

Prayer

Glorious Lord, Your love is for our salvation and strength.
Glorious Lord, Your compassion is for our healing and restoration.
Glorious Lord, Your hope is for our eternal fulfilment in heaven.
Glorious Lord, Your promise is for our life, here and now.
We praise You, glorious Lord: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

When you have a break for a cup of tea or coffee today, tell the Lord what is on your mind

On-going prayers

- ***This week, give thanks for the blessing of life.*** Give thanks for the many good things that have happened to you over the years
- *Pray for Jerusalem and conflicts over the Al-aqsa mosque*
- *Pray for those who translate the Bible into new languages*

Meditation

By Your gracious love, Lord God, You continue to speak to us.

You are firm when we need to be guided;
You are gentle when we need to be loved.
You are direct when we need to hear instructions;
You are silent when we need to make our decisions.
You are challenging when we need to be confronted;
You are encouraging when we need to be affirmed.
You are heartening when we need to be courageous and act.
You are cautious when we need to take care of ourselves.
You are critical when we need to know our mistakes;
You are accepting when we need to know You care.

By Your gracious love, Lord God, You continue to speak to us.

Bible Study - Ephesians 3:1-6

¹ This is the reason why I, Paul, am the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles. ² Now you surely know about the special responsibility of God's grace that was given to me for you, ³ and that the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I previously wrote briefly; ⁴ reading this you will be able to discern my understanding of the mystery of Christ. ⁵ This was not disclosed to people of other generations in the way that it has now been revealed to God's holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit, ⁶ and it means that through the Gospel, the Gentiles have shared blessings, a shared body and a shared participation in the promise through Christ Jesus.

Thought for the day

Text

Ephesians 3:6

'through the Gospel, the Gentiles have shared blessings, a shared body and a shared participation in the promises through Christ Jesus.'

Thought

After the majestic introduction to the letter to the Ephesians, Paul began to focus on the message that would dominate the whole letter; that of the unity of God's people in Christ. Here, he speaks of *'shared blessings, a*

shared body and a shared participation ..., a message close to the heart of his call and central to the Gospel.

So often, Christians justify their divisions by saying 'I do my thing and you do yours' with the assumption that God will patch it all up. This attitude is far from God's heart and far from the testimony of Scripture. Indeed, if we will not share our blessings, how can we expect to share in His promises?

Review

The first two chapters of Ephesians form a magnificent prayer of praise and glory to God for His work in salvation and redemption. The letter continues in chapter 3 with a distinctive description of Paul's call to make known the 'mystery' of the Gospel revealed to him, as we read in our passage for today (3:1-6). The heart of his message is found in verse 6, which dramatically sets out the purpose of God to unite Jew and Gentile as equal partners in His blessing, the body of Christ, and His eternal promises. Paul continues to write about this up to verse 13, which we will read tomorrow (3:7-13).

Paul was a prisoner when he wrote Ephesians; there is little dispute about this and Ephesians is normally classified as a letter written from prison (see also 4:1). A careful look at this passage however reveals that Paul does not describe himself as a prisoner in the normal sense of the word, but as a 'prisoner of Jesus Christ for the sake of you Gentiles'. He was captivated by the call of God placed on his life, and as we know from other scriptures (e.g. Gal. 2:1,7 and Acts 18:6f.), he had a special revelation from Jesus that shaped his ministry and directed it specifically to the Gentiles.

Earlier in the letter, Paul has already said that God has revealed the '*mystery of His will ... which He has planned for us in Christ; a heavenly task for the fullness of time which is to unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth.*' (Eph 1:9,10). These words prepare us for what we read in this passage about the sharing of the Gospel with the Gentiles (3:6). It is easy for us to forget how incredibly difficult it was for early Christians to break out of the entrenched mould of Judaism. The truth is that after the Gospels, most of the New Testament charts the route of the Gospel out of Judaism and into the whole world, as commanded by Christ Himself before His ascension (Matt 28:19). This is the reason why the book of Acts begins with a small group of followers under the leadership of Peter in Jerusalem, and ends with Paul going to Rome and being entertained by Christians gathered at a city that was at the very centre of the known world. It is also the reason why the majority of the letters in the New Testament were written by Paul, the man who was personally charged by Jesus to take the Gospel to the Gentiles, and the reason why the Bible ends with a book about God's complete authority over all Creation, the book of the Revelation of John.

We must pause and take in the incredible sweep of this message. Christian faith is not a form of personal, self-satisfying religious convenience. By the grace of Christ, we are saved; but through this we are connected to the truth about our world and its eternal destiny. Paul knew this very well, which is why he explained his great call only after giving glory to God for His authority and command of everything (Ephesians 1 and 2). Paul was careful not to claim any personal merit for this grand vision; it was revealed to Him by Jesus Himself (3:3), and his call was an act of 'grace' on the part of the Almighty, given to him for the sake of others (3:2).

This whole passage speaks of the amazing intent of God to create, by means of the Gospel, a people who are united in Him, who share His blessings and promises, and are united in 'body' (3:6). Paul was committed to this divinely revealed mystery, found in Christ and proclaimed in the Gospel. He described Himself as a prisoner of God's call to proclaim this truth and build up the Kingdom of God. Surely the only proper response to this reading is for us to submit to this same revelation.

Going Deeper

The Bible study continues a further look at the following subjects:

- What does Paul mean by the 'special responsibility of God's grace' (3:2)?
- What is Paul referring to when he speak of a revelation he 'earlier wrote briefly' (3:3)?
- Why has God revealed His plan to 'holy apostles and prophets' (3:5)?
- What does Paul mean by using the word 'shared' three times in verse 6 (3:6)?

Notes on the text and translation

V2 *'the special responsibility of God's grace'* *'Special responsibility' is the way I have chosen to translate a Greek word ('oikonomian') that usually refers to someone's personal task or responsibility within the running of a household. Paul uses this phrase to describe his 'call' from God.*

V5 *'in the way that it has now been revealed ...'* *In most Bible versions, you will read this; 'as it has now been revealed ...' If you read the whole sentence, however, it is easy to lose track of what Paul is*

saying. I have used the phrase 'in the way that' instead of 'as' (a simple expansion of the Greek words used here) to bring out the meaning of the sentence, which is that God has revealed something now that was not evident before.

V6 'the Gentiles have shared blessings, shared body and shared participation of the promise'
This phrase reads quite differently in the various Bible versions, because it is hard to put the clear meaning of the Greek into English. I have attempted to capture what it says by the threefold use of the word 'shared', which is a distinctive feature of the original Greek of this sentence.

Going Deeper

What does Paul mean by the 'special responsibility of God's grace' (3:2)?

Of course, Paul's 'special responsibility' was his well documented call to take the message of the Gospel to the Gentiles, as explained above. When Paul wrote to the Ephesians, he wrote to a church he had founded and some of his readers knew him. Now if this letter was written years later in Rome, as many suggest, then he would have assumed that a number of those who read his letter would not have known him personally, hence his cautious comment in verse 2; 'now you surely know about ...'. He hoped that those who knew him in Ephesus would have told newer Christians about him, but he could not be sure.

Whilst reading for this study, I found that a number of books on Ephesians assume that if Paul wrote the letter, he was writing only to people he knew (and not also to the Christians who had been converted since his presence there). The authors of these books go on to suggest that Paul's cautious comment here at the beginning of verse 2 is evidence that Paul was not the real author of Ephesians; for they cannot understand why he would write in such a way to people he knew. Their assumption is wrong because it does not account for the growth of the church, and it is very sad that such a conclusion could be drawn!

If you read the 'translation notes' above, you will find that the phrase describing Paul's call, the 'special responsibility of God's grace' comes from a Greek word with a distinct meaning. In normal Greek it is used mostly to describe household duties or chores, and two things are worth noting. Firstly, every responsibility in the running of a household is 'special', for every task needs to be done for the house to run smoothly. Secondly, the word was used at times for the general management of a household, and whichever meaning you choose, it adds meaning. On the one hand, Paul did not want to elevate himself above others who worked for God's church. On the other hand, his role was indeed fundamental in creating a unified church in the early centuries, and this unity meant that the church, and the Kingdom of God, grew rapidly.

What is Paul referring to when he speak of a revelation he 'previously wrote briefly' (3:3)?

We have already commented (above) about Paul's special sense of call, so his comment suggesting that he wrote about this previously, and 'briefly', may mean that this is what he was speaking about earlier in the letter (1:9 – see above). Alternatively, if Paul wrote this letter (as I believe), then he was conscious of repeating himself not just in Ephesians, but perhaps also in other letters; Galatians 2:1,9, 1 Corinthians 15:51, Colossians 1:26f. 1 Timothy 3:16.

Sometimes, we think about 'revelation' as a special event in which the Lord makes a personal appearance to deliver a message. This can sometimes happen, and Paul did speak about receiving the personal call of God to go to the Gentiles in such a way. This should not blind us to the fact that scripture itself gives plenty of evidence of people receiving revelation in other ways. For example, Acts 18:6f. describes how Paul was led to this same decision by a sequence of events. He was forced to take action and 'wipe the dust from his feet' at the synagogue in Corinth, saying 'from now on I will go to the Gentiles'.

Paul's move to take the Gospel to the Gentiles was so radical in its day, it is not surprising that although he was called by Jesus to do it, he needed other experiences of life to teach him its truth, and he also wrote about it frequently. His comment that he 'previously wrote briefly' about it demonstrates the truth of this powerful call.

Why has God revealed His plan to 'holy apostles and prophets' (3:5)?

Paul's comments about God's 'holy apostles and prophets' in verse 5 are interesting. Paul does indeed say that although the mysteries of the Gospel were not fully revealed to people in the past, they were now revealed through Christ to the apostles and prophets of the early church. However, there is a little more to the verse than this, as we can see by looking more closely at what Paul meant by 'apostles' and 'prophets'.

The name 'apostles' was given to the disciples after they were commissioned by Christ to share the Gospel throughout the world (Matt 28:19), a group to which Paul was added because of his special revelation from Jesus. Because of the high esteem in which they were held, the early church seems to have used the term exclusively for the remaining twelve disciples and Paul. Consequently, later generations used the term 'mission', or 'missionary' (the Latin word for the Greek 'apostle', meaning 'one who is sent') to speak of

people who were commissioned to go out and preach the Gospel, leaving the word 'apostle' for the famous disciples (and Paul).

The prophets of the Old Testament, of course, only received glimpses of the full work of God in Jesus Christ, and even the great prophet Isaiah never described the complete work of God for salvation through Jesus. The truth was this; since Pentecost, the Holy Spirit had come on all God's people with power, and prophets arose in the church according to the work of the Spirit (see Acts 11:12, 13:1, 15:32 etc.). The work of the prophet remained the same, which was to speak the Word of God when moved by the Spirit, but the gift was unrestricted to special people.

For these reasons, it is understandable that Paul would call both the apostles and the prophets of the early church 'holy', but not in any special sense. They were the means God used to convey His Gospel and His Word, but they were not the only people who were holy or the only people God used to do His will. The adjective describes the fact that apostles and prophets were set aside by God for a task. The New Testament sometimes uses the word 'holy' to describe all who are saved (e.g. 1 Cor 1:2, Eph 1:4, Col 1:22 etc.), so we should think of the word 'holy' as a common adjective in the life of the church, not a special one!

What does Paul mean by using the word 'shared' three times in verse 6 (3:6)?

The translation of verse 6 is explained in the notes above, and the triple use of 'shared' in this translation replicates the Greek word structure. It is difficult to overemphasise the importance of this verse, because it gives us an important insight into the mystery of the Gospel itself, and one that is often forgotten.

In Colossians 1:27, Paul says this, *'To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory'*. So here, Paul describes the mystery of God as the presence of Christ; *'Christ is in you'*. There is no more powerful message than this, but what comes next builds upon it. In his years of ministry, Paul preached this message many times. However, as he did so, he had to face churches that were split and divided over issues; Jews and Gentiles fought each other, and churches (e.g. at Corinth) were at odds over all manner of issues. So in later years, Paul expanded what he had to say about the 'mystery of God', adding the important truth found in Jesus' prayer in John 17, where Jesus asks that His followers might 'be one so that the world might believe'. Paul therefore preached the classic Gospel message of the revelation of God in Christ and Christ alone, but here (3:6), he added the essential scriptural message that all God's people were one in Him. Most specifically (for this was the most contentious issue of his day), Jew and Gentile Christian were one in Christ.

This is why Paul speaks so forthrightly in this passage about *'shared blessings, a shared body and a shared participation in the promise through Christ Jesus.'* (3:6). Here, Paul uses the language of the Old Testament when he says 'shared blessings', recalling the blessing of God on Abraham and David and their descendants. He also evokes his famous picture of the church as the 'body' of Christ, in which all the 'members' play their part, not independently, but dependently (as in 1 Corinthians 12). He then adds the fundamental Old Testament theme of the eternal promises of God found in Jesus Christ; all God's people share this unity.

Application

Our conclusion must be that the unity of God's people is indeed part of the message of the Gospel. It is not some 'add on' to church life. If Jews and Gentiles are called to share 'blessings, body and promise' (3:6), then all God's people today are called to do the same. It is not a notion to be put to one side as if God will sort it out because we can't. It is a message that is consistent with the whole of scripture and requires our active concern and earnest intent. I will not emphasise the point further because those who have read these studies will be used to discovering that this theme occurs in scripture with great regularity. Each of us must respond to it with understanding and seek to fulfil what our Saviour and the whole of Scripture requires of us, which is to be 'one in Christ'.

Another application of this passage of scripture concerns our understanding of God's call. Here, Paul speaks at least about his own call, and the call placed on all God's people to know the truth of Christ and demonstrate the unity of Christ. Now, I once heard a very notable Christian leader comment that he did not understand 'all this talk about call'. He went on to say that it was only necessary that people were saved, and if he did his job well as an evangelist, then people would be saved. He asked 'what else is required?' Unfortunately, such an attitude does not reflect scripture. The Word of God frequently tells us that all who are called by God are called for a purpose, and each child of God has a task to do in the Kingdom. No one is saved as some kind of 'fodder' for the Kingdom of God, with nothing special to do except live a good life on earth and in heaven. God has plans for this world, and He works through people. The clear evidence of scripture is that each one who is saved has work to do in the Kingdom, and this is what we mean by our individual 'call'.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Read through this passage as a group one verse at a time, and ask each other any questions that arise.
2. Do you believe, in principle, that the 'Gospel' necessarily includes the call for all God's people to be one.
3. Discuss what is meant by '*shared blessings, a shared body and a shared participation in the promises through Christ Jesus*' (3:6)

Discipleship

Discipleship issue in this text

- *The grace of God and the full Gospel*
- *Christian unity*
- *The call of God*
- *Apostleship, prophecy and holiness*

Personal comment:

I was not expecting to find the theme of unity almost everywhere in scripture when I began writing these studies, and it is not a theme I find easy to advocate due to the horrendous difficulty of finding unity between Christians today. I have to accept that scripture repeats this theme repeatedly and face its challenge, and I ask you to do the same.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Find a Christian from another church and discuss what you have found in this passage of scripture with them. If possible, try discussing this with as many other people as possible, and gauge their reaction to Christian unity and the Gospel.*
- *If possible, find a Bible dictionary or concordance, and look up the word 'mystery' in both the Old and New Testaments.*

Final Prayer

Jesus, Saviour of the World and redeemer of all humanity; forgive our foolishness and help us find all truth in You. Guide us in our response to other Christians, particularly those with whom we tend to disagree, and bring us to a place where we can be tolerant of others under Your authority. Help us we pray, Lord Jesus; AMEN
