



New Testament Theology

United to Christ, Walking in the Spirit

A Theology of Ephesians

BENJAMIN L. MERKLE

Series edited by Thomas R. Schreiner and Brian S. Rosner

“*United to Christ, Walking in the Spirit* clearly and concisely presents the themes of Paul’s short but majestic letter to the Ephesians. The themes of individual union with Christ, the teaching about the church, and the call to walk well are all well handled. If you desire to understand the theme of this letter, this book is for you.”

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A Theology of Ephesians

Benjamin L. Merkle

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Series Preface

THERE ARE REMARKABLY FEW TREATMENTS of the big ideas of single books of the New Testament. Readers can find brief coverage in Bible dictionaries, in some commentaries, and in New Testament theologies, but such books are filled with other information and are not devoted to unpacking the theology of each New Testament book in its own right. Technical works concentrating on various themes of New Testament theology often have a narrow focus, treating some aspect of the teaching of, say, Matthew or Hebrews in isolation from the rest of the book's theology.

The New Testament Theology series seeks to fill this gap by providing students of Scripture with readable book-length treatments of the distinctive teaching of each New Testament book or collection of books. The volumes approach the text from the perspective of biblical theology. They pay due attention to the historical and literary dimensions of the text, but their main focus is on presenting the teaching of particular New Testament books about God and his relations to the world on their own terms, maintaining sight of the Bible's overarching narrative and Christocentric focus. Such biblical theology is of fundamental importance to biblical and expository preaching and informs exegesis, systematic theology, and Christian ethics.

The twenty volumes in the series supply comprehensive, scholarly, and accessible treatments of theological themes from an evangelical perspective. We envision them being of value to students, preachers, and interested laypeople. When preparing an expository sermon

series, for example, pastors can find a healthy supply of informative commentaries, but there are few options for coming to terms with the overall teaching of each book of the New Testament. As well as being useful in sermon and Bible study preparation, the volumes will also be of value as textbooks in college and seminary exegesis classes. Our prayer is that they contribute to a deeper understanding of and commitment to the kingdom and glory of God in Christ.

Ephesians is deeply theological and meditative, reflecting on the great salvation that is ours in Christ Jesus. Paul doesn't dispute with opponents as he does in many of his letters. Instead he composes a letter that is profoundly theological and at the same time wonderfully practical. One of the striking features of the letter is the central place of the church in God's plan, steering us away from the individualism and fierce independence that is characteristic of many in our days. Ben Merkle is an expert and faithful interpreter of one of the most important Pauline letters, leading us to explore all the riches that belong to us in Christ Jesus our Lord. He mines the letter both theologically and practically, showing us that redemptive history centers on and points to Jesus the Christ.

Thomas R. Schreiner and Brian S. Rosner

Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
<i>Ant.</i>	Josephus, <i>Antiquities</i>
BDAG	<i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, 3rd ed.</i>
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
BHGNT	Baylor Handbook on the Greek New Testament
<i>DPL</i>	<i>Dictionary of Paul and His Letters</i>
EEC	Evangelical Exegetical Commentary
ICC	International Critical Commentary
<i>JETS</i>	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
<i>J.W.</i>	<i>Jewish Wars</i>
L&N	<i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains</i>
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIVAC	NIV Application Commentary
PNTC	Pillar New Testament Commentary
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
ZECNT	Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament

Introduction

FOR ITS SIZE (SIX CHAPTERS AND 155 VERSES), Paul's letter to the Ephesians has had a profound impact on the life and theology of the church.¹ Klyne Snodgrass asserts, "Only the Psalms, the Gospel of John, and Romans have been as significant as Ephesians in shaping the life and thought of Christians."² Harold Hoehner likewise declares, "The Letter to the Ephesians is one of the most influential documents in the Christian church."³ This influence is due to the robust and diverse nature of the theology embedded in this short epistle. Paul addresses topics such as God's sovereignty, the nature of salvation, race relations, roles in marriage and the family, the unity of the church, and spiritual warfare.

The apostle Paul wrote this letter to the Christians living in (or near) Ephesus to instruct them in the faith and encourage them in their behavior. Along with Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon, Ephesians is known as one of the "Prison Epistles" since it was written during a two-year imprisonment in Rome (AD 60–62).⁴ Paul writes primarily,

- 1 See Rudolf Schnackenburg, "The Influence of the Epistle throughout History," in *Ephesians: A Commentary* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 311–42.
- 2 Klyne Snodgrass, *Ephesians*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 17. Similarly, Raymond Brown declares, "Among the Pauline writings only Rom[ans] can match Eph[esians] as a candidate for exercising the most influence on Christian thought and spirituality." *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 620.
- 3 Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002), 1. Markus Barth writes, "Ephesians is among the greatest letters under the name of the apostle Paul." *Ephesians 1–3*, AB 34 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974), 3.
- 4 See Eph. 1:1; 3:1; 4:1; 6:20. Other possible options for the date and location of Paul's imprisonment include sometime during his three-year visit to Ephesus (AD 52–56) or during his imprisonment in Caesarea (AD 57–59).

though not exclusively, to Gentile Christians (2:11–12; 3:1; 4:17), providing first a theological foundation (1:1–3:21) and then instructing them how to live (4:1–6:20).

This book, *United to Christ, Walking in the Spirit*, has five chapters that are based on prominent theological features of the book of Ephesians: (1) the plan of *God*; (2) union with *Christ*; (3) walking according to the *Spirit*; (4) the unity of the *church*; and (5) spiritual warfare in the *present age*. Although many of these topics overlap with major loci in systematic theology (e.g., theology, Christology, pneumatology, ecclesiology, and eschatology), these topics are nuanced so as to be particular to Ephesians. Chapter 1, “The Plan of God,” first delves into the meaning of Paul’s statement that it is God’s plan “to unite all things in him [i.e., Christ], things in heaven and things on earth” (1:10). It also discusses God’s plan in salvation (including election, redemption, adoption/inheritance, perseverance, and regeneration), God’s plan for the apostle Paul (including his calling and his receiving the mystery), and God’s plan in prayer (including Paul’s two prayers and his exhortation to pray and request for prayer). Chapter 2 is an in-depth study on the doctrine of union with Christ in Ephesians. In particular, using Constantine Campbell’s work as a foundation, it explicates the four concepts of union, participation, identification, and incorporation. Chapter 3, “Walking according to the Spirit,” contains three emphases, with the final emphasis receiving the most attention. First, I discuss the former way of walking, which involved being dead in sin, living as alienated strangers, and possessing futile minds and hardened hearts. Second, I explain how the foundation of walking in the Spirit is based on God’s work in Christ for us. Finally, I give attention to the freedom of walking in the Spirit, which means walking in good works, walking worthy of our calling, walking according to the new self, walking in love, walking as children of light, walking with wisdom, walking filled by the Spirit, and walking faithfully with the family of God. Chapter 4 focuses on the unity of the church, the body of Christ. Because of their mutual relationship with Christ, Jews and Gentiles can live in peace with one another. But the unity of the church allows room for

a diversity of gifts that leads to the maturity of the body. Chapter 5, “Spiritual Warfare in the Present Age,” explains the present rule of Satan (his kingdom, his minions, and his power and influence), the present battle (the believer’s struggle, strength, and stand), and finally the meaning and eschatological tension between the present age and the age to come.

The goal of this book is to offer an accessible summary of the theology of Ephesians that highlights the work of God through his Son for the believer who is then able to love and enjoy God because of the ongoing work of the Spirit. It is *because* believers are united to Christ that they *can* walk in the Spirit. Paul has much to say about the behavior of Christians, but such behavior is always based on first beholding and believing in the promises of God that are given to us through Christ. We love because he first loved us, and we serve because he first served us.

The Plan of God

IF *THEOLOGY* IS THE STUDY OF GOD, then it is appropriate that we begin our theology with God and his eternal plan. After all, Paul informs us that God is the one who works “all things according to the counsel of his will” (Eph. 1:11). As the Creator of all things (3:9), God is the sovereign and benevolent King who is orchestrating his grand plan to redeem humanity through the seed of a woman (Gen. 3:15). The rebellion of angels and humanity alienated them from their Creator and, in the case of humanity, from one another. What began in the garden with the fall of Adam and Eve culminates with the Son of God, Jesus Christ, being first lifted up on a cross and then lifted up to the Father’s side in glory. Specifically in Ephesians, we will consider (1) God’s plan to unite all things in Christ, (2) God’s plan in salvation, (3) God’s plan in calling the apostle Paul, and (4) God’s plan in prayer.

God’s Plan to Unite All Things in Christ

In Ephesians 1:9–10, Paul provides us with a central statement of his letter. In fact, these verses (especially 1:10) represent the high point of the eulogy (a prolonged blessing) found in 1:3–14.¹ Paul indicates that God’s “plan” is “to unite all things in [Christ], things in heaven

¹ S. M. Baugh suggests that 1:9–10 “contain one of the central statements of the opening benediction and of the epistle as a whole” (*Ephesians*, EEC [Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2016], 92). Frank Thielman states that 1:10 “is the chief theological concern of the letter’s

and things on earth.” The term translated “plan” (*oikonomia*) can mean (1) the act of administrating, (2) that which is administered (i.e., a plan), or (3) the office or role of an administrator.² The context suggests that here it refers to God’s act of administrating his plan of redemption. The repeated vocabulary of the opening fourteen verses also indicates that God’s plan is central. Paul mentions God’s “will” (*thelēma*; 1:1, 5, 9, 11), “purpose” or “good pleasure” (*eudokia*; 1:5, 9), “purpose” (*prothesis*; 1:11), and “counsel” (*boulē*; 1:11), as well as verbs such as “choose” (*eklegō*; 1:4) and “predestine” (*prooridzō*; 1:5, 11).

But what does it mean that God’s plan is to unite all things in Christ? There are several truths related to this statement that should be highlighted. First, God desired to *reveal* his plan to his people. He lavished his grace on us by “making known to us the mystery of his will” (1:9). Thus God is to be blessed and praised precisely because he graciously revealed his plan to redeem fallen humanity. This plan was not something God’s people could calculate or deduce by their own reasoning, but it displays the overwhelming grace of God. So Paul writes to inform his readers of God’s gracious purpose and to instruct them of their place in his eternal plan.

Second, this plan is the revealing of a *mystery*. What was previously concealed as to the exact nature of God’s plan of redemption through Christ is now revealed. Although the Old Testament prophets progressively unfolded the divine design, the precise details were often shrouded and seen as shadows behind a veil. God designed all along that his people understand his purposes, but many of the details of this plan were not disclosed to his people. Although the Old Testament included the nations being blessed, it was not clear that Gentiles would be considered equal with Israel. But now, in the gospel God has revealed the mystery of his plan, which has the ultimate goal of unit-

first main section (1:3–3:21)” (*Theology of the New Testament: A Canonical and Synthetic Approach* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010], 395).

2 *Oikonomia* occurs eight other times in the New Testament (Luke 16:2, 3, 4; 1 Cor. 9:17; Eph. 3:2, 9; Col. 1:25; 1 Tim. 1:4) and has been translated in a number of ways in this verse: (1) “administration” (CSB, NASB), (2) “plan” (NRSV), and (3) “dispensation” (KJV, NKJV).

ing all things in Christ. More specifically, it involves uniting Jews and Gentiles into the one, new people of God. Thus the term *mystery* in Paul refers to something that was hidden but is now revealed, especially as it relates to God's plan to include the Gentiles into the people of God.³ In Ephesians the mystery involves the all-inclusive plan of God to unite all things (including Jews and Gentiles) into the one body of Christ.

Third, this plan was revealed by God "according to his purpose" (1:9). The word translated "purpose" is often rendered "good pleasure." The goodness and love of God are manifested in his plan for humankind. Because God delights in redeeming lost sinners, that is what he purposed to do. So just as God predestined his people for adoption according to his good pleasure (1:5), he also has disclosed his plans to them for his good pleasure.

Fourth, God set forth his plan "in Christ" (1:9). That is, God did not conceive of this plan in isolation, but Christ was intimately involved in planning our redemption with the Father. As Arnold notes, "Christ was not a passive observer of all that the Father was doing, but participated with him in the delight of planning a way to overcome the obstacle that sin presented to the divine-human relationship."⁴ Just as God chose and adopted his people in Christ (1:5), so too God's plan to reveal the mystery of his purposes is rooted in and revolves around Christ.

Fifth, God set forth this plan "for the fullness of time" (1:10). From the beginning God had a plan of redemption that was revealed in bits and pieces through the Old Testament prophets but was hidden until the coming of the Messiah. The exact phrase "fullness of time" does not occur elsewhere in the Bible, but the closest parallel to this unique construction is found in Galatians 4:4, where Paul states, "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law."⁵ The incarnation, ministry, life, death,

3 See Rom. 11:25; 16:25–27; Eph. 3:3, 4, 9; Col. 1:26–27; and 1 Tim. 3:16. Paul uses the term *mystery* (*mysterion*) twenty-one times, including six times in Ephesians (1:9; 3:3, 4, 9; 5:32; 6:19).

4 Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 87.

5 Although the English translations are the same, the Greek contains two different words for "time." Gal. 4:4 has *chronos*, whereas Eph. 1:10 has *kairos* (cf. Dan. 2:19–22).

resurrection, and ascension of Jesus comprise the pivotal act in redemptive history.

Sixth, God's perfect plan is "to unite all things" (Eph. 1:10) through his Son.⁶ This phrase describes the content of the mystery that was hidden in the past but is now revealed in the gospel. The only other New Testament use of the verb *to unite* is in Romans 13:9 where Paul notes that all of the Old Testament commandments can be "summed up" by the command to love your neighbor as yourself. "All things" most likely refers to the entire universe (cf. Eph. 3:9). This meaning is confirmed when Paul amplifies this thought by adding, "things in heaven and things on earth" (1:10). That is, it refers to not just all humanity but also the angelic realm, both good and evil, and the entire cosmos. Paul writes elsewhere that through Christ, God will "reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross" (Col. 1:20). In Romans he declares that creation itself is longing for its own redemption (Rom. 8:18–22). Thus God is in the process of uniting the entire universe around Christ. This uniting includes both the heavenly and earthly dimensions. God's plan is unequivocally Christocentric.

Seventh, this plan *centers on Christ*. That is, the triune God's work of redemption hinges on the incarnate Son of God—Jesus, the Messiah.⁷ Baugh comments, "The work of Christ on the cross is the central axis for the history of all creation."⁸ God's purpose is to unite all things "in him [Christ]" (Eph. 1:10). Christ is not only the means by which God will unite all the disparate elements of creation together; he is the center and focal point through whom and for whom all this will take place. Jesus defeated sin and death through his resurrection and ascension and is seated at God's right hand ruling sovereignly over his creation.

6 The verb "to unite" is variously translated in English as "to bring together" (CSB), "summing up" (NASB), "to bring unity to" (NIV), "gather together" (NKJV), and "to gather up" (NRSV).

7 In 1:1–14 the name or title "Christ" is explicitly or implicitly mentioned (usually through a pronoun) at least fifteen times, and the phrases "in Christ" (*en Christō*), "in him" (*en autō*), "in whom" (*en hō*), or "in the beloved" (*en tō ēgapēmenō*) occur eleven times.

8 Baugh, *Ephesians*, 93.

He has defeated all powers, with all his foes vanquished under his feet (1:20–22). Furthermore, Christ is head of the church, his body, which is comprised of people from diverse ethnic groups but who have all submitted to follow the Lamb of God (1:22–23). He is the one who abolished the law “that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two” (2:15). Thus “all things” will be brought under Christ’s lordship, whether the vanquished or the victorious. As Paul writes in Philippians, “At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:10–11). Thus “God achieves his purpose for all things through what he accomplished in one person, Christ.”⁹ God’s gracious purpose to restore harmony for the universe centers on Jesus. In Christ, the final, climactic phase has begun in uniting all things and in bringing God’s plan to fulfillment.

God’s Plan in Salvation

The ultimate goal of God’s plan includes the redemption of the entire cosmos (Eph. 1:10) and is therefore not limited to humanity. But the renewal of humanity is the key component of God’s cosmic plan to unite all things in Christ. God’s plan to save his people is featured prominently in the first two chapters of Ephesians, especially 1:3–14. In the original Greek, this passage consists of one long sentence of 202 words. These verses contain an extended praise to God for his blessings that believers receive from their union with Christ; namely, God’s election, redemption, inheritance, and perseverance. The topic of God’s amazing love in regeneration is highlighted in 2:4–10.

Election

As Paul begins his letter in a typical Old Testament or Jewish style of a prolonged blessing (eulogy), he urges his readers to bless God since he has blessed us “with every spiritual blessing” (1:3). Specifically, the focus is on *spiritual* blessings or blessings that pertain to life in the Spirit. The

9 Andrew D. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, WBC 42 (Dallas: Word, 1990), 34.

first reason Paul gives for believers to praise God is his divine election. That is, God is worthy of our praise precisely *because* he has chosen us in Christ before the foundation of the world.

THE MEANING OF ELECTION

Election is God's choice of individuals to receive his favor before they have done anything good or bad (Rom. 9:10–11). It is not a choice that is based on (or in light of) certain deeds or choices that we make but is based solely on God's sovereign grace (Rom. 9:16). Here in Ephesians, Paul uses two different verbs to convey this idea. He writes that God "chose" (*eklegomai*, 1:4) and "predestined" (*prooridzō*, 1:5, 11) those who believe and follow Christ. More specifically, Paul states that God's choice of his people is related to them being predestined to be a part of his family ("for adoption," 1:5). Thus Paul is stressing that believers should praise God because he predestined them and chose them to be his children and receive all the benefits that such a privilege affords. The verb *predestine* can also be translated "predetermine" or "foreordain" and occurs only four other times in the New Testament (Acts 4:28; Rom. 8:29, 30; 1 Cor. 2:7). In every occurrence it refers to the work of God that emphasizes God's sole initiative in election or predestination.

THE CAUSE OF ELECTION

Election is the divine choice of God to grant eternal life to undeserving sinners based solely on his love and not on the goodness of those receiving his grace. It is not arbitrary but part of his grand plan of salvation and grounded in his eternal wisdom. Paul indicates that God elected or predestined his people "in love."¹⁰ That God sovereignly elects a people for himself is not original to Paul but is a theme that runs throughout the Bible. In the Old Testament, God graciously chose Abraham and blessed him to become a blessing to the nations (Gen. 12:1–3). Later,

10 Although it is possible that "in love" modifies what precedes ("holy and blameless before him in love," NKJV, NRSV), it is more likely that it modifies what follows ("In love he predestined us," ESV, CSB, NASB, NIV) since the focus of the eulogy is on God's work of blessing his people.

God chose the nation of Israel to be his treasured possession, not because they were greater than the other nations or because of their righteousness, but because of his love (Deut. 7:6–8; 14:2). Similarly, in Christ, God chose individuals from all the peoples of the world to become his people, a decision based on his amazing love.

Paul also indicates that God's election is rooted in the work of Christ. Four times in Ephesians 1:3–6 he links the blessings of God's sovereign, electing grace to the Son: we are blessed "in Christ" (1:3); we are chosen "in him" (1:4); we are adopted "through Jesus Christ" (1:5); and we are blessed because of being "in the Beloved" (1:5). The blessings we receive are reserved specifically for those who are united with Christ through faith, those who trust in his death, resurrection, and ascension. The ability to call God our Father is possible only through Christ, who alone provides access to the Father because of Christ's finished work on the cross. Christ is not only the recipient *par excellence* of the Father's love and affection (Col. 1:13), but it is through his beloved Son that we receive his blessings. Furthermore, God's work of predestination was done "according to the purpose of his will" (Eph. 1:5). The basis of God's choice was his own will carried out in accordance with his "purpose," or "good pleasure," indicating that the choosing of his people was something in which God delighted. God's choice was also done in accordance with his "will." God has a definite plan and redemptive purpose for adopting wayward sinners into his family.

THE TIME OF ELECTION

Interestingly, Paul indicates that the time of believers' election was "before the foundation of the world" (1:4). This phrase also occurs in John 17:24 (referring to the Father's love of the Son "before the foundation of the world") and 1 Peter 1:20 ("[Christ] was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you"). Here in Ephesians, God's choice in election occurred before time and creation. God's timing emphasizes that this choice was based on God's sovereign purpose and not human merit. Paul declares in Romans 9 that God selected Jacob over Esau "though [the twins]

were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God’s purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls” (Rom. 9:11).

THE PURPOSE OF ELECTION

God’s electing love and grace have a purpose. Paul writes that God chose us so “that we should be holy and blameless before him” (Eph. 1:4; cf. Col. 1:22). Those who have the privilege of being elected to receive God’s grace have the responsibility of living according to God’s word. Redemption has a divine purpose and intended result. God desires not only to forgive our sins but also to conform us to the image of his beloved Son (Rom. 8:29–30). When God chose his people, they were *not* holy and blameless. They deserved his judgment and wrath. Because of his great love and electing grace, he chose us, and through the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit, is transforming the thoughts and actions of his people. Ultimately, all of God’s purpose in election is done “to the praise of his glorious grace” (Eph. 1:6). This refrain is also later echoed in 1:12 and 14 (“to the praise of his glory”), demonstrating that God’s purpose is to make his name great through his great mercy that he bestows on undeserving sinners.

Redemption

THE MEANING OF REDEMPTION

The term *redemption* (*apolutrōsis*) indicates release or liberation from imprisonment or captivity.¹¹ Redemption is a concept not only known in the Greco-Roman society; it is also found in the Old Testament where it describes both the release of slaves from bondage (Ex. 21:8; Lev. 25:48) and the deliverance of God’s people from slavery in Egypt (Deut. 7:8; 9:26; 13:5; 1 Chron. 17:21). Elsewhere Paul writes that believers have been “bought with a price” (1 Cor. 6:20; 7:23) and that “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” (Gal. 3:13).

11 The term *redemption* (*apolutrōsis*) occurs nine times in the New Testament, with seven references found in Paul’s writings (Rom. 3:24; 8:23; 1 Cor. 1:30; Eph. 1:7, 14; 4:30; Col. 1:14; cf. Heb. 9:15; 11:35).

Paul expresses that believers should not only praise God for his election, but also bless him for his redemption: “In him we have redemption” (Eph. 1:7). Paul transitions from God’s predetermining choice before time, to his work of redemption in the course of history. Just as God chose his people *in Christ*, so also they are redeemed “in him.” This redemption is not simply a future hope (cf. 1:14) but is also a present reality (“*we have* redemption”). That is, believers now have the full hope of redemption, as well as its firstfruits, even though fullness of redemption awaits the new heavens and the new earth.

The redemption believers receive is clarified as “the forgiveness of our trespasses” (1:7). Forgiveness implies an offense that requires a just punishment. Here, Paul uses *trespasses* instead of the more common word *sins*, though the parallel passage in Colossians 1:14 uses the word *sins*. Paul later uses both concepts together: “you were dead in the trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1).¹²

THE MEANS OF REDEMPTION

In Ephesians 1:7 Paul specifically states that our redemption in Christ is “through his blood.” That is, the blood of Christ is the *means* by which redemption is procured, with “blood” functioning as a metonymy (one word used for another word closely associated with it) for the sacrificial death of Jesus. Thus our deliverance comes only at the great price of Christ’s death on the cross. Salvation is free simply because it has been paid for by another. It is free to us, but the cost was incalculable. This redemption that God initiated is “according to the riches of his grace” (1:7; see also 1:18; 3:8, 16; cf. Col. 1:27; 2:2–3). According to Ephesians 1:8, God *lavished* this grace upon his people, demonstrating the extent of his grace. Furthermore, God bestows this lavish grace on those in Christ “in all wisdom and insight,”¹³ demonstrating that it is all part

¹² The concept of forgiveness of sins is found in Mark 1:4; Acts 2:38; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18.

¹³ Although it is possible to take the phrase “in all wisdom and insight” with what follows in 1:9 (NASB, NIV, NRSV), it is best to take the phrase with what precedes (CSB, ESV, KJV, NKJV) for the following reasons: (1) Its similarity with the Greek of 1:6 and some of Paul’s other statements (see Eph. 1:17–18; Col. 1:9). (2) In 1:3–14 most of the prepositional phrases occur after the verbs they modify.

of his well-designed and -executed plan. God's decision to lavish his kindness and favor upon them by securing the price of their redemption through the death of his beloved Son was in accordance with his infinite wisdom and insight.

In two passages redemption is linked to the Spirit, where Paul shifts from focusing on redemption that believers now possess to the future inheritance that they will receive. In chapter 1 Paul states that believers are "sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it" (1:13–14), and in chapter 4 he likewise asserts it is by the Holy Spirit that we are "sealed for the day of redemption" (4:30). Both of these passages are in the context of believers receiving a future inheritance that will undoubtedly be obtained because the Holy Spirit will ensure that God will complete his work of salvation (Phil. 1:6). Although it is not articulated, the inheritance that believers will receive includes the blessing of eternal fellowship with God (Pss. 16:5; 119:57; Lam. 3:24), a blessing that believers can now begin to enjoy. The "redemption" here is thus forward-oriented, looking to the completion of that redemption in the future. The "day of redemption" (Eph. 4:30) refers to the final day of salvation (or judgment) and most likely is referring to the same time as "the day of the Lord."¹⁴

Inheritance (Adoption)

In Ephesians 1:11–12 Paul supplies a third reason why believers should bless or praise God: he has given his people an inheritance based on their adoption (1:5). In the ESV, the verb translated "we have obtained an inheritance" (*klēroō*) could also be understood as "appoint by lot."¹⁵ Based on the latter meaning, some have interpreted the text to mean that believers have been allotted to God as his inheritance or portion. If this interpretation is correct, then the passage does not refer to believers *receiving* an inheritance, but to the fact that believers *are* the

¹⁴ See 1 Cor. 1:8; 5:5; 2 Cor. 1:14; Phil. 1:6, 10; 2:16; 1 Thess. 5:2; 2 Thess. 2:2; 2 Pet. 3:10.

¹⁵ BDAG 549. The verb *klēroō* occurs only here in the New Testament, though it does occur three times in the Old Testament (1 Sam. 14:41; Isa. 17:11 [2x]).

inheritance that God obtains. Although the concept of God possessing his people as an inheritance is found in the Old Testament,¹⁶ this interpretation is not consistent with the focus of the passage, which emphasizes the necessity for believers to praise God because of the blessings his people receive.¹⁷ This theme is not only found in 1:11–12 but is also mentioned in 1:5, 14, 18 and 5:5.

THE REALITY OF THE INHERITANCE

Because of his great love, God has promised his people an inheritance (*klēronomia*). Although Paul does not go into detail as to the nature of the inheritance in Ephesians, in Galatians he connects it to the promise given to Abraham (Gal. 3:18). In the Old Testament, the concept of inheritance was often linked to the land promise that God gave to Abraham (Gen. 15:3–5; 17:8; 22:17; 28:4). And yet the promised inheritance cannot be limited to the land of Canaan, a truth found in the Old Testament (Pss. 22:27–28; 47:7–9; 72:8–11; Zeph. 3:9–10) and New Testament (Rom. 4:13). Thus inheritance consists of a renewed and transformed universe that is now promised but will be received only after Jesus returns. It is also likely, as Moo notes, that “the land becomes a tangible symbol of all that God promises to do for his people.”¹⁸

Paul makes it clear that this “glorious inheritance” (Eph. 1:18) is something that awaits believers. Although the promise of this inheritance has been made (1:11), the reality of it is eschatological. Believers have been given the Holy Spirit, who is “the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory” (1:14). Now we are given the Holy Spirit, but in the future we will also

16 See Deut. 4:20; 9:29; 32:8–9; 1 Kings 8:51; Pss. 33:12; 106:40.

17 For example, in 1:14 Paul states that those who believed the gospel were sealed with the Holy Spirit, “who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it.” In Col. 1:12 Paul similarly prays that his readers would give thanks to God who qualified them “to share in the inheritance of the saints” (the Greek word here is *klēros*, which refers to one’s lot or portion).

18 Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 312. See 1 Cor. 6:9–10; 15:50; Gal. 5:21; Heb. 1:14; 1 Pet. 1:4.

be given an inheritance. In 1:18 saints have been given the *hope* of a future inheritance, and in Colossians Paul uses the future tense in relation to this promised reward: “You will receive the inheritance as your reward” (Col. 3:24).

THE REASON FOR THE INHERITANCE

Believers will receive an inheritance because God has predestined them to receive this free gift, which is done in accordance with the purpose of his will. God does not simply elect his people with no purpose, but God’s divine purpose of predestination is specifically that those chosen are adopted into his family as a free gift through the completed work of Christ (Eph. 1:5, 11). In the Old Testament, the nation of Israel was given the special privilege of being God’s son. At the time of the exodus, God calls Israel “my firstborn son” (Ex. 4:22), and later God reminds his people through the prophet Hosea: “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son” (Hos. 11:1). Paul indicates that the privilege of adoption was one of the benefits graciously given to Israel (Rom. 9:4). Adoption was common in Greco-Roman culture, and those adopted were given the full status of the family and became heirs of the family’s estate. Paul now applies this concept to believers (cf. Rom. 9:26; 2 Cor. 6:18).¹⁹ Believers receive an inheritance because God has adopted them into his family to be coheirs with Christ.

The reason for believers obtaining an inheritance ultimately relates to God working out his purpose in history. Three times in the span of ten verses, Paul reminds his readers that God adopts and grants an inheritance to his people “according to the purpose of his will” (Eph. 1:5), “according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will” (1:11), and “to the praise of his glory” (1:14). God’s choosing, saving, and blessing his people is all part of God’s carefully considered and executed plan.

¹⁹ The term *adoption* (*huiiothesia*) is used only five times in the New Testament, and only by Paul (Rom. 8:15, 23; 9:4; Gal. 4:5; Eph. 1:5; cf. Eph. 1:11, 14).

THE RECIPIENTS OF THE INHERITANCE

But who precisely are those who will receive the inheritance? It is those who are in Christ and those who walk according to his word. First, Paul makes it abundantly clear that union with Christ is the defining feature of the redeemed who await an inheritance. He declares that their adoption as sons is “through Jesus Christ” (1:5) and that it is “in him” that believers obtain an inheritance (1:11). Thus Paul emphasizes that it is through our union with Christ that believers are incorporated into the family of God and have become heirs to the blessings and promises made by the Father (cf. Rom. 8:17; Gal. 3:29; 4:1, 5, 7).

Second, Paul later clarifies that “everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God” (Eph. 5:5).²⁰ Although Paul only mentions three groups, it is not limited to those specifically named. Rather, the point is that those who abandon the word of God and live immorally are not in Christ and therefore will not partake of the blessings that Christ has secured. Paul is not proclaiming that all those who commit such sins are necessarily excluded from God’s heavenly kingdom but those who are characterized by such a lifestyle. It is those outside of Christ who live in persistent and unrepentant sin who have no future inheritance in the kingdom.

Perseverance

In 1:13 Paul provides the final reason for why believers should praise God: he has sealed them with the Holy Spirit. God ensures that his promises for his people are not in jeopardy. That is, he chooses them and adopts them into his family, he redeems them by the blood of Christ, and he provides them a glorious inheritance. But what if they fall away or permanently reject Christ? According to Paul, this will not happen since the Holy Spirit not only indwells his people but is the

20 Rosner defines the greedy (or covetous) as “those with a strong desire to acquire for themselves more and more money and possessions, because they love, trust, and obey wealth rather than God.” Brian S. Rosner, *Greed as Idolatry: The Origin and Meaning of a Pauline Metaphor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 129.

means by which they are sealed so as to guarantee that believers will receive their promised inheritance.

THE SEALING OF THE SPIRIT

Paul explains that when people hear and believe the truth of the gospel, they are immediately sealed with the Holy Spirit (1:13). He later adds that this sealing is not temporary but will endure until “the day of redemption” (4:30). Thus the Holy Spirit is the means by which God seals his people, which provides several benefits to believers. First, being sealed secures salvation, protecting someone from God’s future wrath and judgment that will be poured out on the wicked. Second, because the Spirit serves as a deposit or down-payment, being sealed guarantees that believers will acquire their future inheritance. That is, the indwelling of the Spirit provides the assurance or guarantee that God’s people will receive everything that God has promised and that Christ accomplished for them. The idea of being “sealed” also can signify identification of ownership (cf. 2 Cor. 1:22). Consequently, God is to be praised because he seals those who hear and believe the gospel, thereby claiming them as his own and securing their eschatological inheritance.

THE GUARANTEE OF THE SPIRIT

Believers will persevere in their faith until the end because they are sealed with the Spirit who thus is the “guarantee” that they will receive their promised inheritance (Eph. 1:14). The term *guarantee* (*arrabōn*) is used only three times in the New Testament, all by Paul and all referring to the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5; cf. Rom. 8:23). In the Greco-Roman world, a guarantee functioned as a down-payment that signified the expectation that the full amount would be given once the terms of service had been met. As a result, the guarantee was a promise of more to come. Likewise, God has granted the Holy Spirit to his people with the assurance and expectation of the future inheritance (cf. 2 Cor. 5:5). Paul therefore declares that the presence of God’s Spirit will continue “until we acquire possession of [our inheritance]” (Eph. 1:14). Later, Paul

indicates that believers have been sealed “for the day of redemption” (4:30), which refers to the day of salvation (for believers) or the day of judgment (for unbelievers). There is no doubt that believers will persevere until the end because the indwelling presence of the Spirit seals believers and guarantees that they will receive their inheritance.

Regeneration

In Ephesians 2:1–3 Paul offers a bleak view of humanity: all people are dead in their sins and deserve God’s wrath. Beginning in 2:4, however, Paul introduces the good news of the gospel into our hopeless condition: because of his great love, mercy, and grace, God intervened and brought life into our dead, hardened hearts. The essence of this passage is that we were dead, but God makes us alive. Regeneration is thus the free and sovereign work of God, who takes sinners who are spiritually dead and makes them alive through the work of the Spirit.

THE WORK OF REGENERATION

Humanity’s desperate situation is contrasted by two key words: “But God” (2:4). Without God’s intervening grace, God’s unending wrath would have been our destiny since we were guilty of offending God by walking in our “trespasses and sins” (2:1) and following the ways of the world, the flesh, and the devil. Paul uses three verbs to describe the regenerating and salvific work of God—and all three of these terms underscore the believer’s union with Christ: “God . . . made us alive together with [*synezōpoiēsen*] Christ . . . and raised us up with [*synēgeiren*] him and seated us with [*synekathisen*] him” (2:4–6). Each of these verbs in Greek is a compound verb that includes a prepositional prefix (*syn-*) meaning “together with.” The threefold blessing of regeneration, exaltation, and coronation that was first accomplished by God in Christ is what believers partake in. Although Christ’s resurrection was physical, in this passage “being made alive” and “being raised” are used metaphorically, referring to the spiritual existence possessed by believers that results from Christ’s resurrection. The last verb, “being seated,” is also used metaphorically to refer to “our present exaltation

with the point of comparison being the privileges, honor, and authority involved with enthronement.”²¹ Lincoln rightly summarizes this parallel: “If raising Christ from death to sit in the heavenly realms was the supreme demonstration of God’s surpassing power, then the raising of believers from spiritual death to sit with Christ in the heavenly realms is the supreme demonstration of God’s surpassing grace.”²²

THE CAUSE OF REGENERATION

But what would compel God to take fallen, broken, and sinful humanity and give them the regenerating power of the Spirit? The answer in one word is *love*. Paul plainly tells us, “because of the great love with which he loved us . . .” (2:4). In fact, Paul emphasizes the origin of God’s saving decision to rescue his people with a variety of phrases: “rich in mercy” (2:4), “great love” (2:4), “immeasurable riches of his grace” (2:7), and “kindness” (2:7). Salvation and new life are based solely on God’s undeserved and unmerited favor. Thus our dire predicament changes because of God’s mercy and his great love. God’s merciful nature is clearly revealed in the Old Testament: “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Ex. 34:6); “The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love” (Ps. 103:8; see also Jonah 4:2). Elsewhere Paul states, “He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy” (Titus 3:5). But God is not only merciful; he is also loving. Paul emphasizes God’s love by supplying the adjective “great” and by reiterating his statement with the verbal form that follows (“with which he *loved* us”). Both God’s mercy and his love are the causes that propelled him to awaken sinners by the regenerating work of the Spirit to bring new life to dead hearts.

Paul emphasizes that the cause of salvation (including regeneration) is *not* our good works. Salvation is “by grace” (Eph. 2:5, 8) and by grace alone. Grace is highlighted throughout Ephesians. Paul opens his letter

21 William J. Larkin, *Ephesians: A Handbook on the Greek Text*, BHGNT (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009), 32.

22 Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 110.

with a greeting of grace (1:2). God is to be praised because he has freely graced his people with glorious grace (1:6). We have redemption and forgiveness through the riches of his grace (1:7). Paul was a steward of God's grace (3:2, 8), a ministry itself that was received by grace (3:7, 8). Grace, and the resulting gift, is given to every believer through Christ (4:7). Instead of words to tear down, believers are exhorted to speak words that build up so "that it may give grace to those who hear" (4:29). Paul then ends his letter the way he began it, with a message of grace: "Grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with love incorruptible" (6:24).

Furthermore, this grace that results in regeneration is received *by* faith. There is an important distinction to make here. We are saved *because of* grace, which is attained *by means of* or *through* faith. That is, we are not saved because of or on the basis of faith. Faith does not save; God's grace based on Christ's atonement saves. Faith, then, is merely the instrument by which grace is received. As such, faith is not viewed as a meritorious work but trusts in Christ's life, death, and resurrection. Paul states negatively that salvation is "not your own doing" as well as "not a result of works" but positively it is "the gift of God" (2:8–9). If it is a gift, it is not earned but is freely received. Furthermore, if it is freely received as a gift and not dependent on good works, it precludes any boasting before God (see Rom. 3:27; Gal. 6:14; Phil. 3:3).

THE RESULT OF REGENERATION

As stated above, when God regenerates people, they are spiritually awakened, raised with Christ, and seated with him. God's regenerating work on an individual evokes a change of heart and a change of destiny. The divine purpose of God's act of granting new life and status to believers is so that "he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace" (Eph. 2:7). In 1:3–14 Paul stresses that the goal of bestowing every spiritual blessing upon believers is the glory of God (1:6, 12, 14). Here, Paul adds that God saves rebellious sinners in order to display or show off his grace, a grace that is highlighted with the adjective "immeasurable" and the noun "riches." But Paul mentions not only God's

“mercy” (2:4), “love” (2:4), and “grace” (2:5, 7); he also includes God’s “kindness” (2:7). Elsewhere, he explains that it is God’s “kindness” that leads to repentance (Rom. 2:4) and that God chose to save us “when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared” (Titus 3:4). God regenerates the dead hearts of sinners to publicly display his grace.

When people receive God’s grace, they are spiritually awakened and indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, God’s quickening results in good works. As God’s workmanship, believers were created to walk in good works as part of God’s perfect plan (Eph. 2:10). The term “workmanship” (*poiēma*) designates God’s work of the new creation (see 4:24; 2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15). Believers are not created anew based on their good works, but they are created anew for the purpose of good works, works that God predestined believers to perform (see Rom. 9:23). For Paul, the free and gracious nature of salvation leads to good works, not complacency or passivity. God’s plan of salvation begins with grace and ends with grace.

God’s Plan for the Apostle Paul

God’s plan to unite all things in Christ and his plan to accomplish salvation among his people are both related to his plan in calling and using the apostle Paul. In other words, Paul becomes an essential component in revealing and executing God’s plan for humanity. As the apostle to the Gentiles, Paul was given the task of revealing the mystery of God that was hidden in the past but made known through the life and ministry of Paul.

God’s Calling of the Apostle Paul

APOSTLE

Paul begins Ephesians by identifying himself as an “apostle” (1:1), a technical use that is limited to the twelve (Matt. 10:2; Acts 1:2, 13; 1 Cor. 15:5, 7) and Paul (1 Cor. 9:1; 15:9). These apostles were chosen and commissioned by Jesus and therefore occupied a unique position as founders of the church. Paul specifies that he is an apostle “of Christ Jesus,” a designation that indicates that Paul is one who belongs to and

serves Jesus Christ. Thus he is fully authorized as Christ's messenger to proclaim the good news of the one who sent him. Additionally, his apostleship is "by the will of God." God is the one who chose and commissioned Paul to serve as an apostle to help build the church. At the time of his transformation and conversion, Paul was fighting against the church, seeking to destroy it (Gal. 1:13). The Lord conveyed to Ananias that Paul was indeed his "chosen instrument" who would carry his name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel (Acts 9:15). Luke also records that the Lord told Paul that he appeared to Paul "to appoint" him as "a servant and witness" to bear testimony of God's grace to the Gentiles (Acts 26:16–18). As the apostle to the Gentiles, Paul was compelled to bring the gospel to major cities outside of Israel, including Ephesus. About five years after leaving Ephesus during his third missionary journey, Paul writes to "the saints" in Ephesus to assure them that the fruit of his labor has not been in vain. Paul's calling to reach the Gentiles with the gospel is not something that he gave himself, but something to which he was called according to the sovereign plan of God.²³

PRISONER

Besides the designation of apostle, in chapter 3 Paul identifies his ministry using three other labels: prisoner, minister, and saint. Paul calls himself "a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles" (3:1). Paul's reference to "prisoner" is literal, as Ephesians was written from prison, most likely in Rome where he was under arrest for two years (Acts 28:30). Elsewhere in this epistle, he identifies himself as "a prisoner for the Lord" (Eph. 4:1) and "an ambassador in chains" (6:20). Notably, Paul acknowledges that he is a prisoner of Jesus Christ and not Caesar since he belongs to Christ and is in prison for the sake of

23 It should be noted that some manuscripts do not include "in Ephesus." The ESV footnote reads, "Some manuscripts *saints who are also faithful* (omitting *in Ephesus*)." Consequently, some take "in Ephesus" to be a later (though still accurate) addition since the city of Ephesus was probably the first or primary location to which Paul's circular letter was sent. Others are convinced that the phrase is original.

the gospel. He further states that he is a prisoner “on behalf of you Gentiles” (3:1). Paul’s imprisonment was not punishment for personal sin but due to his faithfulness in fulfilling his apostolic role of taking the gospel of Christ to the Gentiles.

MINISTER

Paul states that he “was made a minister” (*diakonos*) or servant of the gospel (3:7–8).²⁴ Paul provides a sevenfold emphasis that demonstrates that his role as God’s servant was via divine appointment and not his own choice: (1) he uses a divine passive (“I was made”), which “underscores the idea that God put him into that service”;²⁵ (2) his calling is called a “gift” (*dōrean*) or (3) “grace” (*charitos*); (4) he reiterates that the gift “was given,” another divine passive; (5) God is designated as the source of the gift (“of God”); and (6) he elaborates that the grace he received is “by the working” of (7) God’s “power.” Elsewhere Paul confesses that although he “worked harder” than his contemporaries, he readily acknowledges that it was “by the grace of God” and that ultimately it was not him “but the grace of God” with him (1 Cor. 15:10). Paul viewed himself as a servant of the King who was given the commission to herald the good news of a Jewish Messiah who has provided a way of reconciliation with God.

SAINT

Finally, Paul designates himself as “the very least of all the saints” (Eph. 3:8). The term translated “very least” literally means “less than the least” or “the lessermost” and is a word that may have been coined by Paul himself.²⁶ So although he labels himself a “saint” (*hagios*), he views himself as the lowest of all the saints. In 1 Corinthians 15:9 he confesses that he is “the least of the apostles,” and in 1 Timothy 1:15 he

²⁴ See also 1 Cor. 3:5; 2 Cor. 3:6; 6:4; 11:23.

²⁵ Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002), 449.

²⁶ Technically, this form is labeled a “comparative of the superlative.” Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 302.

states that he is the “foremost” of all sinners. Paul recognizes that the commission to be Christ’s ambassador to the nations was freely given to him by the grace of God and that he was an unworthy vessel as one who had persecuted the church (1 Cor. 15:9; 1 Tim. 1:13). Paul reiterates that the grace and calling he received were given to him by God (see Eph. 3:2, 7), which is what empowered him to fulfill his ministry to bring the good news of Christ to the Gentiles.

God’s Revealing of the Mystery to Paul

THE CONTENT OF THE MYSTERY

What precisely is the mystery that was revealed to Paul? God chose to reveal a divine plan through Paul—an apostle, prisoner, minister, and the very least of all the saints. He refers to this privilege as a “stewardship” (*oikonomia*), which refers to his divine commission to preach the gospel to the nations (3:2). He further describes this stewardship as a grace from God (3:3, 7, 8). Three times in chapter 3 Paul refers to the “mystery” (3:3, 4, 9).²⁷ In 1:9–10 Paul stated that God made “known to us the mystery of his will,” which included his plan “to unite all things” in Christ. In 3:6 he indicates the content of the mystery: “that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise.”

Paul employs three compound terms to demonstrate that Gentiles are now on equal status with Jews: Gentiles are “fellow heirs” (*sygklēronoma*), “fellow body members” (*syssōma*), and “fellow partakers” (*symmetoxa*) in the promise.²⁸ “Fellow heirs” harkens back to the theme of adoption and inheritance in chapter 1 (1:5, 11, 14, 18; also see 5:5) and elsewhere in Paul’s writings (Rom. 8:17; Gal. 3:18; Col. 3:24). It also recalls God’s promise to bless all the families of the earth through Abraham (Gen. 12:3). “Fellow body members” (“members of the same body,” ESV), implies that Gentile believers have been incorporated into

27 Some English translations such as the ESV and NIV add the word *mystery* to 3:6 in order to make clear that Paul is clarifying the nature of the mystery in that verse.

28 These are the author’s translations of the terms in order to demonstrate the similarity of meaning.

the same body and have become “one new man” (Eph. 2:15) or “one body” (2:16). Now, both Jews and Gentiles together form the body of Christ, the church. Finally, “fellow partakers” (“partakers,” ESV) “of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” recalls the earlier reference that Gentiles were “strangers to the covenants of promise” (2:12). The promise could refer to either the Holy Spirit (see 1:13) or the blessings mentioned in God’s promise to Abraham that would now also come to the Gentiles (see Gal. 3:8; Rom. 4:13). Perhaps both are in view since the gift of the Spirit and Abrahamic blessings are often merged together.²⁹ Paul adds that these blessings given to the Gentiles are attainable only by being united to Christ through faith. In Ephesians 3:4 Paul refers to the mystery as the “mystery of Christ,” which probably indicates that it is a mystery that involves Christ. Thus the mystery is specifically related to the Jews and Gentiles being united with the body of Christ to form the one people of God. Although the Old Testament reveals God’s plan to bless the nations through his covenant with Abraham, we now know that the nations (Gentiles) are blessed as part of the one people of God, united with Jews on an equal basis to form one body.

THE TIMING OF THE MYSTERY

From the beginning, God had a plan to bless Abraham and, through him, the nations. Certain elements of this plan, however, were not disclosed, especially how Gentiles would become one body with Jews. But at the perfect time, God unveiled his plan. Paul declares that he received this insight “by revelation” (3:3; see Gal. 1:12), which probably refers to his Damascus road experience. Paul was not only commissioned to preach the gospel to the nations (Eph. 3:8), but he was also called to reveal God’s mystery (3:9). As Paul preached the unsearchable riches of Christ in the gospel to the Gentiles, those who repented and believed were reconciled to God through his Son and became fellow members of the body of Christ with Jewish believers.

²⁹ See Eph. 1:13; Isa. 32:15; 44:3; Ezek. 11:19; 36:26–27; 37:14; Joel 3:1–2.

In 3:5 Paul clarifies that the mystery is something that was previously unknown: “[The mystery] was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.” Note the timing of the mystery: it was not revealed to previous generations but has now been revealed by the Spirit of God to his people through the apostles and prophets. Paul is not implying that the Old Testament lacks any reference to blessings that would come to the Gentiles (see Gen. 12:3; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14) or to the future inclusion of the Gentiles within Israel (see Lev. 19:34; Deut. 10:18–19; 1 Kings 8:41–43). Rather, the meaning is that no prophet ever announced that these two groups would be joined together as one people and form the body of Christ. In Ephesians 3:9 Paul explains that his calling was “to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God.” By “hidden,” Paul is referring to that which was planned by God but not yet revealed to his people. That is, it was hidden from past ages but only resided in the mind of God. As the sovereign Creator, God would ensure that his once-hidden plan was carried out according to his perfect design. What was hidden is “now” (3:10) made known, suggesting a new salvation-historical era has begun. Specifically, this plan was “realized in Christ Jesus our Lord” (3:11). God’s plan of redemption, though not fully complete, has been revealed and centers on Christ, who will “unite all things” (1:10).

God’s Plan in Prayer

Prayer is also an important part of God’s plan for his people. Twice in Ephesians Paul prays for his readers (1:15–23; 3:14–21), and once he exhorts them to pray, including praying for Paul himself (6:18–20; see also 5:20). In this letter, he refers to God as Father eight times,³⁰ once in each of his prayers (“Father of glory,” 1:17; “the Father,” 3:14) and once when he exhorts his readers to be filled with the Spirit, “giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (5:20). As a gracious Father, God loves to hear the

30 References to God as Father: 1:2, 3, 17; 2:18; 3:14; 4:6; 5:20; 6:23.

prayers of his children. Believers offer prayers to God, not so much to change God's mind (though certainly "the prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working," James 5:16) but to ask God to change us and give us the mind of Christ. Interestingly, Paul does not focus his prayers on what believers should do but on how they should think. This is not because doing is unimportant but because correct thinking leads to obedience. Thus Paul often prays that God would open the eyes and hearts of his readers so that they may be enlightened, know, comprehend, and think in line with God's promises and God's plans.

Paul's First Prayer

After an extended blessing of God (Eph. 1:3–14), Paul offers a prayer of thanksgiving for the faith and love of his readers (1:15–19). Before giving the content of the prayer, he provides a twofold description of the one who is the source of all blessings: he is "the God of our Lord Jesus Christ" and "the Father of glory" (1:17). Specifically, Paul prays that God would give his people "the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation" (1:17). Although some take "spirit" as a reference to the human disposition,³¹ it is best to understand it as a designation of the Holy Spirit who imparts wisdom and revelation to God's people (see Isa. 11:2). Arnold notes, "What Paul is referring to here is not new truths about salvation history, the nature of God, or other doctrine, but an illuminating work of the Spirit to impress already revealed truth about God into the conscious reflections and heartfelt convictions of the readers."³² So Paul prays that the Spirit will produce both wisdom and knowledge so that they will comprehend the unfolding plan of God.

In Ephesians 1:18–19 Paul further unpacks the work of the Spirit. Namely, that he would grant his readers spiritual insight, "having the eyes of [their] hearts enlightened" (1:18). This phrase most likely refers to the ability to discern spiritual realities related to the purpose and plan of God (see Pss. 13:3; 19:8). Paul then prays specifically that his readers

31 See CSB, NASB, NRSV; cf. Rom. 8:15; 11:8; 1 Cor. 4:21; Gal. 6:1; Eph. 4:23; 2 Tim. 1:7.

32 Arnold, *Ephesians*, 105.

will comprehend three spiritual realities. First, he prays that they will know the hope to which God has called them. God has elected his people (Eph. 1:4), called them through the word of Christ (Rom. 8:30; 10:17), and now offers hope in that gospel (Col. 1:5). Previously they were estranged from God's people and had "no hope" (Eph. 2:12). Through Christ's atoning and redemptive work on the cross, the hopeless have become hopeful, and so Paul prays that in faith they will believe all that God has promised to them. Second, Paul prays that they will know the riches of their glorious inheritance (see earlier section "Inheritance (Adoption)"). Third, he wants them to know the immeasurable greatness of God's power, especially as it is displayed in Christ. That is, the same power that raised Jesus from the dead, seated him at God's right hand in power, and gave him authority over the cosmos is the same power at work in believers (1:20–22). Paul stresses the power of God when he speaks of the "immeasurable greatness" of God's "power," which is in accordance with "the working" of his "great might" (1:19). These terms are piled up to provoke the readers' confidence in God and his plan for their lives.

Paul's Second Prayer

In 3:14–21 Paul offers a second prayer for his audience. Instead of using a verb for *praying*, he describes the action of bowing or bending his knees before the Father. Like his previous prayer, Paul concentrates on their thoughts and attitudes. He offers a prayer for (1) strength, (2) understanding, and (3) filling.

First, Paul prays that his readers would "be strengthened with power through his Spirit" in their inner being (3:16). This strength is "according to the riches of his glory," indicating a limitless resource (see also Phil. 4:19). Thus God is graciously and lavishly supplying all the strength that believers need. This strengthening is "with power" and through the agency of "his Spirit" (Eph. 3:16). The result of being strengthened is that the continual presence of Christ "may dwell" in their hearts (3:17).

Second, Paul prays for his readers to understand and experience the love of Christ. In order to attain this understanding, believers must be

“rooted and grounded” in God’s amazing love (3:17). Paul desires each Christian to grasp the immense love of Christ for them. His main petition is that believers “may have strength to comprehend” and “know the love of Christ” (3:18–19). The dimensions of breadth, length, height, and depth all function to describe the immensity of God’s love for his people (see Rom. 8:35–39). Paul qualifies Christ’s love for believers as a love that “surpasses knowledge” (Eph. 3:19). Paradoxically, Paul prays that the Ephesian Christians would be able to know and comprehend something that is incomprehensible. Thus the love of Christ is so vast that it can never be exhausted or fully grasped.

Finally, Paul requests that they “be filled with all the fullness of God” (3:19). That is, believers should long to be filled up to and with the very fullness of God. Similarly, in 4:13 Paul states that believers are to attain “to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (see also 1:23; Col. 1:19; 2:9). It is likely that the “fullness” of God refers to God’s moral excellence or perfections, including his love. Later, Paul will exhort his readers to “walk in love” (Eph. 5:2).

Paul ends this prayer with a doxology (3:20–21). Although Paul focuses his prayers on the need for Christians to be mentally grounded in the reality of God’s gracious plan and God’s unending love, his doxology demonstrates that we will never fully comprehend or understand this reality since God “is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think” (3:20). God is able not only to do what we imagine (or even more than we imagine) but “far more abundantly” than we could even imagine. This rare adjective (*hyperekperissou*) means “quite beyond all measure” and communicates “the highest form of comparison imaginable.”³³ This same God is “at work within us” (3:20). Consequently, our response should be to praise and glorify God.

Paul’s Exhortation to Pray and Request for Prayer

As Paul closes his letter, he exhorts his readers to take their stand, putting on the full armor of God. His final command is that they pray,

³³ BDAG 1033.

including praying for Paul himself. God's plan for believers is that they trust in the strength that he provides, which is not possible without fervent prayer. Believers "stand" by kneeling in prayer. In fact, it seems that Paul is suggesting that the way in which believers arm themselves against the enemy is through prayer. This call to prayer is emphasized several ways (6:18). First, believers should pray "at all times." Even as Paul himself has prayed for his readers twice in this letter, so too Christians should make it a practice of constantly praying throughout the day (see 1 Thess. 5:17). Second, they should pray "in the Spirit" since it is the Holy Spirit who leads and strengthens believers to pray. Arnold writes, "The Spirit stands by the side of believers to prompt them to pray, to direct them whom to pray for and how to pray, as well as to energize them in praying for themselves and others."³⁴ Third, believers should pray "with all prayer and supplication." The repetition of prayer terminology emphasizes the importance of praying diligently and expectantly. Fourth, they are to "keep alert." They must stay vigilant even in the midst of intense warfare. Fifth, they are to be alert and pray "with all perseverance," refusing to give up when there are no tangible results. Finally, they are to pray "for all the saints." Believers must pray for each other to stand firm against the attacks of the enemy.

Paul not only encourages believers to pray for each other; he also solicits prayer for himself (Eph. 6:19), which is not unusual for Paul (see Rom. 15:30–32; 2 Cor. 1:11; Col. 4:3–4; 1 Thess. 5:25; 2 Thess. 3:1–2). Astonishingly, he does not request that he be released from his imprisonment but instead asks that he would be faithful and bold to share the gospel freely and clearly with others: "that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel" (Eph. 6:19). Paul thus asks for prayer to courageously do the very thing that led to his arrest and him being "an ambassador in chains" (6:20; see also 2 Cor. 5:20). Paul views himself as an official representative of God with the specific calling and commission to preach the mystery of the gospel to the Gentiles (see Eph. 3:2, 7–8).

³⁴ Arnold, *Ephesians*, 464.

And so Paul requests that he will be faithful to his calling and the gospel to “declare it boldly.” Paul later indicates the Lord stood by him and strengthened him so that he was able to proclaim the message faithfully to the Gentiles (2 Tim. 4:17).

In prayer believers are asking God to help them trust and rely on his strength. In prayer believers are trusting in God’s purpose and plan to obediently follow God’s revealed truth. In prayer believers are praying for others to be faithful to what God has called them to do. In prayer believers should be seeking to follow God’s will and not their own will.

Summary

God is the creator and sustainer of the universe. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end (Rev. 1:8; 21:6; 22:13). Nothing is hidden from him “but all are naked and exposed” before him (Heb. 4:13). With patience and great wisdom, he works “all things according to the counsel of his will” (Eph. 1:11). His plan ultimately includes uniting all things in Christ since the Son is the center and focus of the divine plan. God’s plan in salvation to elect, regenerate, redeem, adopt, and seal believers is based on his great love and the finished work of Christ. His plan included calling the apostle Paul and revealing to him the divine mystery that included the uniting of both Jew and Gentile into the one people of God. Finally, his plan includes a praying people as was demonstrated by Paul’s two prayers in this letter as well as his exhortation for believers to pray and his own personal request for prayer.