

## Prayer

Dear Jesus, may our lives show the spiritual fruit of kindness. May we demonstrate to others that we take their pain as ours, that we feel the full extent of their feelings, and honour their life's experience as if it were our own. For You have done this for us, Lord Jesus, and as we copy Your example, may we be built up in faith and maturity. We ask this in Your name: AMEN

## Other Prayer Suggestions

### Weekly Theme: Church Unity

*Pray for those organisations that seek to enable churches to witness together to the Gospel; whether you like them or dislike them, pray that God will use them for His glory*

### On-going prayers

- *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*
- *Pray about the swine flu pandemic; for the ill, and for health services*

## Meditation

Sing a song of praise to God!

Sing it over and over again and let it fill your heart  
Let your feelings and emotions soar away in wonder  
Let them rise in praise of Him who lives within you!

Sing a hymn of praise to God!

Sing each verse, and wonder at the mysteries of faith  
Revealed through every line, through every glorious word;  
Proclaim the blessing of our God and His salvation.

Sing a psalm of praise to God!

Sing with all God's faithful people through the ages  
Who've been inspired by the eternal Word of God,  
And challenged by the personal witness of His people

Sing a song, a hymn, a psalm,  
To glorify your God, in love and praise!

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## Bible Study - Ephesians 1:7-10

<sup>7</sup> In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our sins, according to the richness of His grace <sup>8</sup> which He lavished upon us. In all wisdom and insight <sup>9</sup> He has made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good purpose, which He has planned for us in Christ; <sup>10</sup> a heavenly task for the fullness of time which is to unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth.

### Review

When beginning to read Ephesians, we quickly realise that it is no ordinary letter. The introduction is brief, but Paul quickly becomes immersed in an intense prayer of deeply spiritual praise to God for all He has done through Jesus Christ. Today's passage is brief, but it covers an immense range of insight into the work of God in Christ Jesus and His plans for the world. There is a considerable range of powerful and significant words within these verses; 'redemption', 'blood', 'forgiveness', 'sins', 'grace', and these are only in verse 7! Verse 8 is brief, and speaks of God's 'wisdom' and 'insight'. However, verses 9 and 10 each contain further words, each of which are worth a further look because of what they reveal about the work of God; 'mystery', 'will', 'purpose', 'plan', 'heavenly task', 'fullness of time', and 'unite'!

However, it is not the purpose of this devotional study to delve into the meaning of these words for their own sake, but to make sure that we understand what they mean within Paul's great prayer of praise here at the

beginning of Ephesians. Our passage contains two halves, and I have written them out as separate sentences because this makes them easier to understand. The first sentence is this:

*In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our sins, according to the richness of His grace which He lavished upon us. (verses 7,8)*

And the second is made up of the rest of the passage:

*In all wisdom and insight He has made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good purpose, which He has planned for us in Christ; a heavenly task for the fullness of time which is to unite everything in Christ, all that is in heaven and on earth. (verses 8-10)*

The first sentence joyously describes what Christ has done for us to obtain our salvation, using remarkably similar language to that found in Colossians (1:14). In addition, a quick glance at Romans 8:21f. reveals the same thoughts, as Paul describes the 'glorious liberty of the children of God' at the climax of that great letter. In verse 7, Paul does not use the word 'salvation', to describe the work of Christ, but the deeply meaningful word 'redemption', which emphasises the price paid for our salvation. The very use of this word encourages the reader to recall the One who paid the price of redemption 'through His blood'. How can anyone deny that such a gift is far more than any of us deserve? It is God's grace, 'lavished' (1:8) on us with supreme generosity.

The second sentence is more complex, for it spans eternity. Speaking of God's 'wisdom and insight', qualities consistently ascribed to God within the Old Testament, it confirms that God has always had a plan of salvation, and He brings it to fruition in the 'fullness of time', an expression that means 'when the time is right'. God's plan has been revealed in Jesus Christ and it will be completed when He comes again, and everything will be 'united' in Christ (1:10). Some believe this passage says that at the end of time everything and everyone will be reunited with God, whether they have accepted Christ or not. This is called 'universalism', but it is a complete misinterpretation of the passage, which needs to be read carefully. The truth is that Christ is both the means of our salvation and its fulfilment, because our text says that everything 'in Christ' will be brought together, and not that everything will be brought together 'in Christ'. Be careful, for there is a vast gulf between them!

This passage contains a breathtaking glimpse of God's purposes both for now and for eternity, and it is immensely powerful, and deeply spiritual. God's people will gain a great deal by looking carefully at these phrases and words (and we will do this as we go deeper). However, we should not forget that this is a prayer of praise, which speaks about the most powerful truths of Scripture. Let us all be caught up in this great prayer.

### **Going Deeper**

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

- What do we mean by 'redemption' and what does the Bible tell us about this (1:7)?
- What is meant by the 'forgiveness of sins' in this passage (1:7)?
- Why does Scripture speak about 'the mystery of His will' (1:9)?
- What is God's ultimate plan for all things (1:10)?

### Notes on the text and translation

**V7** **'we have redemption through His blood'** *The Greek word for 'redemption' is one used for the action of paying a price for the release of slaves in the market place. The Bible uses this word frequently as one of a set of words describing salvation, and it is sometimes translated as 'deliverance'.*

**V7** **'the forgiveness of our sins'** *The Greek word used for sins ('paraptoma') is not the usual one ('harmartia'). This refers to things that are a deviation from right living, and is similar to the Old Testament concept of 'missing the mark'.*

**V8** **'in all wisdom and insight'** *The original sentence is not at all clear, and this phrase could be either attached to the previous clause or the following clause; either*

*'the richness of His grace which He has lavished on us in all wisdom and insight. He has made known to us the mystery of His will ...' or*

*'the richness of His grace which he has lavished on us. In all wisdom and insight He has made known to us the mystery of His will ...'*

*There is no clear way of working out from the Greek which of these two it is, and although it seems very technical, the difference is between whether the reference to 'wisdom and insight' is about what*

God has done for us in the past or about what He will do for us in the future. I have chosen the second option because this makes more sense, and it is in accord with the similar passages found in Colossians 1, which is recognised as being very similar to the thought of this part of Ephesians.

**V9** ***‘which He has planned for us in Christ’** The Greek word ‘protithemi’ is a rather complicated word in the form used here, and you will find that different Bible versions translate it in many different ways; ‘set forth’, or ‘purposed’. However, the basic idea is of setting something out in one’s own mind, and the simplest way to express this thought is to speak of ‘planning’, as I have done here. The other alternatives make the sentence sound unnecessarily complicated.*

**V10** ***‘a heavenly task for the fullness of time which is to unite all things in Christ ...’** This verse is difficult to translate. Although it would not be good English to present this as a translation, the Greek reads like this: ‘a heavenly task for the fullness of time to unite in Him all things in Christ, that is, what is in heaven and on the earth.’ I discuss this later in the study, but it is relatively easy to see that this translation prevents any suggestion that the passage supports ‘universalism’.*

## Going Deeper

### **What do we mean by ‘redemption’ and what does the Bible tell us about this (1:7)?**

In verse 7, Paul describes the basics of our faith, and the graciousness of God by which people are redeemed by the life and death (the blood) of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins. In short, we call this ‘salvation’. However, the word translated ‘redemption’ (‘apolutrosis’) does not mean the same as ‘salvation’; it has a special meaning that is deeply rooted in Scripture. When Moses led the people of Israel out of Egypt, he did so because God ‘redeemed’ His people (see Exodus 13:13f.). On the night before the Israelites left, God sent an angel of death over Egypt, and the people of Israel were told to slaughter a lamb and eat this as a sacrificial meal. They smeared the blood of this lamb on their doorposts as a sign to the Lord that they had acted according to His instructions, and the Lord counted the sacrifice of the lamb as the redemption price for the firstborn of the Israelites, who otherwise would have been killed by the angel of death. In this way, God saved His people and as a consequence, the language of redemption became attached to the Passover meal, the celebration that defines the people of Israel to this day. Other passages of the Old Testament illustrate the same theme of sacrificial offering for the redemption of life, for example, the story of Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah (Gen 22), and the prophecies of Isaiah (53).

With this background, the early Christians quickly perceived the importance of Jesus’ last Passover meal with the disciples (John 13), and realised that He died sacrificially on behalf of all people for the forgiveness of their sins and their acceptance before God (Romans 3:21f., 5:1f.). For this reason, ‘redemption’ has become part of the essential language of salvation, along with other words such as ‘deliverance’, ‘freedom’, ‘healing’ and ‘peace’; each of them with their own contribution to what we mean by ‘salvation’.

The word ‘redemption’ is used where God’s Word tells us about the price paid by Jesus for our salvation, and it also says something about God’s eternal plan to bring salvation into the world, starting in the Old Testament and being fulfilled in the New. Here, Paul says unequivocally that our salvation has been secured by the redemption price paid for by Jesus with His life; not by His teaching or by His ministry of healing and preaching, wonderful though these are, but by His death on the Cross and His subsequent resurrection. ‘We have redemption through His blood’ is an uncompromising statement of the extreme sacrifice of Jesus required for our salvation; and this is the reason why we are reconciled to God. Paul praises God and gives Him glory because He has made this possible.

### **What is meant by the ‘forgiveness of sins’ in this passage (1:7)?**

Because this passage is full of prayer and praise, its language is rich and effusive. Words flow from Paul in pairs that either complement or add to each other in order to express praise and glory to God; the phrase ‘redemption through His blood’ is paralleled with ‘forgiveness of our sins’ (1:7), not so much as an explanation of salvation, but a way of glorying in it. However, we need to look more closely at the word ‘forgiveness’, and what it means here in this verse.

The Greek word for ‘forgiveness’ means ‘cancellation’ or ‘release’, and it complements the idea of redemption, for redemption is won through the payment of a price so that someone may be ‘released’. In our minds should be the picture of a slave in a market place, who may be ‘released’ (the same word as ‘forgiven’) if someone pays the required ransom, or ‘redemption price’ for the freedom of a slave. Bearing this in mind, we must conclude that we cannot obtain ‘forgiveness’ for our sins by ourselves or just by asking for it; our forgiveness is granted at the cost of Christ’s life. We sometimes treat the matter of our forgiveness in Christ too lightly, but this costly freedom is described here as the ‘riches’ of God’s grace (1:7); but we can hardly expect such mercy unless we accept the One who has died to make it available!

Most people do not realise that Paul rarely uses the word 'forgiveness' (only here and in Colossians 1:14), and most of the teaching we have about forgiveness comes from Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount and in other places (Matt 6:14f., 18:21, Luke 6:37 etc.). It is not that Paul never teaches forgiveness, but that he normally chooses to speak about our salvation by using words like 'justification', or being 'put right with God' (e.g. Romans 1:17, 3:21f.). It is reassuring to find a passage such as this that confirms our belief that when Paul talked about 'salvation by faith', 'justification' and 'peace with God', what he said could also be described as 'redemption ... for the forgiveness of our sins'.

### ***Why does Scripture speak about 'the mystery of His will' (1:9)?***

The second sentence of this passage speaks eloquently about the eternal plans of God for all creation. Paul revels in the fact that God has finally revealed His plan for the whole world in Christ, something that before the time of Christ was indeed a mystery. God knew what He was doing from the beginning of time, and when Adam and Eve 'fell' in the Garden of Eden, He had a plan in mind to bring men and women back to Him in the 'fullness of time' (1:10 – see next). This was only partially revealed through the Old Testament, firstly through the relationship between God and His people, the Israelites, and then when the people began to go astray under the influence of their kings (see 2 Kings 17), God continued to reveal His plan through the prophets. Although there is much for us to learn about God's plans in the Old Testament, all of it leads up to their fulfilment in Christ. Jesus Himself said 'I have come not to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfil them' (Matt 5:17). Let us not be mistaken, the mystery of God has been revealed!

It is not something we spot very quickly, but in his prayer of praise Paul mocked the so-called 'mystery' religions of His day, which suggested that access to God was gradually revealed through 'mysteries', to which people were granted access progressively in the attempted to reach the ultimate secrets of the universe. The only comparable well known 'mystery religion' of our day is freemasonry, with its 'secrets' and orders of initiation. People think of it as merely a social club, but it is not; the orders are built on religious themes completely at odds with Christian faith, and its perils are too often ignored.

In Paul's day, people were used to hearing the word 'mystery' in any discussion of religion, and some early Christians constructed mystery religions based on Christ, with different levels of revelation required to find the ultimate mysteries of God in Christ. Paul would have none of this; in Christ, he said, all the mysteries of God had already been revealed. Even though it was as obvious to Paul (as it is to us) that people could never know the future or know when Christ would come in glory, there was no need for Christians to feel that God had kept anything back. His full plan was available in Christ!

### ***What is God's ultimate plan for all things (1:10)?***

What is this plan? Paul declared that God's intention was to bring all things together 'in Christ'. At this point in the study, I urge you to read the translational note on verse 10 above. This makes it clear to us that Paul's sentence, which is a little obscure, means that God's intention is to complete the work of Christ rather than to simply 'make everything come good in the end'. It is therefore quite wrong to suggest that God intends to accept all people and everything into His New Creation whether or not they have accepted Christ, for the truth is quite contrary to this. God's 'heavenly task for the fullness of time' (1:10) is to complete the plan He has revealed in Christ. God has no more surprises for us about who He is or what He will do; everything is available to us in Christ, and we know about Him from God's Word, the Bible, and His presence with us in Spirit and in truth.

Some people complain that God has not revealed everything, because the book of Revelation remains a mystery to us, and scholars are unable to fathom what it means! In addition, it seems to us that there is a great deal we do not know either about our own world or the future; indeed, people who study theology search as if there is always some more truth to be found that has not yet been revealed! However, we must be careful. There may be things we do not know, but we should not work on the basis that God has yet to reveal more of His plan. He has declared this fully in Christ. It is not God's fault if we are unable to understand what He has given to us within His Word and in Christ. As each generation goes by, godly people discover more about what God has revealed both in Christ and the Bible, but it is there, waiting for us to find it. We may have difficulty in understanding everything, but God cannot be faulted for this. Perhaps the only part of God's plan that we do not know is the exact time of Christ's coming, as Jesus Himself made clear (Matt 24:36).

## Application

In the wonderful prayer here at the beginning of Ephesians, Paul prays in gratitude for the wondrous redeeming work of God and His plan to unite all things in Him in eternity. It is a plan that has been started and is yet to be completed, and the details of this plan are plain and available for all. However, there is a remarkable contrast between this prayer of praise and the reality of church life today. People are often tempted to believe that God has not yet revealed everything and that He has, for whatever reason, kept some things back. There are so many things that Christians argue about and frequently 'agree to disagree', whether it is about doctrines of baptism or what the Bible says about a variety of things such as what happens to us after death. Yet Scripture itself is adamant that there is no more revelation to give; we have

all we need and the work of Christ is unique and unmistakable. Even the last words of the book of Revelation say that no one should add to anything that 'has been written' (Rev 22:18,19); and yet apparently godly people still preach and teach as if God has revealed something new in our generation. What we need is a new heart of praise which interprets Christian truth to our generation, not an attempt to re-invent the Gospel for our age!

In addition, God's intention is to complete what He has already revealed through Jesus, and 'unite all things in Him'. Yes, we are all to be one, and our precious preferences of church allegiance or denominations, and our arguments about baptism, the Reformation, Calvinism and evangelism, will all cease. In Christ they are meaningless not just in the future, but now! We continue to base our church life on our divisions rather than on Christ who is our unity. When we come to the Father in glory, we should not expect justification for our standpoint on divisive issues; we should expect to be humbled before the One who is our only hope and salvation. Our arguments are the jargon of division, and they succeed today in preventing the Gospel instead of enabling it; they are a sin to be confessed, not a fact of life to accept.

The glory of the passage of scripture we have read today is that it is a poem of praise to God for what He has done and will do, untainted by the divisions and factions of the church today. Through this praise, Paul bids us accept that God has revealed all things about Himself and His plan for the world and appeals to us to come together in Him because our redemption in Jesus is more important than anything else in the world. After all, this redemption is God's rich grace lavished on us; why do we look for more? By bringing us back to praise, Paul calls all God's people to join him in celebrating the eternal plan of God and the work of Christ by which it is accomplished.

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## Questions (for use in groups)

1. In your group, ask yourselves what you do to give praise to God. How does it measure up to what Paul does in this passage?
2. How do you envisage the future and God's plans for all Creation? Share your thoughts in your group.
3. Why does God want to 'unite all things in Christ (1:10) and what will this achieve?

## Discipleship

### Personal comment:

*There are many great passages of Scripture, and each of them should be valued for what they say. This passage is helpful because it holds together the present and the future in one vision of being united in Christ. This has always been dear to my heart. People speak easily about God uniting all things at the end of time, or as we would say, when He comes again. However, if this is God's ultimate plan, then it surely begins now, and if we act in a manner that prevents God from achieving His will, then we are at odds with Him and His will. It has always been my concern that by refusing to countenance Christian unity in any practical form, many Christians unwittingly place themselves at odds with the will of the God they worship. Few agree with me, but I cannot stop mentioning it because I cannot turn a page of Scripture without finding this same theme.*

### Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Read through this passage of scripture and make a note of all that God has given us. Examine this list carefully, and compare what it says with what you know of the Gospel. To what extent is it different, or does it say the same as what you know already? Let the Holy Spirit lead you as you explore your faith and check out the meaning of these words of scripture.*
- *Pray for the many Christians who live in your area and who worship God in different churches but yet do not know each other. Ask the Lord to help you see what you can do to help bring about His vision of a people who are united in Him, in preparation for His glory.*

## Final Prayer

Fill us with Your grace, Lord God, our Creator and our Redeemer; and may Your divine favour flow through us because we have unreservedly accepted Your glorious and generous presence. May our lives give testimony to Your kind, open and supportive love; and through us, may others see the gracious truth about You, the One in whom we believe: AMEN