

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

Broadcast Date: 20 March 2011

No. T0668

Speaker: Mr. Peter Ollerhead

Ephesians - it's all about Christ: Made one through Him - Ephesians 3:1-13

Good morning and welcome to *Truth for Today* where we are considering Ephesians 3:1-13 under the general title of "Made One Through Him". After this broadcast, we are taking a break in our studies of Ephesians, though I shall be back in June, God willing, and will resume the series with a talk that covers Ephesians 3:14-21. Last week's programme in this series, which was entitled "Brought Near to Him", could be summarised by 2:13, which says: "But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ." Here, stated plainly and categorically, is the wonderful fact that we are reconciled to God through the redeeming death of His Son.

We now move on to the verses that form our study, noting that Ephesians 3:1 tells us something about the physical state of the Apostle Paul. I quote again from the King James or Authorised Version: "For this cause I Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles..."

From this statement it is clear that Paul was in prison when he wrote the letter to the Ephesians. Consequently, he was not able to visit the region of Ephesus, in Asia, where he had ministered about five years before. We must notice, however, that Paul, though a prisoner of the Roman authorities, described himself as a prisoner of Jesus Christ. To an onlooker Paul, was who chained to a Roman soldier, was obviously under Roman control, whereas in his own mind he was under the control of Christ. How easy it would have been for Paul to retreat into a cloud of self pity, or even bitterness, when his liberty was curtailed for preaching the Christian Gospel. His attitude, displayed in Ephesians 3:1, is a living example of his words to the Philippian Church, where in Philippians 4:11 he wrote: "Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content." It is easy to claim such an attitude when everything is going well, but another matter when a prison is your home!

Some years ago I heard a preacher quote some lines of anonymous verse, which I will cite, as I think they tell us something about Paul.

*"Two men gazing through the bars,
One saw mud, the other stars."*

These lines, obviously, describe two differing attitudes displayed by prisoners. One lifted up his eyes and saw the beauty of the star filled night sky, while the other saw the dirt and filth of the world. The preacher's point centred on the positive attitude that Christians should display. He recalled two other men in prison, though separated by centuries. John Bunyan, incarcerated at Bedford for many years for preaching Christianity without a licence, wrote the timeless classic that we know as *Pilgrim's Progress*, which has charmed and inspired Christians from that day to this. On the other hand, Adolf Hitler, when he was imprisoned for a few months, penned *Mein Kampf*, a political tract containing pernicious doctrines that brought much of Europe crashing down to flames and destruction in the Second World War. The Apostle Paul's imprisonment did not lead him to disillusionment or negativity; instead some of the Apostle's greatest and highest doctrinal truths were released to the church while he was chained.

In Ephesians 3:1-7, Paul brings to light a most wondrous thought that God's mercy and grace includes all mankind. Before he became a Christian, Paul was of the opinion that the revelation of the living God was for one race alone and that was his own. From earliest times, the Hebrew nation was confident that it alone was chosen of God and that, consequently, the Gentiles were beneath contempt. When Paul, and the other apostles, came along preaching that God's loving kindness embraced the despised Gentiles, it was very difficult for Jewish listeners to accept that they, the apostles, were speaking the truth.

For us to understand this message more fully, we will now briefly examine the verses in Ephesians 3 that contain our subject for today. I will read Ephesians 3:2-6 using the Authorised Version, "If ye have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given me to you-ward: how that by revelation he made known unto me the mystery; (as I wrote afore in few words, whereby, when ye read, ye may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ) which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit; that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel."

That is rather a long and involved quotation, yet well worth reading as it confirms to us that Paul was not passing on his own thoughts to us, but truth that had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit. In addition, his ministry was subject to the continuing power and leading of the Holy Spirit. This passage also passes on to us the precious truth of that same Gentile believers would be fellow heirs and members of the one body of God's people.

Paul was always conscious that the message he was delivering, whether preaching to unbelievers or edifying the church, was not the product of his own imagination, but a divinely revealed message. In Galatians 1:15-16 he states the same conviction: "But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb, and called me by his grace, to reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the heathen; immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood." This consciousness of being divinely chosen to be a messenger with a distinct task was also felt by many of the Old Testament prophets, though we have not the time to isolate the scriptures that indicate that.

There is another point, with regards to Paul's biographical details in Ephesians 3:7-8, that I wish to comment on. Here we can read again that the apostle is aware that the grace and power of God has been lavished upon him to make him a minister of the Gospel. I also want us to notice especially Ephesians 3:8: "Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ" My point is that we notice this great Apostle describes himself as the "least of all saints". In 1 Corinthians 15:9 he is "the least of the apostles", whereas, in 1 Timothy 1:15, he writes of himself as the "chief of sinners". It would seem that the more Paul experienced of the greatness and faithfulness of Christ the less he thought about his own importance. Sadly, some of us in the church are more concerned with our own image than with the honour and supremacy of the Lord.

We ought now to move onto the central theme of our passage, and if you have just joined us can I welcome you to *Truth for Today*, where we are considering Ephesians 3:1-3. Ephesians 3:4, informs us of the mystery of Christ. We should note that the New Testament use of the word "mystery" should not be confused with our ideas of a detective novel or something difficult to understand. It simply means something that once was hidden but is now made known. Here the mystery is the fact that, "through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, as members of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus". Most of that last sentence is a quote from the New International Version but, whichever translation we use, we must notice that Christians from the Gentile nations are fellow-heirs, fellow-members and fellow-partakers with the people of God, by virtue of their incorporation into Christ, which was achieved through the gospel. As Westcott, the nineteenth century commentator wrote regarding this passage: "In the announcement that the Word became flesh all partial and transitory privileges are lost in one supreme and universal blessing." [*Saint Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians*, BF Wescott] I am writing this with Christmas celebrations at their height, with cards and lights and other manifestations of the popular regard for the season, yet the amazing, central and critical fact of Christmas, that the Word became flesh (John 1:14), is neglected and ignored, sadly sometimes by Christians.

This truth that we were discussing of "All one in Christ Jesus" might come across to us today as familiar, or even commonplace, yet to the people to whom Paul was writing it was revolutionary. No Israelite would ever consider that God's love and mercy extended to the Gentiles; for to them to have the privilege of worshipping the living God meant being born a Jew and following the laws of Moses. Now the apostles of a crucified Nazarene were claiming that He was the long promised Messiah, who had risen from among the dead, as well as claiming that all who believed in Him were members of a new body, where all racial claims had no validity. Little wonder that Paul and the other apostles were persecuted.

To emphasise this truth, I want us to notice other words that Paul uses in his writings, which describe the effects of the Gospel. In Galatians 3:26-28 we read: "For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptised into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus." This union of all believers into one body, which was the consequence of the Gospel call that offered salvation to all who believed, was an amazing fact when it was first made known. Perhaps we, in our age, have lost the wonder of this aspect of Christ's redeeming work.

According to Ephesians 3:9-10, this union of all believers into one body was not an afterthought of God, when His other plans involving the Israelites had failed. It is possible to present the history of the church in this way by suggesting that the Gentiles were brought in because the Jews would not receive the message that Jesus was the Christ, or Messiah. Ephesians 3:9 states: "And to make all men see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God, who created all things by Jesus Christ." This verse states plainly that the mystery that we have been discussing, which is the union of all believers, was a truth that had been hidden in God from the beginning of time. The *Schofield Bible* has a helpful note on Ephesians 3:9 concerning the mystery: "That the Gentiles were to be saved was no mystery (see Romans 9:24-33 and Romans 10:19-21). The mystery 'hid in God' was the divine purpose to make of the Jew and Gentile a wholly new thing - 'the Church, which is His [Christ's] body,' formed by the baptism with the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:12-13) and in which the earthly distinction of Jew and Gentile disappears (Ephesians 2:14-15). The revelation of this mystery, which was foretold but not explained by Christ (Matthew 16:18), was committed to Paul. In his writings alone we find the doctrine, position, walk, and destiny of the

Church.” Notice also in Ephesians 3:9, that was quoted earlier, how Paul resisted the tendency of some heretical religious teachers, who taught that redemption was of God, while creation was the work of some inferior agencies. It was God who created all things by Jesus Christ.

Further dignity is added to the redemptive and creative acts of the Lord, in Ephesians 3:10, where it is evident that the aim, or goal, of the work of Christ is to make manifest the divine wisdom. The implications of such a declaration are immense. To impress, but not exaggerate the point, I quote the words of another: “The Church becomes a mirror through which the bright ones of heaven see the glory of God. And in order to show them this glory, God committed the Gospel to Paul.” A Skevington Wood *Ephesians [NIV Expositors Bible Commentaries]* From 1 Peter 1:12, we learn that the angels have an interest in knowing more of the effects of the Gospel. What a stupendous thought is this, that the Church is the learning tool for the angels to investigate the mysteries of redemption! When you or I became believers in the Lord Jesus, little did we realise the fullness of all that that involved, or the dignity that is conferred upon us through grace.

I should read Ephesians 3:10, as there is something else we need to notice. “To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God.” The word from this verse that I wish to highlight is “manifold”, which has the thought of “very varied” or “many coloured”. One thing we can learn from this word is that the grace of God that brought us salvation is sufficient for every situation that we may meet. Neither sunny days, nor lengthening shadows, will overcome the matchless grace of the living God.

Please listen carefully as I read Ephesians 3:11-12 as these firmly fix the Lord Jesus at the very centre of the purposes of God: “According to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord: in whom we have boldness and access with confidence by the faith of him.” If we learned from Ephesians 1 that we were predestinated according to the purpose of God, we learn here something of its realisation in time. Though the plans and purposes of God had their origin prior to the beginning of time, it required the incarnation of the Son of God for these purposes to be worked out. It is instructive for us to take note that the title of “Christ Jesus our Lord” involves the confessions of Jesus as Messiah, or Christ, and also of Jesus as Lord. Obviously, these were names or titles that belonged to the Lord when He came into this world to suffer death, and then to be raised and ascend to the seat of all power and might. The total supremacy of the Victor of Calvary is acknowledged by each of us when we confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

This centrality of the Lord has important implications for the believer; for it is only in Him that we gain free access into God's presence. This is not in the arrogance of self confidence, or reliance upon our own worth, but rather through the merit of the Lord Jesus and our faith in His great redeeming work upon the cross. Through the Person of the Lord Jesus, and our faith in Him, we have freedom of address and freedom of access to God. This, may I say on the authority of Scripture, is true for all believers, as we all stand on the same ground as members of the one body.

Many years ago, the man who became my brother-in-law, introduced me to an aged man, who had played the summer game with some of the revered names from a past era. As I was young and immature, I could never have approached the great man on my own. I needed another, such as my soon to be brother-in-law, who was on familiar terms and known personally to the old cricketer, before I could have any hope of standing in his company.

This is what the Lord does for us with God. In Him, the door to God's presence swings open for all believers and no man can close it. Paul wrote to Timothy many years ago telling him: “For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus: who gave Himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time.” (1 Timothy 2:4-5). In this passage, the precious truth of free access through the Lord Jesus into God's presence for all believers, that we have been considering at length this morning, is emphasised yet again.

As we are almost at the end of our talk this morning I will read Ephesians 3:13 which is the final verse of our passage: “Wherefore I desire that ye faint not at my tribulations for you, which is your glory.” Here we finish the rehearsal of the administration of the grace of God that Paul began in Ephesians 3:2. We have travelled full circle, for he takes up again the theme of his imprisonment, making clear that his sufferings and tribulations were on their account. The phrase “faint not” has the thought of “good for nothing”, and that is, perhaps, what some of the Christians at Ephesus might have become, if they considered that imprisonment would be the result of believing in Jesus and living the Christian life. As an antidote, Paul informed his infant churches, on many occasions, that his afflictions were nothing when compared with the inestimable privilege of preaching the Gospel as a servant of the Lord Jesus. In his letter to the Philippians the Apostle wrote about the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ. (Philippians 3:8) For him, nothing in the whole world was better than being a Christian, so that the believers at Ephesus need never fear, for they had the Lord's promise that He would be with them unto the end of the age. (Matthew 28:20)

So to close our talk this morning I would reiterate its central theme of “Made One through Him”. We have seen from Scripture, how believers in the Lord Jesus have been formed into a new body, that spans the years from Pentecost as well as including all believers regardless of nationality. We must remember that this remains true today. All believers

are incorporated into the one church. We might speak different languages or have differing cultures, but those who have confessed with their mouths that Jesus is Lord and believed in their hearts that God has raised Him from among the dead (Romans 10:9) are all members of the one body. Because Paul especially ministered this truth he suffered persecution and imprisonment, yet he wished the Christians at Ephesus to be strengthened by his example as a minister of the Gospel. The verses that we have just considered together form part of the context for the prayer that follows in Ephesians 3:14-21, which has been called "Paul's enraptured supplication" A Skevington Wood *Ephesians [NIV Expositors Bible Commentaries]*. That, however, is the subject of another talk in a few weeks time, if the Lord so wills.

May the Lord richly bless you this day and thank you for listening.

Please Note:

We encourage you to use this transcript for your personal or group Bible studies. This material should not, however, be used in any publications without the express permission from Truth for Today, whose contact details can be found on page 1. Large Print copies of this document are also available upon request.