

## Prayers

### Opening prayer

Father God, sometimes the smallest of things have a powerful effect upon us all, for good or for ill. Help us repent of those small sins which lead us astray, such as ill-timed or unkind words, selfish behaviour or persistent negativity. Lead us to repentance and forgive us we pray; set our hearts free, and give us the will to show love to others through small things; a word or two, a smile, or an outstretched hand to help which says 'I care'. In this way, may we become like You and bear fruit for Your Kingdom. We ask this in Jesus Christ; AMEN

### Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: WATER

**1. For yourself**

*Pray about your health. Pray for God's blessing on your body mind and spirit, and ask the Lord to keep you fit and well*

**2. For your friends and family**

*Pray that those you love might give God the glory for their health, and pray that they will all honour the God who has made them*

**3. For the church and its work**

*Pray that your own church might become a stream of 'living water', and the means whereby God is able to move amongst people in your neighbourhood*

**4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)**

*Pray about the need for international co-operation in the matter of water supply. Pray also for the engineering companies responsible for piping water. Pray for God's blessing on the genuine efforts of many to bring water to people throughout the world. It is a very 'political' subject.*

### Meditation

We weep when we have fallen short and let ourselves down;  
We wish that we had learned our lessons long ago  
When we cannot later put things right.

We weep when we have failed and let our loved ones down;  
We wish that we had shown more love to them  
Because they mean so much to us.

We weep when we have been faithless and let our friends down;  
We wish that we had shown the courage and love  
That would have made a difference.

We weep when we have sinned and let our Saviour down;  
We wish that we had kept a stronger, firmer grip  
On the truths that Jesus taught us.

But do not fear.

Our weeping shows we know the penalties of waywardness;  
For truly contrite tears can open heavenly doors  
That lead to Him whose heart is love.

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## Bible Study

### Bible passage – Ephesians 3:7-13

<sup>7</sup> I have become a servant of this Gospel by the gift of God's grace, which was given to me through the working of His power. <sup>8</sup> As the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to preach to the Gentiles the limitless riches of Christ, <sup>9</sup> and to reveal to everyone the purpose of this mystery, which for past generations was hidden in God, who made all things.

<sup>10</sup> He did this so that through the church, the vast extent of God's wisdom should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly world, <sup>11</sup> according to the eternal plan he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord. <sup>12</sup> We have assurance in Him and the right to have access to God by faith in Him, <sup>13</sup> so I therefore ask you not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.

### Review

**Here, we read about the greatness of God's plan of salvation, which spans all time and is ultimately more important than anything else. Those who confess faith therefore need never be discouraged, for God has everything in His hands.**

In this passage, Paul boldly claims that the Gospel he has preached to the Ephesians has been given to him by God Himself (3:7), and he enthuses over this awesome revelation of the Gospel (3:8). He urges the Ephesians to appreciate the full significance what God is doing in their midst, because this is the first time in human history that God's eternal plan has been made available to all people (3:8,9). He also writes about the place of the church in this eternal plan of God (3:10,11), and he begs the Ephesians to think of what happens to them and to him in this light (3:12,13). Everything, including his own sufferings, are for the glory of God who has done such great things!

Towering above this whole passage is Paul's appreciation of the sheer magnitude of God's eternal plan and the limitless resources of God's favour and grace. He speaks of this first when describing his sense of amazement that he should be given the task of taking the Gospel message to the Gentiles (3:7,8), but goes on to describe God's plan with superlatives. He speaks of the '*limitless riches of Christ*' (3:8), and after this, the '*vast extent of God's wisdom*' (3:10).

People in every generation have their own ways of describing greatness, and these words may not convey the same ideas today as once they did. But we should pay attention to what Paul says, for when he describes the riches of Christ as '*limitless*', he means that God's love and saving grace are sufficient for all. There is enough salvation for every soul who comes to Him in faith, from every place and from every time on the planet. Then, when he talks of the '*vast extent of God's Wisdom*', he means that God's plan, together with all the features of His saving grace are huge, and beyond our understanding. They are certainly sufficient for our needs, and if we have faith in God, then we touch into this enormous potential and this comprehensive plan for the whole world.

In Paul's day, just as they do in every generation, people tended to live their own lives. Sometimes out of a need to be secure, people prefer to live with what is familiar and shun the wider world beyond their immediate experience. The message Paul brings us here is that as servants of Christ, God's people become a part of God's great salvation plan for the whole world, and they should therefore see all things in this light. He was able to rise above his sufferings for the sake of the Gospel, and he invites everyone of faith who reads God's Word to do the same.

Writing this, Paul was aware of the great divisions between the Jewish world and the Gentile world, a division that Christ came to break down (3:6). We cannot read Ephesians and ignore the frequent references to Jew and Gentile (here in verse 8), for Paul, himself a Jew, had been led to be an '*apostle for the Gentiles*', as he confesses here in verse 8. For this reason, Paul strove throughout his ministry to keep Jewish and Gentile Christians together in the one church. It was an exacting task, and the story of his journey of faith from the Jewish synagogue to Gentile homes is set out wonderfully in the book of Acts.

As far as Paul was concerned, God was big enough to embrace both peoples within His salvation. We therefore should believe that God is able to include every race and kind of people in His salvation plan. For Him there is no division between Black and White churches, between Protestant and Catholic, and so much more. Moreover, God wants this to be made known to the '*rulers and authorities in heavenly places*' (3:10), so that these heavenly powers can know that God is at work and drawing all things to their conclusion in

Christ. When we maintain our divisions, for whatever earthly reason, we prevent God doing His heavenly work of salvation and reconciliation.

Now, our passage is dominated by the contrast between Paul's humility and the glorious nature of the Gospel. On the one hand he speaks in superlative terms of the Gospel, but confesses his lowly status as a 'servant' of the Gospel (3:7), indeed '*the very least of the saints*' (3:8). He says something similar in two other letters (1 Cor. 15:9 and 1 Tim 1:15). Some have accused Paul of too grandiose a sense of his own importance due to the forthright dogmatic instructions found in his letters, but this is a hard judgement. Paul always justifies what he says, and passes on what has been revealed to him, as here (3:7f.). However, God had called him to preach nothing less than His universal plan of salvation for all people and the whole world, and it is extraordinary that God should give this task to a man who had opposed the Gospel, as Paul did before he was converted. But that is the nature of God's grace and the reason why it is so powerful. God transforms His enemies into His advocates.

There is so much at stake, for just as there is only one God who created the world, there is only one Gospel of salvation that makes peace with God and this passage captures the magnitude of this. Paul speaks about a 'mystery', hidden 'in God' since the beginning of creation (3:9). So the salvation offered to us in Christ is no accident of history, it is intended by God, and the Christian preacher today must copy Paul by preaching this great Gospel as a humble servant, and all of us should stand in awe of what God is doing in our midst.

## Going Deeper

- Notes on the translation of the passage
- A comparison between this passage and 1 Corinthians 15:9
- Wisdom, Creation, God's mystery and plan
- The role of the church in God's plan
- Paul's appeal to the Ephesians in verse 13

### Notes on the translation of the passage

- V9** *'to reveal to everyone'* For complex reasons, it is not at all certain that the word 'everyone' is part of the original text. However, I have left the word in because the literary evidence for its presence is 50/50, but its inclusion fits the theological theme of the passage which is the universal message of the Gospel.
- V9** *'the purpose of this mystery'* The word 'purpose' translates the Greek 'oikonomia', generally meaning a task or work to be done. In this sentence, 'purpose' indicates the intent of God to do something through revealing the mystery of His grace. Other versions of the Bible have 'the administration of this mystery', or 'the plan of the mystery', and it is difficult to understand what this means in English.
- V9** *'who created all things'* If you read the 'Authorised Version', you will find that it adds here the words 'through Jesus Christ'. There is no doubt that God made the world through Jesus Christ, because other texts with Scripture say this (see John 1:1f., for example), however, none of the early Greek manuscripts of the New Testament contain these words. They appear to be an unexplained addition to the Latin 'received text' used by the translators of the Authorised version.
- V10** *'the vast extent of God's wisdom'* This phrase is difficult to translate, and many Bible versions say 'the manifold wisdom of God'. The Greek word says, literally, 'the many various forms of God's wisdom', so I think it best to try and convey the idea not so much of variety but the sheer range and extent of His wisdom. God's wisdom is vast, but it is not varied in the sense of being different for different people or circumstances, and the translation given here avoids this implication.
- V12** *'We have assurance in Him ...'* The beginning of this sentence is difficult to translate because most of this text is but one sentence in Greek, and it does not read well in English. The Greek reads 'in whom we have the assurance ...', but this translation allows us to break the sentence at the end of verse 11 and still make sense of verse 12.

### A comparison between this passage and 1 Corinthians 15:9 (and 1 Tim 1:15)

At the beginning of this passage, Paul describes being a 'servant of this Gospel' (3:7) and '*the very least of all the saints*' (3:8). What he says here is similar to what is found in two other letters, and these are quoted below:

*Last of all he appeared also to me, as to one of untimely birth. For I am the least of the apostles, one who is not worthy to be called an apostle because I persecuted the church of God. But I am what I am by the grace of God (1 Corinthians 15:8-10)*

*Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. (1 Timothy 1:15)*

It is important to look at these two texts because they indicate that Paul was inclined to make comments about his own sense of worthlessness from time to time (you can find other examples in other letters). Though he did this because he undoubtedly felt the pain of one who had been a former persecutor, he also knew that this personal testimony had a purpose. It enabled him to appeal to almost anyone to receive the Gospel, for if he could receive it as a fierce opponent of Jesus, then anyone could. Saying this also enabled Paul to appeal to his readers not to elevate him too highly. There are comments in Peter's second letter, even in the early days of the church, that the writings of Paul were regarded as God's Word (2 Peter 3:15,16). It was therefore essential for Paul to show that he was no more or less of a saint than anyone else.

There is one other important reason for looking at this confession of Paul. Literary analysts have examined the manner in which Paul describes himself as 'a servant of the Gospel', and they say that it is not as self deprecating as similar examples in other letters. This has been taken as evidence that Paul did not write the letter to the Ephesians. This is an important point of issue in the scholarly world, and I would suggest that the many different comments Paul makes about himself in his letters shows simply that he spoke about himself according to the train of thought in each letter. To draw such a conclusion is rather presumptuous.

### **Wisdom, Creation, God's mystery and plan**

As Paul began to describe the full extent of the Gospel in verses 9, 10 and 11, he used all these four words as an Old Testament scholar who knew Scriptures well. 'Wisdom' was a property of God, present at Creation (according to Proverbs 8:22-31), describing the vast knowledge of God in governing all history and all human activity and interaction. This is why the book of Proverbs embraces the entire range of human understanding of the world, and of family and social relationships. The logic of the book of Wisdom is simple, God has made everything that exists, so we must go to Him to understand both the world in which we live and also how we relate to it individually and how we relate to each other. We also gain knowledge about ourselves by accessing the wisdom of God.

I write about this because wisdom is not spoken of much today, but it is an important aspect of God's nature and His salvation plan. Here in this passage, Paul speaks of the salvation plan of God as a revelation of God's mysterious wisdom in all its 'vast extent' (3:10); it was hidden in Old Testament times and has now been revealed in Christ. Because of this, Paul describes God's plan of salvation as universal; he says that God created 'all things' (3:9), and he talks about salvation as the 'limitless riches of Christ' (3:8). Salvation starts in the heart of God at Creation, and it is now the responsibility of God's people on earth to proclaim it universally.

It is therefore a great tragedy that Christians are divided about what this all means today. A significant number of Christians believe that God's plan of salvation is only relevant to those He has pre-determined and already chosen to be saved. The idea is derived from two New Testament texts that speak about God 'choosing beforehand' those who will do His will (Romans 8:29,30 and Ephesians 1:5,11). These two texts speak exclusively about the Christians of the early church who pioneered the faith of Jesus Christ and took it into the world, and it is very sad that they have been used to suggest that God in Christ has only died to save certain people, and not others. This text and many others throughout the Bible, make it clear that God's plan of salvation is universal and available to all. The fact that some do not accept God's offer is a tragedy, and scripture does not say that everyone will be saved; nevertheless, the offer of salvation is open to all. This is what is meant by the 'limitless riches of Christ' (3:8)

### **The role of the church in God's plan**

In the New Testament, there are many places where the church is mentioned, meaning the gathered people of God who have responded to Christ by faith. The word is used mostly in an incidental way, where Paul, for example, greets the 'church at Corinth' (1 Cor. 1:2). There are not many scriptures that speak about the church in depth, what it is, or how it should function. One exception is 1 Corinthians 12 and 14, which define the church as the 'body of Christ' and comment on some practices of church worship. This text is another exception, because here, Paul describes the church as being responsible for proclaiming this message of salvation not just to other people on earth, but to 'the authorities in the heavenly world' (3:10), and 'according to the plan He has carried out in Christ Jesus' (3:11).

What does this mean? We are used to the idea that the church should be involved in proclaiming the Gospel by word and deed, worshipping God and serving others, but Paul speaks here of what appears to be a spiritual rather than an earthly task. When Paul wrote this letter, the 'rulers and authorities of this world' were commonly thought to be the powers that ruled what happened on earth through empires, nations and governments. Paul and the early Christians would not accept that the heavens contained any other 'gods' (as other people of their day believed), they only believed that there were other rulers and authorities, some of which were evil and demonic, and these affected what happened on earth. It is easy to turn up our noses at such ideas, but we should be careful. It is all too evident that evil exists even today, when nations,

organisations and individuals seem so capable of evils such as genocide or monstrous fraud affecting the life of everyone on the planet, and more.

The simple consequence of this text is this. We must accept that although the church has a clear obligation to announce the Gospel on earth, it must also do heavenly battle in the name of the Gospel against evil. We must fight against powers of darkness that affect our world in whatever way we chose to define them or speak about them.

### **Paul's appeal to the Ephesians in verse 13**

At the very end of our passage, Paul asks his readers '*not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you ...*' (3:13). What does this mean? We know from other letters of Paul that he endure great suffering whilst travelling around the Roman Empire on his various missions (see 2 Cor 6:4f. and chapter 11), and Paul was also in prison when he wrote this letter (3:1, 4:1). Paul did not advocate seeking pain suffering or difficulty, but he did accept the teaching of Christ that His disciples would suffer for the Kingdom (Matthew 5:11f. etc.). For him, the endurance of suffering was evidence of the glory of God at work in the world!

Yet still, many Christians fall when the subject of suffering comes up. Some believe that with faith, suffering will cease because the work of Christ heals the soul and brings peace; but the truth is that Christ does indeed heal the soul and bring peace but this does not stop anyone suffering in this world. Some preach a Gospel of prosperity, which says that if you do what God requires, He will give you blessings on earth; but the truth is that the Gospel promises eternal blessings and God's help to deal with this life.

None of us can escape the reality of life, and suffering is a part of it. When we suffer for our faith, then like Paul, we should encourage each other because this suffering is a sharing in Christ's glory.

## **Discipleship**

### **Application**

This passage of scripture contains a great many treasures. For example, the idea of being a servant of the Gospel (found in verse 7) is important, because the Greek word for 'servant' also means 'minister'. With this in mind, our passage identifies the preaching of the Gospel, however it is done, as the primary task of one who would be a 'minister of the Gospel'. Then, towards the end of our passage, verse 12 speaks about the 'assurance' we may have that we are saved (sometimes translated 'boldness'). Today, when challenged, many Christians have considerable doubts about aspects of faith, and some will quickly slip away from the church if things do not work out as they would like, or suffering comes. If the church fosters such faith then it fails in its task, for true faith is faith with assurance. We do not come to Christ to get spiritual help for a good life, we come to Christ to be saved for all eternity, and by His grace, God grants that we may know this with certainty. When this happens, we surely know it!

This passage of scripture therefore challenges God's people to hold on to and preach a full Gospel with a universal message of God's grace. It also tells us to make this Gospel effective not just on earth, but in the heavens. How do we do this? To a certain extent, what we do on earth has eternal and heavenly consequences, but I believe that here, Paul means more than this. He expects us to battle prayerfully and practically against the evils of our day that dominate the lives of people throughout the world, whatever their origin, perhaps form politics, war or the problems of our planetary environment.

We should never lose sight of the one great theme of this passage, however, which is the greatness of God's grace both in saving us and in using us to proclaim His Kingdom both on earth and in heaven. We offer the whole of our lives in response to this grace of Christ.

### **Questions for groups**

1. Discuss how people become preachers of the Gospel today, and whether those who preach in our pulpits do indeed preach the Gospel.
2. What does the eternal plan of God's salvation mean to you? Is it possible for any one of us to grasp the full extent of God's plan?
3. What is 'assurance', and how do we find it if we are uncertain and lack confidence in our faith?

### **Discipleship challenges**

- *Pray, and explore the idea of the church's responsibility to declare the Gospel 'in heavenly world' (3:10). How can anyone be effective in such witness and testimony?*
  - *Go through the text and write down the different theme of faith you can find within it. Pray about each one and consider how they affect you and how you live your life.*
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## **Final Prayer**

All glory to You, God of all joy and happiness. Bless us today in the good things of life, and help us overcome the problems of suffering and be confident in Your love. May we radiate the happiness of those who are at peace with themselves and with You, and may we declare with every part of our being that You are the One who 'makes the difference' to our lives! AMEN

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