

## Prayer

Great and mighty Lord, Your extraordinary power is shown not simply by miraculous events and great deeds, but by the way You help us deal with the troubles and distress of everyday life. You encourage us through the people we know and love; You heal us in mind and spirit as well as in body, and You inspire us by revealing Your great plan for our salvation and eternal life. Thank You, great and mighty Lord; AMEN

## Other Prayer Suggestions

### Weekly Theme: Church Unity

*Pray today for the Christian denomination, or the national or international group to which your church belongs. Pray that the Lord will revive His work amongst His people.*

### On-going prayers

- *Thank God for the gift of the Scriptures, Old and New Testaments*
- *Pray about the swine flu pandemic; for the ill, and for health services*
- *Pray for scientists who assess the phenomenon of 'global warning'*

## Meditation

So many people need your love and care, Lord Jesus,  
Only You can help the wounded of body, mind, and spirit.

You can focus the mind of one who cannot face debt;  
You can help someone handle tough working conditions;  
You can bring hope to the troubled soul that sees no future;  
You can liberate men and woman from insecure marriages;  
You can give help to all those who feel that they cannot cope;  
You can bring refuge to those who are trapped by insecurity;  
You can heal children rejected by parents, and parents by children;  
You can ease the anxiety of those ensnared by chronic illness;  
You can cure the hearts of those who have been sexually abused;  
You can see each human problem from every different angle.

So when, in love, we seek to care for those in need,  
Give us Your wisdom so that the Spirit may do its work.

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## Bible Study - Ephesians 1:1-6

<sup>1</sup> Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, to the saints who are in Ephesus and faithful to Christ Jesus. <sup>2</sup> Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

<sup>3</sup> Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavens with every spiritual blessing in Christ, <sup>4</sup> for He chose us in Him, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and blameless before Him. In love, <sup>5</sup> He set us apart from the beginning to be adopted as His through Jesus Christ, for the purpose of His will, <sup>6</sup> to the praise of His glorious grace, with which He has blessed us in the Beloved.

## Review

Today, we begin our studies of Ephesians. To say that Ephesians is an influential letter is something of an understatement, because there is a breadth and quality to its message which has drawn people's attention since it was written, and many regard it as one of the most spiritually deep and inspiring of Paul's letters. There has always been some contention about whether Paul wrote the letter and to whom it was written, but we will look at this further in the 'going deeper' section of the letter. Nevertheless, I will side with church tradition which identifies the author as Paul, writing in a poetic style about the central truths of the Christian faith.

Our reading today from the first few verses of the letter contains a brief introduction (1:1) followed by the familiar greeting used by Paul in most of his letters, 'grace and peace' (1:2, see Romans 1:7, Gal 1:3, etc.). Most of Paul's letters begin with an introduction which gives some information about the church being addressed, perhaps explaining the circumstance of the letter (as in Galatians 1:3f.) or offering praise for the witness of the church (see Colossians 1:3-8). Here in this letter there is no such introduction, and Paul launches straight into one of the most amazing pieces of writing in all Paul's letters!

Verses 3 to 6 are extraordinary in themselves, expressing praise and glory to God for the spiritual blessing of our salvation, and our adoption by God as His sons through Jesus Christ. However, there is something unique about these verses. They begin a sentence that keeps on going, and going and going, until at least verse 14! Every translation you read, including the 'Authorised' Version, has to break up this incredibly long and extensive prayer of praise and thanksgiving into shorter verses, and in order to take in the power and breadth of this great text, I have split it into three sections, beginning with the reading for today.

The purpose of the letter is not to educate readers about the nature of salvation, but to encourage them to glory in the immense privileges they have been given through Christ Jesus. Paul is enthralled at God's love and the wonderful things He has done through Jesus Christ, so he does not start by speaking about sin or salvation, but launches immediately into describing the great privilege of being 'blessed' by God (1:3). Continuing, he explains that this blessing brings people into a close relationship with God, something like an 'adoption' that is achieved through Jesus Christ (1:5), and he offers praise to the living God for this work of grace (1:6).

The points are not made by means of superlatives such as 'greater', 'bigger' or 'best', but by phrases that say stupendous things about God and what He has done for us. Each phrase is coloured with words that reflect the great honour of being one of God's children. In verse 3, for example, the word 'blessing' appears more than three times, and then, Paul speaks about the wonder of God's choice to 'set apart from the beginning' those he intends to bless (a phrase often translated as 'predestined'), adding that this is because of God's favour and grace, as a free gift in Jesus (1:6).

But what can this mean for us now? From time to time it does us good to be reminded that our faith is born out of God's desire to draw to Himself those who have sinned and separated themselves from Him, because they were made by Him and He loves them. Since the 'Fall' (Genesis 3) and throughout the Old Testament, God's passion has been to solve this separation, which was done by Jesus through His death and resurrection. The faith we express and the discipleship we practice today is no spiritual 'life-choice'. It is a result of God's extraordinary passion for us and the work of His Son Jesus Christ to draw us back to Him. The Christian life is glorious, and sometimes, we need to sit back and enjoy the wonderful things that He has done for us; this is our great privilege.

### **Going Deeper**

- The Bible study continues with further information about the following subjects:
- To whom was Paul writing and why (1:1)?
- What does the word 'blessing' mean (1:3)
- What do the words 'set apart', and 'adoption' mean (1:4,5)?
- What does predestination mean and what does this passage say about it?

### Notes on the text and translation

**V1** *'to the saints who are in Ephesus and faithful ...'* There is some strong evidence that the words 'in Ephesus' are not part of the original letter. The very earliest of manuscripts and papyri suggest that these words were not part of what Paul wrote; however, the early church clearly received the letter as written to the Ephesians, even though there is no other reference to Ephesus or Ephesians in the letter. For this reason, I have left it in. However, those who study this letter should be aware of why it is that many scholars are sceptical about the designation of the letter as 'to the Ephesians', and why some versions of the bible omit the word 'to the Ephesians'

**V3** *'in the heavens'* The phrase 'in the heavens' refers to the heavenly sphere believed by the ancients to cover the earth, and being the realm of God's dwelling because it was unreachable by humanity.

**V4/5** *'In love<sup>5</sup> He set us apart ...'* The break between the two verses is highly contentious. The words 'in love' might either be attached to the previous sentence or the next sentence, and the Greek does not indicate which! However, because both verse 4 and 5 are about God's choice of His children at the beginning of time, I have assumed that this work of God is done 'in love', and this way of translating the text reads most naturally. It is preferred by most modern Bible translations.

- V5** *'He set us apart from the beginning ...'* To be 'set apart from the beginning' is just another way of translating a word that is sometimes rendered 'predestined'. The phrase does not solve any riddles about predestination, but it does help explain what the text means here.
- V5** *'to be adopted as His through Jesus Christ'* This phrase translates the Greek '... for adoption through Jesus Christ to Him'. You will find that other Bibles give different versions of this, but the idea is that the adoption is done by and for God, but through Jesus.
- V6** *'His glorious grace, with which He has blessed us in the beloved.'* It is hard to translate this because a literal reading would give this; 'His glorious grace, with which He has graced us in the beloved.' The Greek words are impressive, but we have no vocabulary in English which is similar to 'gracing' someone, except the language of blessing them. Hence my translation.

## Going Deeper

### **To whom was Paul writing and why?**

The arguments about Paul's letter to the Ephesians do not look like abating. If you read the translation notes you will have noted that the words 'in Ephesus' are quite unlikely to have been a part of the original letter written by Paul, and this is verified by the oldest and most significant copy texts we possess, coming from perhaps less than a hundred years after the letter was first written. Nevertheless, early Christians were used to listing Ephesians within the letters of Paul, and not many people recognise the fact that Paul's letters are listed in the New Testament from Romans to Philemon in order of length. Clearly, Ephesians would not be where it is unless the earliest compilers of the New Testament felt the letter was genuinely by Paul, or it would not be placed here! It would be placed alongside Hebrews, which comes next in the list of the 'letters' by people other than Paul (these also being listed largely by length but also by author – James, Peter, John and Jude, before the very last book of the Bible, Revelation).

The other main argument against the Paul's authorship of the letter is that the opening chapters are highly poetic in nature, and unlike any other writing of Paul. For example, people point to the fact that this letter does not start with any commendation of the Gospel or of recipients of the letter, as in Romans, Galatians, Philippians, or Colossians. However, there are other places where Paul writes in a highly poetic style (e.g. 1 Corinthians 13), and in addition, the themes and remaining structure of Ephesians (after the first two chapters) show a great similarity to the letter to the Colossians. Indeed, some scholars think that if Paul was the author, then the letter was bound to have been written at the same time as Colossians!

As it is, we can say that the church at Ephesus was an important centre for Paul and was significant in both his second and third missionary journeys (Acts 18:19f. and 20:16,17f.). The records in Acts (especially 19f.) show that Ephesus was a strategic centre for mission on the whole western side of Asia (now Turkey), and the church at Colossae, for example, was set up when a young man named Epaphras heard the Gospel at Ephesus from Paul and took the message home to Colossae (Col 1:7)! After everything that happened on that great last missionary journey of Paul, a 'round robin' letter sent by him to Ephesus would have been greeted with enthusiasm. It would have been circulated around the many congregations that sprang up in those regions during this missionary activity.

### **What does the word 'blessing' mean (1:3)?**

The great words used in this passage of scripture help us understand something of what was on Paul's heart as he wrote. The word 'blessing' comes from the Greek word 'eulogeo' from which we get the English word 'eulogy', for example, meaning 'fine speech'. The word 'eulogeo' and its various forms is used in the New Testament in different ways to convey the idea of both praise and blessing. How do we know the difference? When someone gives a 'eulogy' (fine speech) to God, this is what we mean by 'praise'; however, when God gives us a 'eulogy', this means that He conveys a gracious blessing on us, for we do not deserve such kind treatment by God. People sometimes become confused between the meaning of 'blessing' and 'praise', so it may help to remember that both come from the same word in Greek. I have heard people suggest for example, that while God blesses us we cannot bless God, and should not speak as if we do; unfortunately, this is a misunderstanding. We are dealing only with this one New Testament word ('eulogeo'), so to speak of blessing God simply means to praise Him!

### **What do the words 'set apart', and 'adoption' mean (1:4,5)?**

Next we come to the word 'set apart' which is found in verse 5 and is frequently translated as 'predestined'. The whole doctrine of predestination has been terribly misunderstood, but it is still important for us to understand what the new Testament means when it uses language which talks about people being chosen by God from before they were born for special tasks. It is important to remember that the word 'predestined' simply means 'chosen beforehand', or 'set apart beforehand', and I have chose this translation in order that we do not misjudge what is said here about this.

The subject is not just found in verse 5, but also in verse 4. In verse 4 we read that God chose us before the foundation of the world, and then in verse 5, the letter goes on to speak about being 'set apart from the beginning'. For the sake of reading the letter in English, these are phrases within two sentences, but in the original Greek, these two phrases are parallel to each other, saying virtually the same thing, and I set them out below so that you can see this clearly:

'for he chose us in Him before the foundation of the world ...' (1:4)

'He set us apart from the beginning to be ...' (1:5)

Read like this, the letter reads like a typical Hebrew poem (although translated into Greek!), and this reminds us that we should look at what comes after these phrases to see what the purpose of this setting aside, or 'predestination' might be. Firstly, we must realise that the 'us' in this sentence is not us individually, but 'us' meaning the 'church', the gathered people of God. Now, at the end of verse 4, we are chosen to be holy and blameless; now we cannot be holy or blameless by ourselves, so the phrase means that God has chosen His people, the church, to be His holy and saved people. The second phrase says something similar, but the emphasis is not on holiness and salvation, but on being 'adopted' as God's children, to be heirs alongside God's Son, Jesus Christ! 'Adoption' is what happens to us when we identify with Jesus Christ, and so inherit the blessing of God that He has received, principally the blessings of the Holy Spirit in this life and eternal life in the next!

### ***What does predestination mean and what does this passage say about it?***

This passage is a way of saying that although we have responded to Jesus by faith, we possess no merit for our choice to follow the Lord, God has chosen us to be His, and He has chosen us before we knew it, from before 'creation'. Some find it difficult to speak of 'predestination', but we must remember that Paul was speaking about God's people as a whole, and he was wanting to convey the incredible and moving fact that our salvation was part of God's plan from before the beginning of time. The grace of God was not given because of our choice; we simply responded to the choice God gave us, and Paul used the idea of God's 'choice' before time (predestination) of all His people to convey the idea that we who benefit from this grace do so freely and without claiming to be better than anyone else.

Nevertheless, even though we do not have a full blown doctrine of personal predestination here, what is said is breathtaking. God has chosen His people 'before the beginning of the world'! How can any one of us respond to this revelation except with awe! This choice of God is not a personal privilege, for all are equal before the Creator, but it is a privilege of us all (collectively) who are saved, and this is why we place our lives at the disposal of our Saviour not just individually but collectively. Without condemning us by mentioning the sin which has separated us from Him, God has made it possible for us to be 'adopted' back to the privilege of His care and family, 'through Jesus Christ'. Paul does not say how; he simply glories in the wonder of what he is led by the Spirit to say.

## Application

In reading a passage such as this, we can identify a number of points as worthy of our attention. This passage speaks about grace, blessing (and praise), being chosen, and adoption. Any of these great themes can be explored further in the Bible by comparing what we read here with what may be found elsewhere, and we can gain an understanding by reading about them in commentaries and Bible dictionaries.

Nevertheless, the real challenge of this passage is surely to release ourselves in praise and awe of God. This, of course, is what Paul was doing in this letter, and his enthusiasm and spiritual delight are evident. Even if he used poems and hymns and possibly wrote in a poetic style, this only indicates that he was pouring out his soul in praise. The text reads as if the deep theology Paul wrote about in so many of his great letters was not just a matter of words and mental agility, but a deeply personal source of 'wonder love and praise', welling up within him. It is also possible that Paul wrote in this way because he remembered with deep affection the amazing evangelism and church growth that was enabled by the Holy Spirit when the churches in the region of Ephesus were founded (see Acts 19f.).

In the middle of our study we observed the connection between praise and blessing; God blesses us and we praise Him, and this two way action surely feeds our souls. If we invest time and energy in praising God throughout life and in the midst of everything we do, then we will be blessed! This passage of Scripture encourages us to pour out our hearts to God in praise and reap the benefits. However, this is not just a personal matter, this truth is a truth for God's people as a whole; the more we pour ourselves out in praise to the living God, then the more we will receive His blessing! Surely we go nowhere as God's people unless we praise Him for His grace towards us.

## Questions (for use in groups)

1. How does this passage make you feel? Discuss your responses in your group.
2. What does it mean for us to be chosen 'before the beginning of the world' (1:4), and how should this affect us now?
3. When the Bible talks about us being 'adopted' into God's family, what does this mean for you?

## Discipleship

### Personal comment:

*I find this passage at the beginning of Ephesians deeply moving. It challenges me to pray in praise when I am feeling most unhappy or down about something. Why should I be limited by the troubles of this life when I have been saved by the love of Christ and have fellowship with God? Why should I see anything as unfair? Why should I be aggrieved at anything done to me when God has saved me from death and blessed me with spiritual benefits I do not deserve? I am fully aware that this is the general message of much of the New Testament, but the beginning of Ephesians gets the message home to me and when I read it I know that I need to respond and make praise a reality in my life.*

### Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *This passage of Scripture is so extraordinary, I suggest taking a notebook, and writing down a few sentences that describe your reactions to the different words and phrases as they occur. Use these to create your own prayers of praise and glory to God, and keep them handy.*
- *Pray that God's people will rediscover the spirit of praise and thanksgiving that will enrich them and make them a vehicle for God's renewal in our countries and in our world.*

## Final Prayer

Jesus, grant us all peace this day. We have worked, we have talked, we have thought and spoken, and we have done what we believe to be right even though we may have slipped up along the way. Forgive our sins, we pray, and grant us peace. AMEN

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