sixth sense” which helps compensate for some of their loss. We endeavour to be inclusive, to give equal opportunity to the visually disadvantaged. But, in spite of our best efforts, it is a sighted world. At every point, our life and life-style assume that we are creatures of the light.

But Paul goes further than that. He writes, “For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord” (5.8-10).

We belong to the light – spiritually as well as physically. We are “children of light” – belonging in the family of the God of light and truth and holiness, belonging there by the grace of Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Light of the world.

### Our Old Self

Having made that first choice, we belong in God’s light. There are ideas, attitudes and life-styles that no longer “belong” in our life. They are incompatible in the life of any child of the light.

## Living in Unity

Reading: Ephesians 4

Is it possible? we wonder. And how is it possible... how can ethnic Fijians and Fijians live together in peace as one nation?

They have done it before, and yet... All was well until the election of an Indian Prime Minister. And George Speight – now himself in detention – sees his actions as a signal example for other indigenous peoples – including Australian aborigines! With that suggestion it suddenly becomes an issue no longer far out there, but quite close at hand!

We have lauded ourselves as a truly “multicultural” nation – with small regard to the potential for division. We have prided ourselves in our diversity with little focus on what might unite us. And we have continued to extend our cultural complexity before satisfactorily resolving our relationship with indigenous Australians.

### The Unity of the Body of Christ

We have tended to operate that way as a Church. For example, we can make agreed statements on baptism with Catholic, Lutheran and Anglican Churches before thoroughly discussing or even being aware of our own diversity of understanding. On current issues in the Church, we pick up that “politically correct” phrase, “unity in diversity” – and think to accept one another in love and move forward in diversity.

But this is back-to-front – it isn’t Biblical thinking! There isn’t anything intrinsically good about diversity. We are called to be a “diversity in unity”. That puts the focus on unity. Our unity is in Christ. We are one body in Christ. Like a physical body, the members have different gifts – gifts that are essential for the life, growth and unity of the body. As all work together under the headship of Christ, the body fulfils its proper function and “grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (Eph. 4.16).

We note that “unity” is the gift of the Holy Spirit who indwells us and builds us together in true “peace”. But it is a gift to be “kept” – fostered, maintained (v. 3).

It is a unity which flows from the nature of the three-in-one God – “one Spirit... one Lord... one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” It is a unity which is basic to the message we have received – we have “one hope... one faith, one baptism” (vv. 4-6).

Within this oneness which we have received from God’s “glorious grace”, there are a variety of “grace-gifts” that we have received. Notice v. 7 – “But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.” Paul isn’t suggesting here that Christians have received different amounts of saving grace. After all, “it is by grace you have been saved, through faith” (2.8). That saving work is quite complete for all who have faith. In chapter 3, Paul wrote of his call to preach to the Gentiles as the “administration” (v. 2) or “gift” (v. 7) of God’s grace. Paul’s “grace-gift” was “to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ” (v. 8).

Within this one body, there are various gifts, but God has given “some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers” (v. 11).

Their purpose is “to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up” (v. 12).

James Kennedy, author of *Evangelism Explosion*, identified the most serious heresy in the Church as “Let clerical George do it.” Sometimes the clergy have jealously claimed that role for themselves. At other times it is forced on them by the expectations of the people.

It was never the Lord’s purpose for the Church, and no church can grow when minister and/or people operate on that basis. The purpose of full-time ministry is to prepare, equip and enable us all to exercise our own “grace-gifts” to build up the body “until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (v. 13).

Note verses 15-16 – “...we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.”

### **The Old and the New**

This chapter begins with Paul’s insistence that they “live a life worthy of the calling you have received” (v. 1). Now in v. 17 he insists that they “no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking.” A life of sensuality and lust is not how they came to know Christ (vv. 19-20).

“You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (vv. 22-24).

We are saved. We are forgiven. We are, to use Paul’s words from 2 Cor. 5.17, a new creation in Christ – the old has passed away, the new has come. That is our status before God because of the redemptive work of Christ. But God’s plan of salvation is directed to bringing about many practical changes in our lives. That is going to depend on our co-operation.

Too easily we accept the wrong “bent” of our lives as what we have always been and will always be. At times we may even be inclined to think these things are part of what God has given.

But God expects us to “put off” the old – to put it off in repentance, to put it off in trusting faith, to say to God, “I know this part of my life isn’t as you mean it to be. By the continuing work of your Holy Spirit, apply the completed work of Christ to this part of my life. By your grace, enable me to be renewed in my mental attitude – to put on the new self, created to be like you in true righteousness and holiness.”

Paul goes on to spell out some of the practical implications – but don’t let yourself off lightly if your own particular “besetting sin” isn’t in this list!

Falsehood must be replaced with truthfulness (v. 25). On the other hand, relationships sometimes break down because of our perceived right to “speak out the truth.” There certainly can be “righteous anger” – such as Jesus exercised in driving the moneychangers and traders out of the Temple. But human anger is so often twisted by

wrong attitudes and motives and becomes far from “righteous.” Even legitimate anger can lead us into sin. It needs to be curbed, lest it become an entry-point for the devil’s activity (vv. 26-27).

The thief must not only give up stealing, but must work and contribute to those in need (v. 28). What a powerful example of this was given by Zacchaeus – “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount” (Lk. 19:8).

Our speech isn’t to be “unwholesome” – “decayed” and “rotten” is the original meaning – “but only what is helpful (good, useful) for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen” (v. 29).

“And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption” (v. 30). In chapter 1, Paul said that we “were marked in [Christ] with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession” (1.13-14). Unwholesome speech grieves (offends, insults) the Holy Spirit whose indwelling is the guarantee that we belong to God, the pledge of our future inheritance beyond this life.

So – “get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you” (vv. 31-32).

“Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (v. 3). By grace God has forgiven us. Through the Holy Spirit God continues to work towards change in our lives – towards holiness. He has broken down the barriers that separate us. Through the same Spirit he has given us a variety of “grace-gifts” which enable us together to be one Body – ready and able to do his will. Then live it! Live out that unity! Together seek and do his will!