

# Commentary on Ephesians

## *Paula Fether, 2006*

### Chapter One

#### Verses 1–6

As usual, Paul begins his letter with praise and greetings. But even in this there is controversy.

We see the words "he chose us before the foundation of the world", and Calvinism takes it as a proof text for an alleged "eternal decree" by God to forcibly choose some people for salvation before the universe was made, while others were chosen for eternity in hell. But what does it really say?

First we see **who** exactly was "chosen": us. Paul just identified "us" as "the people devoted to God who are faithful to Christ Jesus". He is addressing believers. We were not chosen **to be** believers, but **because we are** believers. This is consistent with his earlier writing about God's foreknowledge (Rom. 8:29).

Then we see **what** we were chosen for: to be sacred and blameless in God's sight. We are to be conformed to the likeness of Jesus after we place our faith in him. It is this that God decreed "before the foundation of the world", not our individual salvation. He decided that we who believe would be adopted into his family through Jesus. We praise God for this adoption, this being made like Jesus.

If we had been chosen for salvation itself, apart from faith, then not only is all scripture nullified that says otherwise, but we are supposed to praise God for forcing us to be saved! Let me illustrate.

Suppose a couple gets married and then announces their plans: "We will have four children. Three will be hated before they are even born and mistreated all their lives. But one will be loved and blessed, and none have any choice in the matter. The loved one will be forced to praise us for our love and kindness, even as we torture the other three, just for our good pleasure."

What a hideous situation! Yet this is exactly the picture Calvinism paints of God. How can the "loved ones" praise a God who creates billions of people just to send them to hell? Yet the Bible, in stark contrast, tells us that God takes "no pleasure in the death of the wicked" (Eze. 18:23,32, 33:11) and that he loved us "while we were still sinners" (Rom. 5:8). God planned to rescue all people through Jesus, even while we all were still his enemies. That most do not accept this free offer of pardon is hardly what God ever "decreed".

## **Verses 7–10**

Here we see the purpose of Jesus' sacrifice: to buy back the human race from separation from God by "paying the ransom". It was a legal or financial situation brought on by Adam but reversed by Jesus. Now that God's wrath against all mankind is gone, there is nothing stopping anyone from coming to God by faith in Jesus. And now, for us who have come to him, God showers us with many blessings, and reveals to us "the mystery". This mystery is what Paul has just been talking about: that we can be saved by faith because Jesus reconciled us to God.

Each period of history was a step in God's plan, and it all led up to our salvation. This is one of the scriptures giving weight to a theological system known as Dispensationalism, meaning history is divided into ages or "dispensations", which comes from the Greek word meaning "economy" or "house rules". God himself never changes, but only his dealings with mankind. At the present, salvation is by faith alone in the Jesus who is YHWH, and no other.

## **Verses 11–14**

Again, we see that it was God's plan to set apart for himself all those who would have faith in Jesus. Such faithful ones would be adopted and assigned an estate. This was to cause Jew and Gentile alike to praise God, since this is all a lavish gift. People who trust Jesus, whether Jew or Gentile, are now stamped with the seal of the Holy Spirit, and this guarantees our inheritance, being a down payment for what is to come. We are free because our ransom has been paid!

## **Verses 15–23**

Seeing that the Ephesians had placed their faith in Jesus caused Paul to rejoice, and he promised continued prayer for their spiritual growth and maturity. As their understanding of their riches in Jesus increase, so too will their gratitude. And we are promised the power to grow, the same power that raised Jesus from the dead and seated him above all other authorities and powers. All power comes from him, and it enables his Body, the believers, to grow to completeness.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Verses 1–10**

Paul goes on to explain our situation before salvation. We were as good as dead because of our sins, and we lived accordingly. We obeyed the flesh and the devil and thus deserved the wrath of God. But in spite of that, God showed us all mercy

by buying us with the blood of Jesus, and changing our status from "as good as dead" or "condemned" to "cleared of all charges"! And it was all on God's initiative; we didn't ask for him to do this. But of course we are then obligated to ask for the free gift God offers because of what Jesus did, and we do this by trusting in him.

It is by God's favor and initiative that we can be saved by faith, not by our own works or plans. We didn't ask God to sacrifice Jesus for sin. But knowing this, nobody can boast about themselves.

Note that many people think vs. 8-9 say our faith itself is a gift from God, but it doesn't say that at all. Even Calvin wrote that it is salvation that is a gift, not faith. And many scholars view the whole thing— salvation by grace through faith— as being the object of "not of yourselves". This is an issue of Greek grammar and syntax and does not come through clearly in English. But from what I've read it makes sense that this gift is the whole plan of God: salvation through faith because of Jesus. God decreed that this is the way we would be saved. So God does not have to give us faith before we can be saved. Instead, he gives us the choice, the opportunity, to be saved if we just put our faith in Jesus.

And we are then told the expected outcome of salvation: that we must do the tasks God has assigned to us. We who are "in Christ" are to do that which God has planned for us. When we are saved, we are a "new creation" whose purpose is to glorify God by doing what he has assigned to us.

### **Verses 11–16**

Now Paul reminds the people that they, being Gentiles, were once outsiders to God's plans, having no hope. Think about what that means, especially as it relates to the issue of what happens to people who never hear the gospel. That's an enormous can of worms, but I'll try to briefly summarize.

Since salvation is found in no one else but Jesus, only those who have him can be saved. No Jesus, no salvation. But the objection is immediately raised, "It isn't fair to send people to hell for never having heard the gospel." And you know what? God agrees! That is why he commands us to spread the gospel. And the sobering thought should be that if we fail, people will be lost.

But let's first establish an over-arching principle here: Do we trust God to be just and fair, or do we not? Are we more compassionate than he, more loving, more fair? Then can we dare to put ourselves above him as his judges?

We must trust God to do the right thing, even if he has not explained every detail to us. We are only responsible for what he did tell us, and that is to spread the gospel. We will be held responsible for failing in this command, yet greatly blessed if we carry it out.

But for the sake of argument, let us suppose it isn't necessary to have faith in Jesus to be saved. Let's say people can be saved by following whatever 'light' they have, as a popular saying goes. The major problem with that idea is that it would therefore be much better to never spread the gospel! Once people hear it they are obligated to accept it to be saved. But if they never hear it, then they are much more likely to be saved by sincerely following their own religion.

That of course is over simplified, but I hope to have gotten the point across. The fact remains that we are commanded to spread the gospel, and that salvation is only by hearing it and believing it (Rom. 10:17). Hence Paul's statement that the Gentiles were formerly "without hope".

Who is "you who were once far away from God"? The Calvinistic view holds that all the non-elect have a "totally depraved nature" (spirit), taking "the objects of God's wrath" to refer to them. Yet this passage refutes that because it speaks of those who are now saved as having formerly been the objects of God's wrath. In other words, it is the saved Gentiles who were the objects of wrath, not all those who were not picked for salvation in eternity past.

God has annulled the Law and made the two groups, Jews and Gentiles, into a new "person" who could come directly to God without a human mediator. He did this via the cross, which the tearing of the curtain in the Temple symbolized (see Mt. 27:51). There is no more separation (Gal. 3:28).

### **Verses 17–22**

The gospel is for all, the "near" and the "far" (Jews and Gentiles). Nobody is considered a foreigner or stranger anymore; all believers are fellow citizens and children of God with equal status. This "house" is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Jesus being the main cornerstone. The rest of us are being formed into a kind of temple, a spiritual building.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Verses 1–12**

The reason Paul is a prisoner at this time is because of the very thing he's been writing about here: the gospel is for everyone; the Gentiles are not excluded. God had entrusted Paul with making known his plans for this age, plans which God had revealed directly to Paul by revelation. It was something that had never been revealed before.

In spite of this, Paul considered himself the very lowest of the apostles. Yet this

served the purpose of making it all the more obvious that this was of God and not Paul. God was now revealing his ultimate plan of salvation via the church, an entity nobody saw coming. This sent a message to all the "rulers and authorities in heavenly places", that God is supreme and cannot be out-witted. Jesus' sacrifice and resurrection was the very epitome of all God's plans through the ages.

### **Verses 13–21**

For all of these reasons, Paul asks the people not to be discouraged by what he is currently suffering for the sake of the gospel. Instead, they should be proud of this suffering, because it will strengthen them and help them grow, giving them ever-increasing appreciation for the gift of God.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Verses 1–10**

Now he implores the people to live and act according to their understanding of the great things God has done for them. We are all of one Spirit, forming one Body, through one Gift. We have one Lord (master), one faith, one immersion (or anointing), one God and Father. But we should remember that our unity comes from this, and not from a false peace imposed externally.

What does it mean that Jesus "led prisoners"? There is much speculation, but the context doesn't give us much to go on. Likewise, what does it mean that "he also descended into the lower parts of the earth"? Again there is much speculation. People get astounding amounts of material out of these obscure statements. But certainly we'd all agree that Jesus came to the earth, which could be considered "lower parts" as compared to having "ascended".

Some claim it must mean he went into Sheol, but differ over exactly where and why. I think it's ridiculous to imagine what some say, that Jesus was tortured by Satan but escaped, or something to that effect. But a case can be made for saying Jesus went to the place of the dead and took out of there all the righteous people who had died before him. They could only now be taken to heaven since the Sacrifice had finally been made. But again, this is all speculation.

### **Verses 11–13**

This is one of the instances where Paul makes a list of spiritual gifts. I don't think any of the lists are meant to be exhaustive; that is, that these are the only gifts there are. He seems to be mentioning a few of them to give some idea of what the Spirit does within the body of believers.

Some also say that the order of gifts signifies importance or a hierarchy, but I don't see support for that in this context. All he's saying is that each person has a different job to do, and the ones he lists here happen to be the ones who build up others. These are not, as some imagine, "offices" or positions of domination, or any kind of clergy class over the "common people" (a phrase which implies that there are also special or privileged people). These people are gifted to nurture, not to oppress, dominate, rule over, or boss. They build up, not tear down.

### **Verses 14–16**

Shepherds guard and protect those that cannot protect themselves. When people are first saved, they are vulnerable and dependent. But if the shepherds do their jobs properly, these infants grow to adulthood, to the point where they eventually can become shepherds themselves. They are not to remain children perpetually. These tender ones are the people who must be treated tenderly.

A couple points are in order here.

One: there is no excuse for people to think they can shirk personal responsibility by deliberately remaining children. Many people have always been content to stay in the shadow of a preacher, as if they are exempt from all Paul has been talking about. We have the ridiculous situation of senior citizens being "taught" by young, inexperienced people who simply regurgitate the contents of the approved "quarterly"; we have masses of people sitting passively in pews while a public orator with the right worldly credentials lectures them "authoritatively". Instead, the elderly should be teaching the young, and the experienced should be teaching the newly born. And this is a spiritually determined, not by diplomas or seminaries.

Two: to "speak the truth in love" is not a club that, ironically, can be used to beat people who dare to express some righteous indignation when confronted by unbelievers or heretics. Paul is talking to shepherds guarding tender lambs. But when a wolf comes along, that same gentle shepherd is obligated to get nasty and use whatever means are necessary to remove the threat. It's a two-sided coin: protect the vulnerable, but beat off the hostile. This is what good shepherds do. But we see the "sheeple" biting the ankles of the few remaining good shepherds every time a voice is raised or an alarm sounded.

### **Verses 17–32**

Paul now implores the people to get busy and stop acting like unbelievers. Continuing to live in such a hard-hearted way will result in their falling prey to sin and vice. The more we push in the wrong direction, the easier it gets to keep sliding downward.

Instead, the whole idea of repentance is to change direction and go God's way. We must throw away all that drags us down and be renewed in truth and holiness. No more deceiving each other or losing control. We must stop nursing grudges and get over ourselves. Otherwise we "give the devil a foothold", something like a "key to the back door".

We must also stop being lazy, and I think we can apply that to growing spiritually as well as to providing for physical needs. And don't think that only certain words are considered by God to be "foul". In my many years in "church", I heard few "curse words" but boatloads of backbiting, slandering, tearing down, and improper judging. This is in stark contrast to "building up". Yet again, remember that we're talking about how believers are to treat each other. If someone teaches heresy or an unbeliever attacks, those are legitimate times for harsh words and judgment.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Verses 1–5**

Jesus is our example to follow; he sacrificed himself out of love for all people. The exact opposite are the typical lifestyles of the wicked in their self-indulgence and destruction. We should stay so far from all that, that people have no reason to even suspect us of doing those things.

Does verse 5 mean we can lose our salvation if we persist in these things? Not at all. Remember the overwhelming number of passages that teach the opposite. There are two ways to look at this verse. One, that Paul is referring to unbelievers, the people we are not to act like. Such will never have an inheritance as we do. Two, that Paul's use of "inheritance" here is talking about reward and not salvation. Either way, taken in context, it cannot be construed as putting doubt on the Deposit and Guarantee of our inheritance.

### **Verses 6–10**

We are warned to stay away from smooth talkers, people who are out to deceive and undermine our faith. We are of the Light and must not wallow in darkness anymore. Too often I see this scripture ignored. People who believe that all evangelism must begin with establishing friendship with unbelievers frequently go to the point of listening to their arguments. They are not well-grounded enough in the Bible to give a strong defense or to see the errors in the unbeliever's thinking. So error creeps in, and apostasy follows. Instead of leading the unbeliever to the Truth, these people follow the unbelievers to falsehood.

### Verses 11–14

Here we see a command to expose error. Many today think this is wrong and "negative". But to see evil and not report it is every bit as sinful as any other form of disobedience. As James put it, "So then, if you know the good you ought to do and don't do it, you sin." (James 4:17).

### Verses 15–20

All of this requires effort on our part to practice discernment. We need to pay attention and keep our eyes open, walking the narrow path and not turning aside. We need the Spirit's power to accomplish this. Notice that the scripture here does not say "never touch alcohol", but simply that we must not let it overcome us. The Spirit cannot work through people who fill themselves with mind-numbing substances. If there is any void in us, we must let the Spirit fill it instead. We can also keep a song in our hearts in praise to God, and share these with others.

Let's not get tripped up here over music styles. No particular form of music or method of producing it is either condemned or commanded. Whatever comes from a pure heart in praise of God is the point. The entire Bible never singles out any music or art form as being intrinsically evil.

### Verses 21–24

Continuing the theme of being filled with the Spirit, Paul commands mutual respect among all believers. This is the complete opposite of domination or assuming authority over others. The over-arching principle Paul teaches is the equality of all believers, Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female (Gal. 3:28).

We need to get the sense of the Greek here to avoid a time-honored misinterpretation of how wives relate to husbands:

"Be filled with the Spirit, while you are supporting one another out of respect for the Anointed One, wives, with your own husbands, as with the Lord. The man is the source of the woman just as the Anointed One is the source of the assembly. He himself is the protector of the body. Just as the assembly is a support for the Anointed One, so also let the wives be a support for their husbands in everything." (The Source)

The Greeks used the word "head" to refer to source or originator, not authority or master. For that, they used the word "heart" since they believed the heart was the true seat of the will and mind. So the proper meaning is much like our English phrase "the head of a river"; it most definitely does *not* mean "the head of a company"! Remember the context, which is about mutual submission and building each other up. Authority is not in view here at all.



### **Verses 25–33**

In contrast to the views of patriarchal society, Paul commands husbands to love and protect their wives. They must follow Jesus' example of self-sacrifice for the people's purity by treating their wives at least as well as they treat their own bodies. This means providing and caring for them, recognizing that the two of them are "one flesh".

Here is an interesting point that is frequently missed about this reference to Genesis: the man is to leave his parents and join to his wife! It is he who is to leave home and join to her, not the other way around. She is not absorbed into him, or made a mere appendage or slave. Instead, he unites with her and treats her like his own body. Those who love to appeal to Genesis to support a husband's "right" to dominate his wife suddenly run the other way when confronted with this truth. It doesn't fit their power scheme.

In what way does this symbolize "Christ and the church"? Paul already told us: it is Jesus who gave up his heavenly home to join with us, making us his very own Body, and treating us as his own family. He does not treat us harshly or demand our blind slavery, but instead nurtures us so that we give ourselves to him as he gave himself to us. We respect him as our "husband", not out of fear or legalism or any demands, but because we return the love he first showed to us. Husbands, take note! Do you represent Christ to your wives, or do you represent someone else?

## **Chapter Six**

### **Verses 1–9**

Finally, some general instructions to believers.

Children are to obey their parents, but parents are to treat their children properly, with Christian love and nurturing. Correction is done when necessary, but parents, remember the principle of the good shepherd: you're training them to be grown-ups someday, not perpetual dependents.

Like children, slaves too are told to obey. Is this an endorsement of slavery? No! It was a situation common at the time and Paul had to address the matter of how Christians in that situation should act. He was not sent to correct every social injustice, but to teach the young church how to behave. And we should also note that motive is of prime importance here. Whether slaves or modern employees, Christians must remember to "work for Jesus". Likewise, Christian employers (in a

parallel to parents) are to be kind and reasonable, not overly threatening. They should remember who their Master is!

Note that while children and slaves are to *obey*, wives are told to *submit*. The difference is that one is commanded and the other is voluntary. Jesus does not demand our obedience, but instead he appeals to us to return his love and show it by our faithfulness. In the same way, wives show their love by *choosing* to support their husbands. This all fits into the general rule of mutual submission.

### **Verses 10–17**

Again, our power to do all these things must come from God. The analogy of military armor Paul uses here indicates that our defenses come from God and not our own strength. We must not go out to battle naked! How many times Christians do this though, and wonder why they get hurt. "Putting on the armor" is not something to be taken lightly or done hastily.

We hear the Truth, the gospel, which gives us the righteousness of Jesus and not our own. But the shoes we must put on as a matter of study and learning. This is our preparation, and we dare not leave these shoes off or fail to tie them! We are to put these things on; they don't appear without effort. And we require a shield, which is firm trust in God. (Remember that bit about whether people who don't hear the gospel can be saved? We must truly trust him.) Last but not least is the Sword, the Bible. It is an offensive weapon and is meant to be used effectively. A soldier without training in how to use a sword is as useless as one who is trained but keeps the sword in its sheath. Don't "keep the faith" from others! Get the Sword, learn how to use it, and then keep it in your hand.

We are to then stand firm, not run and hide at the first sign of opposition. Most believers avoid conflict like the plague, but what kind of soldiers are those? And what kind of shepherds run away from the wolves? (A subtle hint is found in John 10:13!) Let's not be cowards but faithful soldiers who keep training for battle.

### **Verses 18–24**

Paul asks for prayer support in his own battles, for boldness and fearlessness. We all need this! He intends to send Tychikos to Ephesus to keep them up on his affairs and put their minds at ease about him. With a final blessing, Paul prays for peace over all the believers.