

EPHESIANS,
PHILIPPIANS,
COLOSSIANS AND
PHILEMON

for

EVERYONE

20TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION WITH STUDY GUIDE

N. T.
WRIGHT

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NEW TESTAMENT FOR EVERYONE
20TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION WITH STUDY GUIDE

N. T. Wright

Matthew for Everyone, Part 1

Matthew for Everyone, Part 2

Mark for Everyone

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John for Everyone, Part 1

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Acts for Everyone, Part 1

Acts for Everyone, Part 2

Romans for Everyone, Part 1

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1 Corinthians for Everyone

2 Corinthians for Everyone

Galatians and Thessalonians for Everyone

Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon for Everyone

1 and 2 Timothy and Titus for Everyone

Hebrews for Everyone

James, Peter, John and Judah for Everyone

Revelation for Everyone

*For
Julian and Miranda
remembering the great mystery
of Christ and the Church
(Ephesians 5.31–32)*

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INTRODUCTION TO THE ANNIVERSARY EDITION

It took me ten years, but I'm glad I did it. Writing a guide to the books of the New Testament felt at times like trying to climb all the Scottish mountains in quick succession. But the views from the tops were amazing, and discovering new pathways up and down was very rewarding as well. The real reward, though, has come in the messages I've received from around the world, telling me that the books have been helpful and encouraging, opening up new and unexpected vistas.

Perhaps I should say that this series wasn't designed to help with sermon preparation, though many preachers have confessed to me that they've used it that way. The books were meant, as their title suggests, for everyone, particularly for people who would never dream of picking up an academic commentary but who nevertheless want to dig a little deeper.

The New Testament seems intended to provoke all readers, at whatever stage, to fresh thought, understanding and practice. For that, we all need explanation, advice and encouragement. I'm glad these books seem to have had that effect, and I'm delighted that they are now available with study guides in these new editions.

N. T. Wright
2022

INTRODUCTION

On the very first occasion when someone stood up in public to tell people about Jesus, he made it very clear: this message is for *everyone*.

It was a great day – sometimes called the birthday of the church. The great wind of God’s spirit had swept through Jesus’ followers and filled them with a new joy and a sense of God’s presence and power. Their leader, Peter, who only a few weeks before had been crying like a baby because he’d lied and cursed and denied even knowing Jesus, found himself on his feet explaining to a huge crowd that something had happened which had changed the world for ever. What God had done for him, Peter, he was beginning to do for the whole world: new life, forgiveness, new hope and power were opening up like spring flowers after a long winter. A new age had begun in which the living God was going to do new things in the world – beginning then and there with the individuals who were listening to him. ‘This promise is for *you*,’ he said, ‘and for your children, and for everyone who is far away’ (Acts 2.39). It wasn’t just for the person standing next to you. It was for everyone.

Within a remarkably short time this came true to such an extent that the young movement spread throughout much of the known world. And one way in which the *everyone* promise worked out was through the writings of the early Christian leaders. These short works – mostly letters and stories about Jesus – were widely circulated and eagerly read. They were never intended for either a religious or intellectual elite. From the very beginning they were meant for everyone.

That is as true today as it was then. Of course, it matters that some people give time and care to the historical evidence, the meaning of the original words (the early Christians wrote in Greek), and the exact and particular force of what different writers were saying about God, Jesus, the world and themselves. This series is based quite closely on that sort of work. But the point of it all is that the message can get out to everyone, especially to people who wouldn’t normally read a book with footnotes and Greek words in it. That’s the sort of person for whom these books are written. And that’s why there’s a glossary, in the back, of the key words that you can’t really get along without, with a simple description of what they mean. Whenever you see a word in **bold type** in the text, you can go to the back and remind yourself what’s going on.

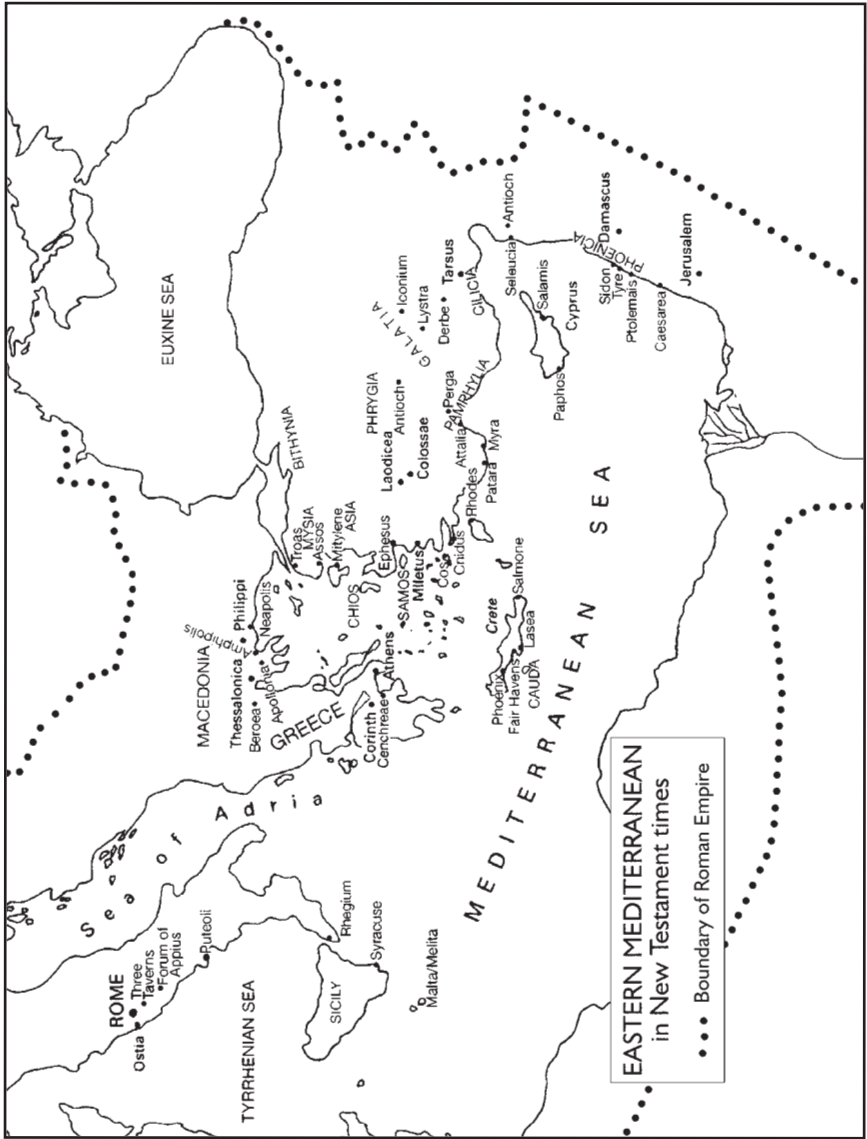
INTRODUCTION

There are of course many translations of the New Testament available today. The one I offer here is designed for the same kind of reader: one who mightn't necessarily understand the more formal, sometimes even ponderous, tones of some of the standard ones. I have tried naturally, to keep as close to the original as I can. But my main aim has been to be sure that the words can speak not just to some people, but to everyone.

Let me add a note about the translation the reader will find here of the Greek word *Christos*. Most translations simply say 'Christ', but most modern English speakers assume that that word is simply a proper name (as though 'Jesus' were Jesus' 'Christian' name and 'Christ' were his 'surname'). For all sorts of reasons, I disagree; so I have experimented not only with 'Messiah' (which is what the word literally means) but sometimes, too, with 'King'.

This book includes the four short letters Paul wrote from prison: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon. His own personal circumstances make these especially poignant, and give us a portrait of a man facing huge difficulties and hardships and coming through with his faith and hope unscathed. But what he has to say to the young churches – and, in the case of Philemon, to one man facing a hugely difficult moral dilemma – is even more impressive. Already, within thirty years of Jesus' death and resurrection, Paul has worked out a wonderful, many-coloured picture of what Jesus achieved, of God's worldwide plan, and of how it all works out in the lives of ordinary people. So here they are: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon for everyone!

Tom Wright



EPHESIANS

EPHESIANS 1.1–3

Blessings on the Sovereign God!

¹From Paul, one of Messiah Jesus' apostles through God's purpose, to the holy ones in Ephesus who are also loyal believers in Messiah Jesus: ²may God our father and the Lord Jesus, the Messiah, give you grace and peace!

³Let us bless God, the father of our Lord Jesus, the Messiah! He has blessed us in the Messiah with every spirit-inspired blessing in the heavenly realm.

The most successful tourist attraction to appear in London in recent years is the 'London Eye'. From a distance it looks like a giant Ferris wheel, but this is no fun-fair ride. For a start, it's far, far bigger: it rises to 450 feet above the River Thames. Its 32 capsules can each hold 20 people, and it takes them half an hour to rotate the full circle. Plenty of time to have a wonderful view of all central London, with its historic buildings and palaces, its cathedrals and abbeys, its parks and gardens, with Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament in the foreground. The London Eye is, in fact, not only a wonderful sight in itself, visible from many points in the capital. It is the place from which you can get the best possible view of London. To do any better, you'd have to go up in an aeroplane, and indeed it is operated and run by one of the airline companies.

The letter to the Ephesians stands in relation to the rest of Paul's letters rather like the London Eye. It isn't the longest or fullest of his writings, but it offers a breathtaking view of the entire landscape. From here, as the wheel turns, you get a bird's-eye view of one theme after another within early Christian reflection: God, the world, Jesus, the church, the means of salvation, Christian behaviour, marriage and the family, and spiritual warfare. Like someone used to strolling around London and now suddenly able to see familiar places from unfamiliar angles – and to see more easily how they relate to each other within the city as a whole – the reader who comes to Ephesians after reading the rest of Paul will get a new angle on the way in which his thinking holds together.

Two questions need to be looked at as we begin. First, was the letter really by Paul himself? Many careful scholars have doubted it. It's clear that some of it is written in quite a formal way, without the rapid-fire, almost street-level debating style Paul uses in some of the other letters. On the other hand, some scholars have established their image of Paul on the basis of a particular way of understanding Romans and Galatians, and have then felt that Ephesians can't be by the same person,

because it doesn't support that point of view. Some have taken a compromise position, and said that though Paul may not actually have written it himself, it may have been written by an assistant under his direction. My own view, which I will follow in going through the letter here, is that, once we understand Paul's thought in the way I think we should, there is no difficulty about holding together what he says here with what he says in the other letters. The writing style is indeed a little different, but Paul wouldn't be the first or the last writer to use different styles when different occasions demand it.

The second point follows from this: who was the letter really addressed to? This question comes up in the very first verse of the letter, because in three of the best and earliest manuscripts of Paul we possess (from the third and fourth centuries) the words 'in Ephesus' are missing.

All sorts of theories have been suggested to explain this. The best, I think, is that this letter was originally intended as a circular to various churches in the Ephesus area. It was written while Paul was in prison, then taken round here and there. A copy might well have remained in the possession of the church in Ephesus, and someone later on might have assumed that it was written *to* Ephesus rather than from there.

Since in Colossians – which is very similar to Ephesians in many ways – Paul says that he's sending a letter to Laodicea which will be passed on to them, it's clear he did indeed sometimes write circular letters. The present letter might even be that 'letter to Laodicea', though we can't now be sure of that. And at the start of chapter 3 of the present letter, Paul seems to be talking to various people who don't know him and his work first-hand – which would hardly have applied in Ephesus itself, where he spent a long time. If we suppose that he intended the letter to go to several young churches within a hundred miles or so of Ephesus, we shan't go far wrong.

Most of Paul's letters start, after the initial greeting, by telling the church what he's praying for when he thinks of them. He will come to that later on in this first chapter (verses 15–23). But pride of place in the opening of this letter goes to a long and quite formal prayer of thanks and praise to God. This opening prayer lasts, in fact, from verse 3 all the way to verse 14. Though we can break it up into quite short sentences (and here we've broken it into two separate sections) it is really a continuous stream of worship, and we should think of it like that. Before Paul will even come to a report of his specific prayers, he establishes what is after all the appropriate context for all Christian prayer, reflection and exhortation: the worship and adoration of the God who has lavished his love upon us.

Who is this God, then? Why is he to be worshipped and adored in this way?

Paul's answer, which he never gets tired of repeating and which we should never take for granted as we hear it, is that the true God, who deserves and should receive our glad worship, is the father of the Lord Jesus, the king, the **Messiah**. He is not the same as the gods and goddesses of the pagan world. He isn't just a divine force, a vague influence or energy loosely known as 'the sacred'. He is the God who made the world, and who has now made himself known in and through Jesus. As far as Paul is concerned, any picture of God which doesn't now have Jesus in the middle of it is a distortion or a downright fabrication.

The entire prayer, all eleven verses of it, is woven through and through with the story of what God has done in Jesus the Messiah. He has blessed us in the king (verse 3); he chose us in him (verse 4), foreordained us through him (verse 5), poured grace on us in him (verse 6), gave us redemption in him (verse 7), set out his plan in him (verse 9), intending to sum up everything in him (verse 10). We have obtained our inheritance in him (verse 11), because we have set our hope on him (verse 12), and have been sealed in him with the **spirit** as the guarantee of what is to come (verses 13–14).

We shall look at all this in more detail in the next section. But what strikes us most about this astonishing bird's-eye view of the whole divine plan of salvation is the way in which Paul, almost relentlessly, sees that everything the one God has done he has done in and through Jesus the Messiah.

In particular, he has acted *for us* 'in him'. When Paul speaks of us as being 'in **Christ**' (I have used 'Christ', 'king' and 'Messiah' almost interchangeably, to bring out his full meaning), the centre of what he means is that, as in some Jewish thought, the king represents his people, so that what happens to him happens to them, and what is true of him is true of them. Think of David fighting Goliath (1 Samuel 17). David was *representing* Israel; he had already been anointed as king, and it wasn't long after his victory before people realized that he was the one who would lead Israel into God's future. So with us: Jesus has won the decisive victory over the oldest and darkest enemy of all, and if we are 'in him', 'in the king', 'in Christ', we shall discover step by step what that means.

Above all, as we do so, we learn to worship the God who has done it all 'in him'. As we read Ephesians today, to be strengthened and encouraged as Christians for the new tasks that lie ahead, we should remember that all genuine Christian life and action flows out of worship. True worship of the true God cannot help telling and retelling,

with joy and amazement, the story of what this God has done in Jesus the Messiah. Enjoy the view. You won't get a better one.

EPHESIANS 1.4–10

The Choice and the Plan

⁴He chose us in him before the world was made, so as to be holy and irreproachable before him in love. ⁵He foreordained us for himself, to be adopted as sons and daughters through Jesus the Messiah. That's how he wanted it, and that's what gave him delight, ⁶so that the glory of his grace, the grace he poured on us in his beloved one, might receive its due praise.

⁷In the Messiah, and through his blood, we have deliverance – that is, our sins have been forgiven – through the wealth of his grace ⁸which he lavished on us. Yes, with all wisdom and insight ⁹he has made known to us the secret of his purpose, just as he wanted it to be and set it forward in him ¹⁰as a blueprint for when the time was ripe. His plan was to sum up the whole cosmos in the Messiah – yes, everything in heaven and on earth, in him.

Have you noticed how sometimes you have a story in the back of your mind which keeps peeping out even when you're talking about something else?

Imagine you've come back from work and the train has been late again. You stood for half an hour on the station platform getting cold and cross. Then when it arrived it was so full of people you had to stand, uncomfortably, all the way home.

But when you tell your family about the trip you find you're also telling them a larger story. Everybody knows that the trains aren't running properly because the present government has allowed them to get worse and worse so that they can have an excuse to introduce a new scheme of their own. But there's an election coming soon, and then you'll be able to vote out this government and put in another one that might at last get you a decent train service.

So as you talk about your anger over this evening's train ride, you are talking as well about your anger with the present government. And as you talk about how things could be better with the train you normally catch, you are talking as well about how good things are going to be with the new government. There is a larger framework, a larger story, within which your own smaller stories become more interesting and important.

Paul's great prayer at the opening of this letter is a celebration of the larger story within which every single Christian story – every story of individual conversion, **faith**, spiritual life, obedience and hope – is set.

Only by understanding and celebrating the larger story can we hope to understand everything that's going on in our own smaller stories, and so observe God at work in and through our own lives.

The prayer itself falls into three sections, though each one is tied so closely to the others, and overlaid with so much praise and celebration, that sometimes it's difficult to see what's going on. Verses 4–6 are the first paragraph, following the introductory word of praise in verse 3. Verses 7–10 are the second, and verses 11–14 round the prayer off. Let's look at them in turn.

Verses 4–6 celebrate the fact that God's people in the **Messiah** are *chosen by grace*. This is, perhaps, the most mysterious thing of all. God, the creator, 'chose us in him', that is, in the king, 'before the world was made'; and he 'foreordained us for himself'.

Many people, including many devout Christians, have found this shocking, or even unbelievable. How can God choose some and not others? How can being a follower of Jesus Christ be a matter of God's prior decision, overriding any decision or freedom of our own?

Various answers can be given to this. We have to be careful here. Paul emphasizes throughout this paragraph that everything we have in **Christ** is a gift of God's grace; and in the next chapter he will declare that before this grace reached down to us we were 'dead', and needing to be 'made alive' (2.5). We couldn't lift a finger to help ourselves; the rescue we needed had to come from God's side. That's one of the things this opening section is celebrating.

The second thing, which is often missed in discussions of this point, is that our salvation in Christ is a vital stage, but only a stage, on the way to the much larger purpose of God. God's plan is for the whole cosmos, the entire universe; his choosing and calling of us, and his shaping and directing of us in the Messiah, are somehow connected with that larger intention. How this works out we shall see a little later. But the point is that we aren't chosen for our own sake, but for the sake of what God wants to accomplish through us.

This alerts us to the other hidden story which Paul is telling all through this great prayer. It is the story of the **Exodus** from Egypt. God chose Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to be the bearers of his promised salvation for the world – the rescue of the whole cosmos, humankind especially, from the sin and death that had come about through human rebellion. When Paul says that God chose *us* 'in Christ' – the 'us' here being the whole company of Christians, Jews and **Gentiles** alike – he is saying that those who believe in Jesus are now part of the fulfilment of that ancient purpose.

But the story, of course, doesn't stop there. In verses 7–10 Paul tells the story of the cross of Jesus in such a way that we can hear, underneath

it, the ancient Jewish story of Passover. Passover was the night when the angel of death came through the land of Egypt, and the blood of the lamb sprinkled on the doorposts rescued the Israelites from the judgment that would otherwise have fallen on them. The word often used for that moment was ‘redemption’ or ‘deliverance’: it was the time when God went to Egypt and ‘bought’ for himself the people that had been enslaved there. Now, again in fulfilment of the old story, the true ‘redemption’ has occurred. Forgiveness of sins is the real ‘deliverance’ from the real slavemaster. And it’s been accomplished through the sacrificial blood of Jesus.

Telling the story like this – the story of Jesus the Messiah, and the meaning of his death, told in such a way as to bring out the fact that it’s the fulfilment of the Exodus story – is a classic Jewish way of celebrating the goodness of God. Worship, for Christians, will almost always involve *telling the story* of what God has done in and through Jesus. From the beginning, such storytelling built on the stories of God’s earlier actions on Israel’s behalf. The prayer will now conclude by moving forwards from the Christian version of the Exodus to the Christian version of the promised land.

Take some time, as you ponder Paul’s prayer, to reflect on what it meant for him, in prison, to write in praise of the God who has set us free. Then open your heart in prayer on behalf of those who today still long that what God did in Christ might become a reality in their daily lives.

EPHESIANS 1.11–14

The Inheritance and the Spirit

¹¹In him we have received the inheritance! We were foreordained to this, following the intention of the one who does all things in accordance with the counsel of his purpose. ¹²This was so that we, we who first hoped in the Messiah, might live for the praise of his glory. ¹³In him you too, who heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed it – in him you were marked out with the spirit of promise, the holy one. ¹⁴The spirit is the guarantee of our inheritance, until the time when the people who are God’s special possession are finally reclaimed and freed. This, too, is for the praise of his glory.

Not far from where I was born there is an ancient castle. It stands imposingly, high above the banks of a river, defying anyone to attack it. These days, the likely attacks come from bank managers and tax-collectors rather than marauding raiders; so the owners have taken

steps to use it profitably. The castle has become a wonderful spot for tourists to visit – and for movies to be made. Many historical films have included it, at least in the background. Part of the famous Harry Potter film series was shot there.

It is still, though, a family home. The same family – one of Britain's ancient noble lines – has lived there for many centuries. It has been handed on from father to son. Or, in some cases, from brother to brother. Not long ago, the Duke who lived there died quite suddenly, in early middle age, and had no son or daughter to inherit. In a flash, his brother found himself thrown into the spotlight. All unexpectedly, he had received an inheritance which changed his life for ever.

He and his wife rose to the occasion. If they were going to have an inheritance like that, it was worth doing something with it. As I write, plans are being put into effect to make the castle gardens among the most spectacular in the country.

These days, an inheritance is often simply money – or something that can quickly be turned into money. But very often in the ancient world, and particularly in the Jewish world, an 'inheritance' consisted, like the castle and its grounds, of land that was not to be got rid of.

The basic inheritance that God had promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was the land of Canaan. All the time that the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt, this was the hope that kept them going: the hope that, whatever the turns and twists of the plot in the long-running story, God himself would eventually give them the 'inheritance': not a gift of cash, but the ideal land, the land flowing with milk and honey.

Part of the meaning of the **Exodus**, therefore, was that they were now free to set off and go to claim their inheritance. They wandered in the wilderness for 40 years, led this way and that by the pillar of cloud by day and fire by night. The presence of the Holy One in their midst was dangerous – you would be foolish to grumble or rebel, as some of them found to their cost – but it was the guarantee that they would get there in the end. And they did.

Now Paul tells this part of the story over again, as the conclusion of his long opening act of worship and praise. Only this time, of course, it's the new Exodus, the new inheritance and the new wilderness wandering. As often in his writings, he sees the church in the **present age** as doing again what Israel did in the desert: coming out of the slavery of sin through God's great action in Jesus the **Messiah**, and on the way to the new promised land.

But what is this new promised land? What is the promised inheritance?

The standard Christian answer for many years and in many traditions has been: '**Heaven**'. Heaven, it has been thought, is the place to

which we are going. Great books like John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* have been written in which the happy ending, rather than an inheritance suddenly received from a relative, is the hero reaching the end of this worldly life and going off to share the life of heaven. But that isn't what Paul says, here or elsewhere.

The inheritance he has in mind, so it appears from the present passage and the whole chapter, is the whole world, when it's been renewed by a fresh act of God's power and love. Paul has already said in verse 10 that God's plan in the Messiah is to sum up everything in heaven and earth. God, after all, is the creator; he has no interest in leaving earth to rot and making do for all eternity with only one half of the original creation. God intends to flood the whole cosmos, heaven and earth together, with his presence and grace, and when that happens the new world that results, in which Jesus himself will be the central figure, is to be the 'inheritance' for which Jesus' people are longing.

At the moment, therefore, the people who in this life have come to know and trust God in Jesus are to be the signs to the rest of the world that this glorious future is on the way. Equally, the sign that they themselves have received which guarantees them their future is the **holy spirit**. The spirit is to the Christian and the church what the cloud and fire were in the wilderness: the powerful, personal presence of the living God, holy and not to be taken lightly, leading and guiding the often muddled and rebellious people to their inheritance.

But the spirit is more than just a leader and guide. The spirit is actually part of the promised inheritance, because the spirit is God's own presence, which in the new world will be fully and personally with us for ever. (That's why, in some New Testament visions of the future, such as Revelation 21, heaven and earth are joined together, so that 'the dwelling of God is with humans'.) The spirit marks us out, stamps us with God's official seal, as the people in the present who are guaranteed to inherit God's new world.

We see this in verse 14 in particular. The word Paul uses for 'guarantee' here is a word used at the time in legal or commercial transactions. Suppose I wanted to buy a plot of land from you, valued at 10,000 dollars. We might agree that I would pay you the first 1,000 dollars as a 'down payment', guaranteeing the full sum to come in the future when the details were complete. The spirit is the 'down payment': part of the promised future, coming forwards to meet us in the present.

As this commercial metaphor takes over in verse 14 (the cheerful mixing of metaphors is, I think, one of several signs that this is indeed Paul's work), the implication is that we have placed something we own, or are meant to own, in a pawnshop, and now need to 'redeem' it as our

own possession. We shall indeed do this, Paul declares; and the spirit is the sign that we shall one day possess it fully.

Everything, of course, is done ‘to the praise of God’s glory’. Look back over the story which Paul has told as an act of worship. God has taken the initiative; God has done what was necessary, at great cost to himself, to buy us back from the slavery of sin; God has given us the spirit as a sign and foretaste of the whole renewed cosmos which awaits us as our inheritance. Discovering that you are to receive an inheritance like that should change your whole life. How can you not join in the hymn of praise?

EPHESIANS 1.15–23

Knowing the Power of the King

¹⁵Because of all this, and because I’d heard that you are loyal and faithful to Jesus the master, and that you show love to all God’s holy people, ¹⁶I never stop giving thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. ¹⁷I pray that the God of Messiah Jesus our Lord, the father of glory, would give you, in your spirit, the gift of being wise, of seeing things people can’t normally see, because you are coming to know him ¹⁸and to have the eyes of your inmost self opened to God’s light. Then you will know exactly what the hope is that goes with God’s call; you will know the wealth of the glory of his inheritance in his holy people; ¹⁹and you will know the outstanding greatness of his power towards us who are loyal to him in faith, according to the working of his strength and power.

²⁰This was the power at work in the Messiah when God raised him from the dead and sat him at his right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹above all rule and authority and power and lordship, and above every name that is invoked, both in the present age and also in the age to come. ²²Yes: God has ‘put all things under his feet’, and has given him to the church as the head over all. ²³The church is his body; it is the fullness of the one who fills all in all.

‘So how strong is it?’

My friend was showing me his new telescope. It was set up in an upstairs room, looking out towards sea.

‘Well, take a look.’

I had been scanning the horizon with my own small binoculars. There were a couple of ships going by. A few small fishing boats closer in. Nothing much else. I put my eye to his telescope and couldn’t believe what I saw.

The two ships I had seen – suddenly they were so close that I could see their names on the side, and people walking to and fro on the deck. But that was only the beginning. Out beyond them, where my binoculars had registered nothing at all, were several other ships: large and small, military and commercial, including a cruise liner. The telescope seemed to have the uncanny power of making things appear out of nowhere.

Power is one of the great themes of Ephesians. Perhaps this is because Ephesus itself, and the surrounding area, was seen as a place of power. Certainly in social and civic terms the city was powerful, and was set to become more so. It was a major centre of imperial influence in Paul's day. The Roman emperors were keen to establish and maintain places where their rule could be celebrated and enhanced.

But it was also a centre of religious power. All sorts of cults and beliefs flourished, and frequently they focused on power: the power of what we might call magic, power to make things happen in the world, to influence people and events, to gain wealth or health or influence for yourself and to bring about the downfall of your enemies. Their world, in other words, was dominated by the 'principalities and powers', the various levels of rulers and authorities from local magistrates up to internationally recognized gods and goddesses, and all stages in between.

For Paul, the greatest display of power the world had ever seen took place when God raised Jesus from the dead (verse 20). Nobody had ever been raised bodily from the dead, before or since. (If anybody today imagines that when the early Christians said Jesus had been raised from the dead, they meant that he had simply been exalted to **heaven**, they should think again. That wouldn't have been an extraordinary display of power, but rather the normal expectation of many, both Jews and non-Jews.) This power of the creator God at once sets itself apart from, and establishes itself as superior to, all the 'powers' that people might ever come across. The risen Jesus, in fact, is now enthroned, on the basis of this power of God, over the whole cosmos. And at the centre of Paul's prayer for the church in the area, which he now reports, is his longing that they will come to realize that this same power, the power seen at Easter and now vested in Jesus, is available to them for their daily use.

Far too many Christians today, and, one suspects, in Paul's day, are quite unaware that this power is there and is available. They are like I was with my friend: until I looked through his powerful telescope I simply didn't know what was out there. If someone says, 'Well, I don't seem to have much power as a Christian', or, 'I can't see the power of Jesus doing very much in the world', that simply shows that they need this prayer of Paul. Paul doesn't imagine that all Christians will automatically be able

to recognize the power of God. It will take, as he says in verse 17, a fresh gift of wisdom, of coming to see things people don't normally see. And this in turn will come about through knowing Jesus and having what Paul calls 'the eyes of your inmost self' opened to God's light.

God has already begun to work in them powerfully, as their loyal **faith** and love indicates (verse 15). So Paul can pray with confidence that God will now add this increase in wisdom and knowledge, especially in showing them two things: the inheritance, in all its glory – in other words, the vision of the renewed cosmos of which we spoke in the previous section; and the power of God which will bring it about in its proper time.

That power, the power which raised Jesus and which will transform the whole world and flood it with his glory, is in fact already available for us (verse 19). This doesn't mean we can become conjurers, performing spectacular tricks to impress people. Many of the things which God's power achieves in us, such as putting secret sins to death and becoming people of prayer, remain hidden from the world and even, sometimes, from other Christians.

But when he speaks of **Christ** as exalted over all possible rulers and authorities, we know that he means what he says. The local magistrates and officials; provincial rulers and governors; kings, princes and the emperor himself: all are subject to King Jesus. They are all put 'under his feet', he says. This is a quote from Psalm 8, a favourite of the early church. It speaks of God's purpose for humankind: that we should be sovereign over the whole creation. This is what has been accomplished in Jesus the **Messiah**. He is the truly human being, before whom all the world must bow.

And King Jesus has, as his hands and feet, his agents within the present world, the church. It is 'his body, the fullness of the one who fills all in all'. If only the church would realize this, and act accordingly!

EPHESIANS 2.1–7

Warning Signs on the Wrong Road

¹So where do you come into it all? Well, you were dead because of your offences and sins! ²That was the road you used to travel, keeping in step with this world's 'present age'; in step, too, with the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is, even now, at work among people whose whole lives consist of disobeying God. ³Actually, that's how all of us used to behave, conditioned by physical desires. We used to do what our flesh and our minds were urging us to do. What was the result? We too were subject to wrath in our natural state, just like everyone else.

⁴But when it comes to mercy, God is rich! He had such great love for us that ⁵he took us at the very point where we were dead through our offences, and made us alive together with the Messiah (yes, you are saved by sheer grace!). ⁶He raised us up with him, and made us sit with him – in the heavenly places, in Messiah Jesus! ⁷This was so that in the ages to come he could show just how unbelievably rich his grace is, the kindness he has shown us in Messiah Jesus.

Many years ago, I was staying for a few days in Cape Town, South Africa. Among the people I wanted to meet was an elderly man who lived on the edge of the city, in one of the outer suburbs. We arranged by telephone that I should drive out, in a rented car, and have supper with him and his wife.

He gave me detailed instructions on how to find him. Unfortunately, when I set off it was dark, and raining, and I managed to get on the wrong expressway. Or, rather, it was the right expressway, but I was going in the wrong direction on it. Since he had told me to go for ten miles or so before looking for the signs to turn off, I didn't worry until I'd gone at least twelve or fifteen miles and none of the signs were making sense. Eventually I turned off the road and asked at a garage. They hadn't heard of the district I was looking for, never mind the street. I was totally in the wrong part of the city. Only gradually, when we studied the map, did I realize my mistake. I had been driving confidently, believing I was doing the right thing, but with every minute I had been going further and further away from where I wanted to be.

The story ended happily, with very kind hosts and a very late supper. But it illustrates the severe point that Paul is making in the first three verses of this chapter. We live in a world where human beings, left to themselves, not only choose the wrong direction, but remain cheerfully confident that it is in fact the right one. Indeed, people regularly point out, as evidence of its being the right one, how confident they are on the subject. It is, after all, a fine road, much travelled and in good repair.

It has been, in particular, very popular to argue that the desires and aspirations that people find deep within themselves are obviously God-given and are for that reason to be followed. This is so particularly in discussions of sexual morality. ('This is how God made me, so he must want me to live like this.') But a moment's thought simply on human grounds, never mind a biblical viewpoint, shows how flawed that thinking is. Many people have deep desires which, unless held severely in check, lead to disaster. Some are by nature highly aggressive. Some appear to be naturally dishonest. Sometimes an entire section of the population senses deeply that it must behave in a certain way, even though their neighbours find it deeply offensive and threatening.

From a Christian perspective, these obvious responses can be taken a stage further. When God acted in Jesus the **Messiah**, he not only revealed himself fully; he revealed fully what genuine human life was like – and it turns out to be deeply self-sacrificial. Simply following the desires of the physical body, and equally of the mind, will lead you to ruin. (Note how in verse 3 the ‘flesh’ and ‘mind’ are both seen as sources of danger: Paul doesn’t for a moment suppose that the mind is morally ‘higher’ than the body.) The problem is, though: even if you recognize this, what can you do about it? If you are already ‘dead’ as a result of all this – already heading the wrong way down the road, with no hope of turning off, let alone turning back, and apparently no brake on the car to enable you to stop – what hope can there be?

Before you look at Paul’s answer, look at the full dimensions of the problem. In verse 2 he shows that there are forces which pull you, lure you, compel you to go in the wrong direction.

First, there is the **present age**: the way the world is now is not the way God intends it to be in the **age to come**. What seems right, especially to those who are simply ‘going with the flow’ of the world around them, actually isn’t.

Second, there is the ‘ruler of the power of the air’. This seems to be a way of referring to the **satan**, the devil, and a way of suggesting that his deadly ideas, his schemes for defacing God’s beautiful creation and particularly his image-bearing human creatures, are, as we say, ‘in the air’. You can sense their power ‘in the atmosphere’ of a place, of a room full of certain people, of a city or college or shop. The **satan** is a spirit, at work among people who see no need to behave any differently.

Perhaps the most devastating thing Paul points out here is that ‘we’ – in other words, the Jews – were no different in principle from **Gentiles** in this respect. When he says ‘you’ in verses 1 and 2, referring to the non-Jewish world, this doesn’t mean that he’s leaving a loophole for Jews to say, ‘Ah, but we’re different’. As in Romans 2.17-24, when this possibility comes up he firmly rejects it.

So what’s the answer? Well, if the problem is that the settled and habitual behaviour of the whole human race leads them on the fast road towards death – the ultimate destruction of their humanness – the answer provided by God is a way through death and out into a new sort of life entirely. This, of course, is achieved through the death and **resurrection** of Jesus, the king. How do these events affect other people? Because, as throughout chapter 1, Paul sees the people who belong to Jesus as being somehow ‘in’ him, so that what is true of him is true of them. He has been raised – and so have they! He has been installed in glory, in the heavenly realms – and so have they! This is the secret truth of the life of all those who belong to Jesus.

The main thing Paul wants to stress about all this is the sheer, almost unbelievable, magnificent kindness of God. In four short verses he says this in several different ways. God is rich in mercy; he loved us with a great love; his sheer grace has saved us; his grace is rich beyond all telling; he has lavished kindness upon us. Whenever anyone says, or implies, that God is after all a bit stingy, or mean, or small-minded, look at these verses and think again.

Of course, lots of people who are heading at speed in the wrong direction want to think of God like that – just as people who are enjoying their drive don't like it if someone tells them they're going the wrong way, and that they're about to pass the last chance to turn off and head back again. But the crucial factor here, as always, is Jesus himself. Take away his resurrection, and for all anybody knows the road to death is the only road there is. Put it back in the picture, though, and you realize two things. First, there is another way. Second, you are urgently summoned to turn round and follow it.

EPHESIANS 2.8–10

Grace, Not Works

⁸How has this all come about? You have been saved by grace, through faith! This doesn't happen on your own initiative; it's God's gift. ⁹It isn't on the basis of works, so no one is able to boast. ¹⁰This is the explanation: God has made us what we are. God has created us in Messiah Jesus for the good works that he prepared, ahead of time, as the road we must travel.

In the mid-1970s a country vet in a small town in northern England suddenly became world-famous. James Herriot, quite suddenly and in midlife, wrote books that sold in huge quantities around the world. Herriot (whose real name was Alfred Wight) lived in the town of Thirsk, in Yorkshire, England. His delightful stories of people and animals in the local farms and villages brought pleasure to millions, not least through *All Creatures Great and Small*, the television series based on his work.

In one of his books, Herriot tells how he planned to take his wife out for a small celebratory dinner at a restaurant some distance from their home. On the way, due to a mishap, he lost his wallet, and found himself at the end of the meal without the means to pay. However, to his complete astonishment, the waiter told him that the bill had already been paid. Unknown to Herriot, his senior partner had telephoned the restaurant and told them to charge the meal to him instead. It was his personal gift to the couple.

The astonishment, and relief, of that moment are a small pointer to the flavour of this passage about the grace of God. We can, perhaps, only understand the force of what Paul is saying when we step firmly into the world he has sketched in the first three verses of the chapter. Often, today, people don't believe there's much wrong with the human race, and with themselves in particular. As a result, they don't see very much need for God's grace. Perhaps, they think, God might help me out in a tight corner here or there, but basically I can get along fine without him. All that God then has to offer, it seems, is a kind of spiritual enhancement of ordinary life, a gentle enrichment of what's already there rather than a radical rescue from imminent disaster. It is as though Herriot, in paying for his meal himself, discovered that his partner had paid to have music played during the dinner.

But Paul's **gospel** is all about grace that is more than mere enrichment. It gives life to the dead. It is God's free, undeserved gift. In these three little verses he has summed up his entire view of how this grace works and what it does. This is very close to what he says about **justification** in Romans and Galatians, though it's here condensed into a tight, shorthand statement. It's important, though, that we look at the particular things he's saying here. Paul never simply fine-tunes doctrines in the abstract; he's always addressing a particular topic.

Paul speaks in Romans, Galatians and Philippians of being 'justified' by **faith**; here, in verse 8, he speaks of being 'saved' by grace. 'Justification' and 'salvation' are not the same thing. 'Justification' has to do with people belonging to God's family. It answers the question as to how they are marked out as members of it. 'Salvation' has to do with people being rescued from the fate they would otherwise have incurred. It answers the question as to how that rescue has taken place, and who is ultimately responsible for it. When Paul speaks of justification, the thing which marks people out is their faith. When he speaks, as here, of salvation, the responsibility is God's, i.e. it comes about through 'grace'.

He speaks of 'salvation' here, not 'justification', since the topic of the chapter at this point is not how God's people in **Christ** are marked out, but how they are rescued from sin and death. At the same time, he glances at the other question: you have been saved, he says, *by* grace and *through* faith. Faith is not something that humans 'do' to make themselves acceptable to God. Nothing we can do, unaided, can achieve that. If there were such a thing, it would become a matter of our own initiative, and the people who had this ability would be able to hold their heads up in pride over those who didn't. On the contrary. Because it's all a matter of God's gift, there is no room for any human being to boast.

This, of course, pushes the question one stage further back. Why then do some people believe, and not others? The only hints Paul gives

of an answer to this question are already set out in chapter 1 (verses 4–6). As part of God's eventual plan to draw together the life and purpose of the whole creation in Jesus the king, those who believe do so because they are the ones in whom he has begun the process of lavishing his love upon the world.

When Paul speaks of justification by faith, not by works of the **law**, the point he is making is that the community of God's people is marked out by their faith in Jesus as the risen Lord, not by the various things (**sabbath**, food laws, **circumcision**) which were badges of membership in the ethnic people of Israel. This concern is closely related to the present passage. He is going at once to speak in verses 11–22 of the coming together of Jew and **Gentile** in the **Messiah**. But the emphasis throughout these verses is on the contrast between the state of the human race as described in verses 1–3 and the state of the human race as God in his generous love has decided to remake it. The 'good works' which he mentions in verse 10 are not, therefore, the same as the 'works of the law' which he rules out as part of justification in Romans, Galatians and Philippians. They are the way of life which he will describe more fully in chapters 4–6 of the present letter. They are the road which Christians must now travel in the right direction, after the disastrously wrong journey described earlier.

Verse 10 is one of Paul's central statements of how Christians are at the centre of God's new creation. We are, he says, God's workmanship. This word sometimes has an artistic ring to it. It may be hinting that what God has done to us in King Jesus is a work of art, like a poem or sculpture. Or perhaps, granted what he goes on to say, we are like a musical score; and the music, which we now have to play, is the genuine way of being human, laid out before us in God's gracious design, so that we can follow it.

We can read this verse in two ways. Paul may have meant that the 'good works' are the new way of being human, the way which conforms to the standards God always intended, the way which is the same for all Christians alike. Or he may have meant that God has a specific and unique purpose for each individual. Since he certainly believed this about his own vocation (see, for instance, 3.8–13), it's likely he believed that it was true of all other Christians as well. But the present verse focuses more particularly on the moral behaviour which is expected of all of us.

What happens to people's moral and spiritual lives if they don't grasp the fact that our entire life, never mind our salvation, is God's undeserved gift? If that sounds too abstract a question, a story which makes it very vivid and personal is found in Luke 7.36–50. You might like to read and ponder that story alongside this short passage of Paul.

EPHESIANS 2.11–16

Two into One Will Go

¹¹So then, remember this! In human terms, that is, in your ‘flesh’, you are ‘Gentiles’. You are the people who the so-called ‘circumcision’ refer to as the so-called ‘uncircumcision’ – circumcision, of course, being something done by human hands to human flesh. ¹²Well, once upon a time you were separated from the Messiah. You were detached from the community of Israel. You were foreigners to the covenants which contained the promise. There you were, in the world with no hope and no god!

¹³But now, in Messiah Jesus, you have been brought near in the Messiah’s blood – yes, you, who used to be a long way away! ¹⁴He is our peace, you see. He has made the two to be one. He has pulled down the barrier, the dividing wall, that turns us into enemies of each other. He has done this in his flesh, ¹⁵by abolishing the law with its commands and instructions.

The point of doing all this was to create, in him, one new human being out of the two, so making peace. ¹⁶God was reconciling both of us to himself in a single body, through the cross, by killing the enmity in him.

We lived for four years by the banks of the Ottawa river, north-west of Montreal. It is a great river, already over 400 miles long by the time it passed our village. By the time it reached us it was over a mile wide. Not far downstream, however, this great river flows into the St Lawrence, which makes even the Ottawa river look small. It carries the water from the Great Lakes, and not only water; ocean-going boats sail to and fro up its seaway. The two rivers have quite different characters. The Ottawa rises in the cold, northern reaches of Quebec and Ontario. The St Lawrence runs along the twisting border between Canada and the United States.

Once the two rivers have joined together, just upstream from Montreal, they are simply known as the St Lawrence. They do not become the St Lawrence/Ottawa river. The noble river from the north is subsumed into the larger one from the west. If someone were to paddle a canoe downstream along the Ottawa river, once it had joined the St Lawrence they wouldn’t be able to say that they were still really on the Ottawa. They would have joined the mainstream.

The peculiar thing about what Paul says in this passage is that what must have looked to his readers to be the vastly greater and wider river has joined a far smaller one – but it’s the smaller one that gives its name to the river that now continues with the two streams merged into one. The great, wide river is the worldwide company of **Gentiles**,

the non-Jewish nations stretching across the world and back in time, including the glories of classical Greece, Rome, Egypt, Mesopotamia, China and the rest of the many-splendoured globe. The smaller river is the single family of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, described here as ‘the community of Israel’. Somehow, in the strange mapping system that the one God has chosen to operate, Gentiles and Jews have become one in the confluence that is Jesus the **Messiah**. And, as the river continues on its way, it bears not only the name of Israel, but also the hope that flows from the **covenants** of promise made with the Israelite patriarchs.

Not only so. As well as the hope, they now have – God! Paul, quite remarkably, describes them in their former state as having no God: the word he uses in verse 12 is the word from which we get our word ‘atheists’. This is ironic, because that’s what Gentiles used to call Jews, and then came to call Christians as well, since neither Jews nor Christians had statues of their gods. Neither, so far as the Gentile eye could see, offered animal sacrifice, consulted oracles, or did any of the other things that pagans associated with worship of their gods. Paul, boldly standing on the same ground as Jewish writers of the same period, declares that the pagan gods are actually non-gods. Those who think they worship them are worshipping something that doesn’t really exist.

At the same time, he’s just as emphatic that those who define themselves by the state of their male members – in other words, Jews who regard their **circumcision** as the ultimate badge of covenant membership – are equally out of line. Don’t worry, verse 11 implies, about the so-called ‘circumcision’ that likes to call you the ‘uncircumcision’. Circumcision, after all, is something that human beings make with their hands – which is what Jewish writers used to say about pagan idols! Paul is claiming the high ground. Those who belong to the Messiah are the new people of God.

At this point the illustration of the rivers, like most illustrations, breaks down. It isn’t just that one stream is merged without trace into the other. Nor is it just that the new river is simply a combination of the two. It is as though, from that point, the whole river takes on a new and different character. Perhaps we could still make it work if we suggested that from that point on the river was tidal, with salt water meeting it from the ocean.

Paul now shows that this coming together of Jew and Gentile in the one family is achieved – as is almost everything else in his theology – through the cross of Jesus the Messiah. This has brought the pagans close in, from being far away (verse 13). It has torn down the barrier that used to stand between the two families (verse 14). It has abolished the Jewish law, the **Torah** – not in the sense that God didn’t give it in the first place, but in the sense that the Jewish law had, as one of its main

first-century uses, the keeping apart of Jew and Gentile (verse 15). The hostility that had existed between the two groups has itself been killed on the cross (verse 16). Paul probably didn't have in mind the way in which Herod and Pilate became friends at the time of Jesus' crucifixion (Luke 23.12), but that little story makes the point well.

The point of it all, as he says in verse 15, was to create a single new humanity in place of the two. Today's church may no longer face the question of the integration of Jew and Gentile into a single family, though there are places where that is still a major issue. But we face, quite urgently, the question which Paul would insist on as a major priority. If our churches are still divided in any way along racial or cultural lines, he would say that our **gospel**, our very grasp of the meaning of Jesus' death, is called into question. How long will it be before those who claim to follow Jesus, not least those who claim also to love Paul's thinking, come to terms with the demands he actually makes?

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