

Prayer

The glory and majesty of Your work, Almighty God is ever present in the beauty of a raindrop and the majesty of the Universe. Give us eyes to appreciate both the intricate detail of Your creation and its stupendous magnitude; and give us hearts and minds to value both. May we never cease to find you at work throughout your world, and give You the praise which is Your due. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Church Unity

Pray today for those who are led by the Lord to establish new churches; pray that their work will 'keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace' (Eph 4:3) for the good of the whole church.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for God's blessing on our endeavours to reduce waste*
- *Pray that people will perceive how God is at work within world events*
- *Thank God for the gift of the Scriptures, Old and New Testaments*

Meditation

(some reflections on the prophecies to the seven churches in Revelation)

Wait patiently for the Lord and test all things;
And never forget the power of God's love.

Don't be afraid in the face of suffering;
And don't let the devil make your life worse.

Hold fast to your faith, even if all seems lost;
And only accept teaching that points to Christ.

Persist in love and faith and patient endurance;
And do not give ground to Satan's deceit.

Be alive in the Spirit, and be worthy of your call;
And don't turn a blind eye to Christ's return.

Walk through the door Christ has opened for you;
And keep hold of the treasures you've been given.

Find your wealth in the Lord, your eternal riches;
And never let the fire in your heart grow dim!

Bible Study - Ephesians 1:11-14

¹¹ In Him we have also been chosen, having been set apart from the beginning according to the plan of Him who makes everything work so that it conforms to His will, ¹² so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might exist for the praise of His glory. ¹³ You were also included in Him when you heard the word of truth, the Gospel of your salvation; and having believed in Him, you were sealed by the promised Holy Spirit ¹⁴ who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the release of what has been kept for us; to the praise His glory!

Review

These are the last four verses in Paul's great prayer at the beginning of his letter to the Ephesians. The language of the prayer continues to overflow with wonder and praise, and what is more remarkable, many of the phrases are used extensively today by Christians to express their faith; 'hope in Christ', 'the praise of His glory', the 'word of truth', 'the Gospel of your salvation', the 'promise of the Holy Spirit'. These phrases may seem so familiar that we take them for granted, but only the 'word of truth' is found extensively elsewhere in scripture (Col 1:5, 2 Tim 2:15 and James 1:18). This passage has had a considerable impact on Christian faith, and deserves our careful attention!

This is important, because too many people read passages like this and give up on them because they seem too complex. We do not mind such phrases by themselves, but we are confused when Paul speaks like this; 'being destined according to the plan of Him who makes everything work so that it conforms to His will' (1:11), or '... the Holy Spirit who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the release of what has been kept for us' (1:13,14). When such passages are read in church, people naturally pick up on the phrases they know, and leave to one side what is not familiar.

However, we must remember that in every aspect of life from science, law, teaching and at least every profession, language is used and understood within that field, but not necessarily by those outside. This does not deter us from seeking to understand such things and respecting them, and neither should problems with language cause us to turn away from God's Word, which has its own complexities because it was written two thousand years ago. With the aid of other Scriptures and some attention and care, most people can piece together the familiar phrases and discover both the meaning of Paul's prayer and the deeper meaning of some of these words and phrases.

To begin with, Paul returned to his earlier theme about God's divine plan to reveal Himself in Christ to those who were chosen (see 1:5,9, and in this passage, 1:11). At this point, Paul was speaking about the Israelites, who were chosen by God through Abraham to be His witnesses to the world. They were to testify to the truth about God by giving Him praise and glory and testifying to the Messiah, Jesus Christ. This is what is meant by verse 12, which says that the 'first to hope in Christ' were to give praise to God for what He had done; they existed 'for the praise of His glory' (1:12).

At this point (1:13), Paul shifted dramatically from speaking about 'we' to 'you', and Paul addressed the readers of his letter for the first time. He said, 'You were included in Him when you heard the word of truth ...'. The plain meaning of this is that although the Jewish people were chosen for the first witness to Christ and the fulfilment of God's plan, the new generation of Gentile believers in new churches established by Paul (at Ephesus and beyond) were included in God's promises! Once we understand this, everything becomes clear, and the remaining two verses (1:13 and 14) gloriously declare the Gospel of salvation by which the church broke out of the confines of Judaism and grew within the Roman world. The key of course was the Holy Spirit, for the evidence of the Holy Spirit at work in Gentiles was the dynamic that powered the expansion of the early church (see the story of Cornelius in Acts 10:1f. and the council of Jerusalem in Acts 15:8f.)

There is so much more for us to discover, but the pattern of Paul's prayer is now complete. He began by praising God for His plan of salvation and the choice of His people to bear witness to it (1:3-12). Then he gave glory to God for making this godly inheritance of faith available to all through the preaching of the Word, the Gospel of salvation and the work of the Holy Spirit! What a prayer!

Going Deeper

The Bible study continues with further information about the following subjects:

- Who were the first to 'hope in Christ' (1:12)?
- What is the real significance of the change from 'we' to 'you' in this passage (1:12,13)?
- To what extent does this passage summarise the Gospel message?
- What does this passage mean by the 'seal' of the Holy Spirit (1:13)?
- What does Paul mean by describing the Holy Spirit as a 'guarantee' (1:14)?

Notes on the text and translation

V11 'Him who makes everything work so that it conforms to His will' *The Greek verb here is 'energo', which is related to the English word energy. If it were not a deviation from the proper meaning of the word, which is 'to be operative', or 'to make something work', it would be very tempting to translate the phrase, 'Him who energises everything so that it works according to His will.' I leave this thought with you as a way to assist your understanding of the text.*

V12 'we who were the first to hope in Christ.' *The Greek verb 'pro-elpidzo' is the basic word behind the expression 'first to hope', but it is not entirely clear what it means. It could mean 'hope before', and a strict translation would be 'we who pre-hoped in Christ', which is far too vague. The logic of the sentence determines the translation here (see study)*

V13 'and having believed in Him ...' *You will find that there are considerable variations on the translation of this verse in different Bible versions, because the Greek is very hard to translate, and there is no common agreement on the possibilities. Some Bible versions make the whole verse into one sentence, but there are two clauses; firstly, 'You were also included in Him when you heard the word of truth, the Gospel of you salvation', and secondly, 'and having believed in Him, you were*

sealed by the promise of the Holy Spirit.' The whole verse seems to me to be much clearer if the two clauses are separated in this way.

V14 'until the release of what has been kept for us ...' The Greek text is just two words, which say 'the release of the possessions'. However, the 'possessions' in this case are the inheritance God has kept for us. However, it is not that God holds back something that we do not understand or that we have no knowledge of. The pledge given to us is a sample or 'guarantee' of what God will give us in all fullness at the end of time (see study).

Going Deeper

Who were the first to 'hope in Christ' (1:12)?

In verse 12, Paul speaks about those who were the 'first to hope in Christ' (1:12). There is a little confusion about what the term means (see notes above), but it is most likely that Paul was speaking about the first generation of Christians who were part of the earliest pioneering days of the church, especially the disciples and those to whom Christ appeared (see 1 Cor 15:5-8). To these we might add those who came to Jerusalem on the first day of Pentecost; the vast crowd of people from the Roman Empire, both Jews and proselytes (those converted to Judaism), of whom about 3,000 became Christians on their profession of faith, their baptism and the evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38f.). Many of these people, of course, would have returned to their homes after Pentecost, and although we think of Paul as founding churches throughout the Roman world, there is also evidence that groups of believers began to meet throughout the Roman Empire from before the time of Paul's great missionary effort.

Nevertheless, Paul counted such people, mostly Jews either by birth or by conversion, as the primary witnesses to God's plan for the salvation of the world. Their purpose was to give glory to God, to 'exist to the praise of His glory' (1:12). Clearly, Paul believed that God intended His good news to be broadcast by praise! This seems odd to us who might think that practical evangelism is required for the proclamation of the good news. However, in saying this we fail to recognise the power of praise and what praise means.

In scripture, to praise God means to honour Him as Creator and to live one's life by His direction and in obedience. As the psalms testify, praise is not merely being happy about the things of God, but having faith in Him in the midst of every circumstance of life. So praise cannot be a personal extravagance or something done only in worship together with others; it is a way of life. As such, praise testifies to God, which is why Paul described it as a primary witness to God in the world. Praise is not for people, it is for God!

What is the real significance of the change from 'we' to 'you' in this passage (1:12,13)?

When Paul began this prayer, he used the term 'we' as if speaking about all Christians. Indeed, everything we have read about the plan of God for the revelation of His will and redemption in Christ is our Christian heritage to this day. However, in the very early days of the church, when Paul was writing this letter, people were only just beginning to come to terms with what it meant for the Gospel to move out from this first wave of believers into the wider world. Paul was one of the few who perceived the importance of mission to the Gentiles, and his work at Ephesus was arguably his most successful mission (see Acts 19,20), reaching out from the city into the regions of Asia Minor beyond.

In changing his words from 'we' to 'you', Paul was consciously addressing the Ephesians, and later on in the letter it is clear that by 'you', Paul meant Gentile Christians in Ephesus converted on mission (see Ephesians 2:11f.). So, where everything from Ephesians 1:3-12 has been said from the point of view of first generation Christians using the Jewish language of redemption, destiny and election, everything from verse 13 onwards speaks to Gentile Christians using the language of evangelism; the 'word of truth', 'the Gospel of your salvation' and the 'Holy Spirit'!

To what extent does this passage summarise the Gospel message?

At last the more modern Christian can feel more at home in what Paul says, although some of his illustrations (as we will see in verse 14 shortly) come from the ancient Roman world with which we are unfamiliar today. In Romans 10:12f. Paul explains with clarity how evangelism works:

For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on Him. For, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim Him? And how are they to proclaim Him unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" ... So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ. (Romans 10:12-17)

By emphasising the preaching of the Gospel, this passage explains why Paul placed great emphasis on the 'word of truth' in this prayer; he was not referring to the Bible! The Gentiles were included in the Gospel of

salvation through their response to evangelism, the preached word of truth. When they heard about the Gospel, responded by faith and received the blessing (or 'seal') of the Holy Spirit, they were accepted amongst God's people (1:13).

Some believe that verse 13 is a formula for baptism used by the early church, in which all these elements played their part. However, this is only a theory. Baptism is not mentioned here, but what Paul says in this verse has provided a model for evangelism for centuries. The word is preached, people respond by faith, and the evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer is taken to be the proof that God has blessed the individual and included him or her amongst His people. Naturally, baptism follows at some point in the future, and a good service of baptism will naturally celebrate how a person has been saved by the grace of God.

What does this passage mean by the 'seal' of the Holy Spirit (1:13)?

Paul's phrase 'sealed by the promised Holy Spirit' is fascinating. Today, we speak about receiving the Holy Spirit more simply, suggesting that someone either has the Holy Spirit, or they do not. Paul's words suggest that we look more carefully at what this means.

His words 'you were sealed' suggest a connection with Ezekiel 9:4, which is a vision in which a mark is placed on the forehead of true believers who lamented over the 'abominations' of Jerusalem. The prophecies of Ezekiel were well known by early Jewish Christians, and they would have identified with this prophecy. They believed that true Christians were in some way 'marked' by God as His own. People in the first century also knew that a seal was the mark of ownership on a slave (sometimes on the forehead, but sometimes elsewhere). In addition, the idea of a sign of belonging was rooted in the Jewish Passover, at which the doorposts of homes were marked with the blood of a sacrificial lamb (Exodus 12:7) as a sign of covenant faith and Jewish identity. It was also rooted in circumcision, the 'sign' of God's Covenant with Abraham and His ancestors.

All these ideas and perhaps more went into the idea of the Holy Spirit as God's 'seal'. So the Spirit is the mark of God's favour and blessing, enabling the Christian to do God's work and be fruitful for Him, a theme taken up in most of Paul's letters (e.g. 1 Corinthians 12 and Galatians 5, and also Revelation 7:4 and 9:4, and 2 Corinthians 1:22). The Holy Spirit is God's gift of Himself to all who believe (as John explained exhaustively - John 14:17f.). Prophets in the Old Testament promised the coming of the Spirit (Isaiah 32:15, Joel 2:28), and the promise was granted on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1f.).

What does Paul mean by describing the Holy Spirit as a 'guarantee' (1:14)?

Nevertheless, no one can possess all the Holy Spirit! We have something of God's Spirit at work in our lives as what Paul describes as a 'guarantee' of the full inheritance of God. Today, we think of this as like a down payment or a deposit that guarantees intent to pay the full amount. However, the Greek word here is 'arrabon', used in Greece to this day to refer to an engagement ring. The term arose in ancient times from commercial bartering and exchange of goods. A sample of goods was deposited with a buyer not just to mark intent to complete a deal, but as a test sample of the full stock ordered, to enable the buyer on receipt of the full order to judge whether it matched up to the promise made when the deal was struck.

When looked at like this, the gift of the Holy Spirit is a perfect sample of what God promises us in eternity; His power and all the qualities of the Spirit described in Scripture, represent the presence of the living Christ within us. He is our promise from God that one day we will be with Him in glory! We cannot experience that perfection now, but when Jesus comes again, we will, because God has planned since the beginning of time to bring us back to Him if we will accept Him and His offer in Christ.

Application

Our passage today does not explain how God has redeemed us and saved us, this is to be found earlier in Paul's prayer, in Ephesians 1 (1:5f.). However, it describes the importance of praise as a means of witnessing to God in the world, and also the receipt of the Gospel by faith and the evidence of this in the 'seal' of the Holy Spirit. Other features of our passage are similar to what we have already read, concerning the plan of God to complete His work at a time of His choosing.

It is perhaps natural that a prayer that began in praise should both end in praise and also hints that praise is a means of making God known within the world. There is something liberating in what Paul suggests here. Instead of thinking that praise is what happens in church on Sundays, we can begin to realise that praise is a way of life. If what we do and say is worshipful and honouring to God, then our lives will indeed give evidence to other people about what we believe. We tend to think that we are not very special and often prefer to hide ourselves in a crowd. However, if we are confident in the Lord and live with an attitude of praise and worship to Almighty God, then this will show in almost everything we do. We may think that it is hard to change our lifestyle and live in a different way, but surely, we can ask the Lord to help us by His Spirit to do such a thing. This is exactly what God wants of us, so we should not be afraid to ask for His help!

Our passage also confirms the importance of evangelism, but not in a narrow way. The preached word of God is important, but it is also important to encourage people to understand that they should expect to receive the Holy Spirit as God's authentic guarantee of His presence. Many people have offered their lives to Christ without being told that God is waiting to grant them special gifts including the Holy Spirit. The result is that even to this day many churches are filled with Christians of whom Paul might ask 'did you know about the Holy Spirit when you were baptised?' (see Acts 19:1f.). Evangelism is complete not just when people respond to the Gospel by faith, but when they know the assurance of God's blessing through the power of His Spirit present within their lives.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. How can praise become a part of life, not just a part of what you do on Sundays? Discuss this within your group.
2. If God has given us a foretaste of our future through the gift of the Holy Spirit, what should we expect eternity to be like?
3. Why is the Holy Spirit important to God's plan for His people and for the whole world?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

I find the idea of praise as a way of life liberating. It can be hard to try and find ways of praising God at first, but even in the midst of difficulty, a moment's pause that honours God's presence accompanied by a prayer asking Him for help, can change everything. Praise is like letting God into every aspect of one's life, and letting Him begin to work through all the circumstances of life. I know for myself that I do not travel as far down this pathway as I should, but this is where I am heading!

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *If you are unsure about the presence of the Holy Spirit in your life, then try coming before God in prayer, and asking Him to reveal the truth to you about the Holy Spirit. If you feel comfortable to do so, ask the Holy Spirit to come into your life; if not, then speak to other Christians about this.*
- *Pray that God will encourage His people by the power of His Holy Spirit, and bless them by His presence.*

Final Prayer

Dear Jesus, may we speak to You honestly and listen to You carefully, so that we may learn to distinguish Your voice from the clamour of everything around us. We long to learn more of Your will and be obedient throughout our lives, and demonstrate in this way the abiding faith we have in You; AMEN
