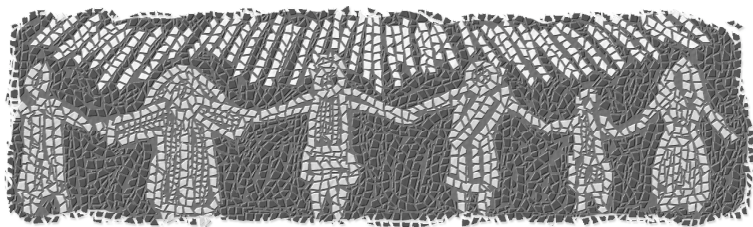


Ephesians: Themes *in* Relationships



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Isa. 14:12; Acts 26:9-19; Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; Gal. 1:11-17; Eph. 3:11, 12; Col. 1:20, 21; Rev. 12:7.*

Memory Text: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ” (*Ephesians 1:3, NKJV*).

A letter of celebration. Last week we saw that as Paul’s third missionary journey drew to a close and as he was on his way to Jerusalem, he told the Ephesians they “ ‘will see my face no more’ ” (*Acts 20:25, NKJV*). He was right. Paul was soon arrested in Jerusalem and eventually imprisoned in Rome. Away from the pressures of the mission frontier and shut in Caesar’s prison, Paul reflected on his life as the apostle to the Gentiles (*Eph. 3:8*).

From the loneliness of imprisonment, the aged apostle celebrated the amazing fellowship in Jesus by writing his “prison” Epistles: Colossians, Philemon, Philippians, and the one we are now studying, Ephesians.

The letter to the Ephesians deals with no particular problem, doctrinal or social. It celebrates the joy of fellowship, relationship, and unity in Christ. It’s also a great expression of thanksgiving and praise for what God has done through Christ in the creation of His church.

The Week at a Glance: Why was Paul so confident of his calling? What is an apostle? What is a saint? When the Bible talks about “peace,” what does it mean? What does Paul mean by the phrase “in Christ”?

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 8.*

The Author: Paul

“Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, to the saints which are at Ephesus, and to the faithful in Christ Jesus” (*Eph. 1:1*).

As Paul opens his letter to the Ephesians, he immediately refers to himself as an “apostle.” In the kind of Greek Paul wrote in, this word carries the idea of being an ambassador, an envoy, or a messenger, certainly an apt title to describe the life and ministry of Paul, who, indeed, had a message to deliver.

In the Gospels, the word *apostle* is used almost exclusively in reference to the Twelve whom Jesus called and sent out, known, of course, as the Twelve Apostles (*see Matt. 10:2-4, Mark 3:14-19, Luke 6:13-16*). Though not part of the original Twelve, Paul uses the term here in Ephesians and in numerous other places in reference to himself, because he was sure of his calling.

How and why does Paul defend his apostolic authority?

Acts 26:9-19

1 Cor. 9:1, 2

Gal. 1:1

Gal. 1:11-17

Paul never had any doubt about his call to apostleship. The Damascus Road experience had a profound effect on him, and it is in that encounter with Jesus that he received his call, chosen as a special vessel to the Gentiles (*Acts 9:15, 22:21*). From that moment on, he was not his own; he belonged to Jesus. It was God’s will that he be an apostle, an ambassador, a sent one, a messenger of Jesus Christ. It was a calling Paul accepted with all his heart. His life was never the same after that experience. Neither the church nor the world were either.

Paul had a dramatic conversion experience on the road to Damascus. Not many people who are called have had such a dramatic encounter with God. Nevertheless, God still calls people today. How have you experienced God’s call in your life? If someone were to ask you, What has God called you to do? what would you say?

The Recipients: The Saints in Ephesus

The letter is addressed “to the saints who are in Ephesus, and faithful in Christ Jesus” (*Eph. 1:1, NKJV*). The early church almost universally accepted that the Epistle was written to the church at Ephesus, but some important ancient manuscripts omit the phrase “in Ephesus,” and hence the problem of whether the Epistle was originally written to Ephesians. Conservative scholarship generally accepts that the Epistle was addressed to Ephesus as a letter to be circulated among other churches in Asia. That explains why Paul omitted any reference to local persons or problems but, rather, celebrated Christ’s work from a cosmic perspective, embracing God’s work in “heavenly places,” Christ’s work on the cross, and the church’s warfare with “principalities and powers” (*Eph. 6:12*).

Paul uses the word *saints* quite frequently in his Epistles. Of the 61 times the word is used in the New Testament, 39 are found in Paul’s writings. Listed below are five such usages. Study each one and note its implication as to the meaning of saints. *1 Cor. 1:2, Eph. 4:12, 5:3, Col. 1:26, Rev. 14:12.*

Saint does not refer to any spiritually elite group but, rather, to all believers. It literally means “set apart”—and here, set apart in Christ Jesus to be “faithful” in Him. The common notion that saints are sinless and morally perfect is foreign to the New Testament use of the word. While saints are to “keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus” (*Rev. 14:12*), the emphasis is not so much on moral perfection as on faithfulness to Jesus. A saint is a sinner saved by God’s grace.

Also, the saints in Ephesus are “in Christ Jesus.” All those who have accepted Christ have two addresses: in Ephesus and in Christ, in this world and in the world to come.

“A little girl who attended worship in a place with a lot of stained-glass windows was asked what a saint was. ‘A saint is a person the light shines through,’ she replied. A saint is someone whose life—speech, actions, attitudes, relationships—points to Jesus.”—*Life Application Bible Commentary: Ephesians* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1996), p. 4. How well have your actions or words in the past day pointed to Jesus? If you could do something over, what would it be?

Grace and Peace

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (*Eph. 1:2, NKJV*).

Paul used “grace . . . and peace” as part of his customary greeting in most of his Epistles (*Rom. 1:7, 1 Cor. 1:3, 2 Cor. 1:2, Gal. 1:3, Phil. 1:2, Col. 1:2, etc.*). The word for “grace” used here is distinct from the common Greek form of greeting, which generally expresses a wish for health and prosperity. Instead of greeting his readers with a call for health and good wishes, Paul employed a word for “grace” that was beginning to acquire a new meaning in Christian faith, emphasizing God’s unmerited favor toward sinners. It is through God’s initiative and love alone that anyone can be saved from sin, a thought Paul will later emphasize: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God” (*Eph. 2:8, NKJV*).

In addition to grace, Paul wished for his readers “peace.”

The death and resurrection of Christ brought new meaning to the idea of “peace” and opened wide doors of new experience and relationship between humans and God, and among humans themselves. Read the following verses: **John 14:27; Rom. 5:1; Eph. 2:14, 15; 6:15.** How do you understand the concept of “peace” expressed here?

The source of both grace and peace are “God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (*Eph. 1:2, NKJV*). The verse places Christ and the Father in a position of equality, thus recognizing the divinity of Jesus. Without Jesus, God’s grace could not have been made manifest to humanity; nor could peace between God and sinners have been possible. Hence, the focus of the Epistle is on what God has done in Christ. He is our redemption. We are saved because of His grace. He is our peace. He is the basis of our new relationship with the Lord.

What has been your own experience of God’s peace? How does it differ from the kind of peace you find only in the world? What might you need to do in order to better know and experience the kind of peace God offers us?

The Theme: Unity

“For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fulness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (*Eph. 1:9, 10, RSV*).

Read the above two verses. Notice the basic theme there: unity. Whom does the Lord plan to unify? How does your understanding of the great controversy, including the fall of Lucifer and humanity, help you understand the need for this unity? See *Isa. 14:12; Col. 1:20, 21; Rev. 12:7*.

In these two verses, Paul sets forth unity as the central theme of the Epistle. “He was writing to a church . . . consisting of Jews and Gentiles, Asiatics and Europeans, slaves and freemen—all symbols of a disrupted world that was to be restored to unity in Christ. This would necessitate unity of person, family, church, and . . . unity of God’s universe.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 995.

Paul’s concept of unity has two dimensions. The first is dealing with the church, in which Jews and Gentiles have been brought together in one body. The second is universal, in which all things in heaven and earth move toward an ultimate unity in Christ.

The source, the motive, and the means of this unity among humans and in the universe must not be located in human needs and ability or in any evolutionary or historic or mechanical process in nature. The book of Ephesians points to a higher and surer way. It talks about ultimate unity in the universe in the mind and will of God. All things move in accordance with “His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself” (*Eph. 1:9, NKJV*).

A small replica of that universal unity, Paul tells the Ephesians, must be seen now and here in the Christian church.

Why is unity in the church so important? What happens when there are disunity, discord, and dissension? Who is hurt? What is impacted? In what practical ways can you, as an individual, promote an atmosphere of unity in the church?

The Key: “In Christ”

“In Christ” and its variations appear some two hundred times in Paul’s writings. In Ephesians, it is a key phrase that demonstrates the depth of Paul’s understanding of what God has accomplished for us and the fallen universe through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. “In Christ,” along with “in Him” and “in whom,” appears more than thirty times in the Epistle. A majority of these references are used in a way that shows that God’s eternal purposes in Creation, history, redemption, and restoration are worked out through Christ. He is the key to everything we have from God.

Thus, Paul not only recognizes the significance of Christ in His incarnate mission but boldly affirms that apart from Christ we would have no salvation, no adoption, no forgiveness of sin, no access to God, no revelation of His love, no church, no cosmic restoration, and no future. Thus, in every way Ephesians is a Christ-centered Epistle: It is a hymn to Jesus, without whom we would be “aliens” and “strangers” (*Eph. 2:12*).

According to the following texts, what has been accomplished for us “in Christ”? *2 Cor. 5:19; Eph. 1:7, 10, 11; 3:11, 12; Col. 1:13, 14; 2:10.*

Everything we have, or can hope for, as Christians, we can find only “in Christ.” He has done for us what we could never do for ourselves. That’s why we owe Him everything; that’s why He must come first in our lives; that’s why we must surrender our wills to Him; that’s why it’s so unpardonable to reject Him and what He is to us, for by rejecting Him we reject life itself.

Because Christ is all-important and all-sufficient, He must have the central place in our lives. Our homes, our work, our values, and our worship must have Him as the focus. “In Christ” God has made all things possible.

“Christ in us” makes that possibility a reality. What practical changes do you need to make in your personal life to keep God central and in focus?

Further Study: *Paul's apostleship.* "Paul ably vindicated his position as an apostle of Christ. He declared himself to be an apostle, 'not of men, neither by man, but by Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead.' Not from men, but from the highest Authority in heaven, had he received his commission. And his position had been acknowledged by a general council at Jerusalem, with the decisions of which Paul had complied in all his labors among the Gentiles."—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 387.

Unity. "When men are bound together, not by force or self-interest, but by love, they show the working of an influence that is above every human influence. Where this oneness exists, it is evidence that the image of God is being restored in humanity, that a new principle of life has been implanted. It shows that there is power in the divine nature to withstand the supernatural agencies of evil, and that the grace of God subdues the selfishness inherent in the natural heart."—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 678.

Christ's work. "Through Christ's redeeming work the government of God stands justified. The Omnipotent One is made known as the God of love. Satan's charges are refuted, and his character unveiled. Rebellion can never again arise. Sin can never again enter the universe. Through eternal ages all are secure from apostasy. By love's self-sacrifice, the inhabitants of earth and heaven are bound to their Creator in bonds of indissoluble union."—Page 26.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 What can you say to someone who says, "I gave my heart to Christ, I have accepted His atoning death in my behalf, and I seek to obey Him to the best of my God-given ability, but I still feel no peace"?
- 2 Are there any issues dividing your local church? If so, what can you do, as a class, to help foster unity?
- 3 As a class, go back over the verses listed in Thursday's lesson about what has been done for us "in Christ." Have each person pick one aspect that means the most to them and explain why they deem it so important.

The Missing Exams

by J. H. ZACHARY

As many as 700 Adventist students study at the state university in Butari, Rwanda. The Adventist church in the area is too far away and too small for the students to attend. So the Adventist students worship in the university's stadium on Sabbath morning.

Adventists are well known in Rwanda, and most of the professors at the university accommodate Adventist students when giving their exams. But occasionally visiting professors from other French-speaking countries are not so generous.

Nyira and Irene were seniors at the university. One of their required courses was being taught by a visiting professor. As exam time neared, the students studied fiercely, for their grade depended entirely on the final exam. But when the exam schedule was posted, the exam for this course fell on Sabbath. The girls went to see the professor and asked to take the exam on a different day.

"No," the professor answered abruptly. "You must take the examination with the other students."

The girls prayed for two days, and then they returned to request a change in their exam date again. This time the professor was even more harsh than the first time. Friendly students who knew their dilemma counseled them. "Surely your God will understand. You ought to take the exam."

But the girls refused. "Even if we must take the entire class again, we will not dishonor God's Sabbath." Early on Sabbath morning, the girls slipped out of the dormitory and into the forest nearby to pray. They returned to the school stadium in time for Sabbath School.

After church ended, Nyira and Irene walked back to their dormitory. On the way they met some of their classmates, returning from the examination hall. "Your God surely does love you," they said. "The examination has been rescheduled."

The girls listened, amazed, as they learned that the other students waited from 8:00 until 10:00, but their professor never came. Finally a teacher appeared and told the students that they could not find the examinations, and the exam would have to be rescheduled.

Nyira and Irene rejoiced that God had overruled the stubborn professor and showed a classroom of students that He does care for His children.

Until his death, J. H. ZACHARY coordinated outreach among the Jews and Muslims in the North American Division.