

FINAL GREETINGS

Ephesians 6:21-24

We come now to the end of our studies in Paul's letter the Ephesians. It is a letter that contains many familiar and much loved passages: praise for spiritual blessings in Christ (1:3-14), Paul's prayers (1:15-23; 3:14-21), salvation by grace alone (2:6-10), reconciliation through Christ (2:19-22), the ministry of the Spirit (4:7-13), the 'Household Code' (5:21-6:9) and the whole armour of God (6:10-20), just to mention a few highlights. I have tried to show you through our studies that this letter is not simply a patchwork quilt of beautiful but unrelated panels (something which many commentators have accused it of), it is in fact, somewhat ironically, a letter about unity.

There is always a danger in the study of Scripture that we may fall into. On the one hand we may use almost any passage as a springboard into our favourite passages and theological hobby-horses and so fail to take seriously the passage before us. On the other hand we may fix our attention solely on a passage, or even a verse, and fail to understand its full meaning because our view is too narrow. In our studies in Ephesians I have tried to give you not only useful information but also an example of how I study the Bible. As such this series has been an extended appendix to our series earlier in the year on how to study Scripture.

As I said, the heart of this letter is unity, but not unity for unity's sake. The key passage is 4:1-6, which takes the theology that predominates in the first three chapters and forms a bridge into the application of the last three. This unity is 'in Christ' (an important phrase in any of Paul's letters) and is a direct result of the ministry of reconciliation achieved through Christ (2:11-22). It is this unity, closely defined and argued in the opening passages of this letter that forms the basis of the practical examples Paul gives, whether it is in the mission and ministry of the church (4:7-13), inter-personal relationships (4:17-5:20) or family life (5:21-6:9). It is also this unity that enables the church to effectively stand firm in the face of hostile onslaughts (6:10-17) and to pray effectively (18-20).

The chief challenge of this letter is, then, to live out this unity that is ours in Christ. This challenge is not primarily aimed at differing

denominations or congregations, but rather at how we should live alongside our fellow Christians at the local, day-to-day level. As always in Scripture, this challenge is not to other people, but to me. Paul's words do not give me the right to tell others they must live in unity with me, rather that I must be the one to, "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." (4:3) This is radically different from the world's point of view which emphasises individual rights, but then Jesus himself said, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over [you]... but you are not to be like that." (Luke 22:25f) Paul makes it clear, there are more important things than being right all the time!

Paul's closing words (6:21-24) are a beautiful, personal illustration of the whole of this letter. Tychicus was a Gentile believer from Asia Minor, he is mentioned throughout the New Testament as a ministry partner of Paul. According to Luke, Tychicus accompanied Paul on his third missionary journey (Acts 20:4). In Colossians Paul describes Tychicus as a beloved brother, faithful servant, and fellow slave (Colossians 4:7). Paul also deeply trusted Tychicus and commissioned him to carry some of his letters to various Christian communities (Colossians 4:7-9; 2 Timothy 4:12; Titus 3:12). Here is Christian unity in practice.

We tend to ignore the relevance of texts like these final verses. Their application may be limited, but they still are significant in shaping how we view God and ourselves. Paul's view of his friends and his concern for them deserve to be copied. By viewing other Christians as in the Lord and by desiring God's gifts for them, we change the way we relate to them. We cannot extend God's peace and love honestly to people we do not care about.

Perhaps the most important application of this short passage is the reminder that God and Christ are the substance of life. They are the willing source of all we need to live, and all God expects from us is a loving response.

In many ways the benediction is an summary of the entire letter. God has provided all you need in Christ; therefore, live worthy of the gift!

Amen.

Kevin Dare
Beeston Baptist Church
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