

Paul's Prison Epistles

LESSON
THREE

PAUL AND THE EPHESIANS



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Paul's Prison Epistles

Lesson Three

Paul and the Ephesians

INTRODUCTION

People who have lived in more than one country often tell me how difficult it is to adapt to new cultures. Each nation has its own customs and laws and values, and what is appropriate in one nation isn't necessarily appropriate in others. Business people, tourists, and even missionaries have to spend a lot of time learning the ways of the new nation they are visiting.

In many ways the same is true of the Christian life. We were all born outside of Christ, separated from his kingdom. Many of us spent years learning and following the ways of the kingdom of darkness. And this presents challenges for us as we try to live according to the ways of our new nation, our new kingdom — the kingdom of light in Christ.

This challenge is nothing new. Even in the first century, Christians had to be taught how to live in ways that were appropriate for the kingdom of Christ. Many Christians had been converted from pagan religions. They had spent much of their lives following the ways of Satan before they came to faith in Christ. And they found it difficult to change the ways they thought, felt, and behaved. So, as the apostle Paul wrote his epistle to the Ephesians, he directly addressed this challenge by painting a sweeping, cosmic portrait of life in the kingdom of God in Christ.

This is the third lesson in our series *Paul's Prison Epistles*. And we have entitled this lesson "Paul and the Ephesians." In this lesson we will investigate Paul's epistle to the church in Ephesus, focusing especially on ways he designed this letter to teach Christians how to build, maintain, and thrive in God's kingdom.

Our exploration of Paul's epistle to the Ephesians will divide into three parts: First, we will examine the background of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Second, we'll look at the structure and content of Ephesians. And third, we will discuss the modern application of this letter. Let's begin with the background to Paul's epistle to the Ephesians.

BACKGROUND

Paul's job as an apostle was to provide authoritative teaching and leadership to the church, and he did this partly by writing letters. But Paul didn't just want to spread sound doctrine or record it for posterity. First and foremost, he wanted to minister to the church in his own day by applying sound doctrine. His letters were pastoral and caring, and they spoke directly to the problems that the church faced in the first century.

This means that as we study Paul's letter to the Ephesians, it helps to begin by asking questions like: To whom was this letter written? And what significant issues were

they facing in life? Knowing the answers to questions like these will help us make greater sense of Paul's teachings.

As we look at the background of Paul's epistle to the Ephesians, we'll focus our attention on three matters: First, we'll discuss Paul's authorship of the letter. Second, we'll identify the original audience. And third, we'll look at Paul's purpose in writing to them. Let's begin by looking at Paul's authorship of the letter to the Ephesians.

AUTHORSHIP

A number of modern scholars have suggested that Paul did not actually write this letter. Instead, they have argued that Ephesians was written by one of Paul's students in order to continue Paul's legacy and apply his teaching in new ways. But there is great reason to reject this notion. For one thing, the letter states that it was written by Paul. Listen to the words of Ephesians 1:1:

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints in Ephesus (Ephesians 1:1).

Now, it is true that in the early church some false teachers forged letters under the names of other people. But whenever the church discovered a letter to be a forgery, they rejected it. Listen to Paul's teaching on this matter in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-3:

We ask you, brothers, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us ... Don't let anyone deceive you in any way (2 Thessalonians 2:1-3).

It is simply too hard to believe that an admirer or student of Paul would have contradicted Paul's own teaching by forging his name in this manner.

Beyond this, Ephesians closely resembles Paul's other letters in both doctrine and language. The connections are especially strong with Colossians, which should not surprise us since Paul probably wrote them both at about the same time. These connections are so powerful and natural that even if Paul had not stated his name in the letter, it is difficult to imagine the church ever crediting it to anyone else.

Finally, according to Acts 19-21, Paul had planted the church in Ephesus, and he had lived in Ephesus for two years. And even after that time, he had continued to maintain close relationships with its elders. It is simply unimaginable that the Ephesians would not have recognized this letter as a forgery. And similarly unimaginable is the idea that the early church would not have rooted out a forgery supposedly sent from such a prominent apostle to such a prominent church.

AUDIENCE

Having looked at Paul's authorship, we should turn our attention to the original audience of the letter to the Ephesians.

We will investigate Paul's audience in two parts, turning first to his primary

audience, namely, the church in Ephesus, and then to his secondary audience, especially the churches of the Lycus Valley. Let's begin by looking at the church in Ephesus as Paul's primary audience.

Primary Audience

Let's look once more at the words of Ephesians 1:1:

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints in Ephesus (Ephesians 1:1).

In the address of this letter, Paul identified the church in Ephesus as his audience.

Ephesus was the capital city of the Roman Province of Asia which corresponds roughly to the modern region known as Asia Minor. During the first century, it was one of the most populous and important cities in the Roman Empire, serving as a gateway between the eastern and western worlds. Geographically it lay on the coast of the Aegean Sea not too far north of the Meander River.

Now, we should mention that some scholars believe that this letter was not originally sent to the Ephesians. There are a variety of reasons for their doubt, but all of them are poorly founded. For one thing, some scholars point to the fact that some manuscripts of this letter are missing the words "in Ephesus" in Ephesians 1:1. While this is true, most manuscripts actually do contain these words, and no known manuscript names a different audience.

Beyond this, many details in the letter would have been particularly relevant to Ephesus. Consider just two examples.

First, we know from Acts 19 that during his time in Ephesus Paul had clashed with worshippers of the pagan goddess Artemis and with many occult practices. Correspondingly, in Ephesians 5:11 he taught strongly against "fruitless deeds of darkness," and in Ephesians 6:11-12 he insisted that Christians battle against the false pagan gods.

Second, we know from archeological research that the city of Ephesus was considered to be the "nurturer" of Artemis, and Artemis was said to have made Ephesus the most "glorious" city in the province of Asia. In relation to this, in Ephesians 5:27-29 Paul spoke of Christ as "feeding" or "nurturing," the church and talked about how Christ is turning the church into his "glorious," radiant bride.

These and other details appear to have been tailored to resonate particularly with the Ephesian church.

Finally, several early church fathers testified that Paul sent this letter to the Ephesians. For instance, Clement of Alexandria, writing near the end of the second century, wrote these words in chapter 5 of his work *The Instructor*:

And writing to the Ephesians, Paul has unfolded in the clearest manner the point in question, speaking to the following effect.

Clement followed this preface with the full text of Ephesians 4:13-15.

Similarly, Tertullian, who wrote at the very beginning of the third century, had this to say in his work *Against Marcion*, book 5, chapter 17:

We have it on the true tradition of the Church, that this epistle was sent to the Ephesians, not to the Laodiceans.

According to Tertullian, the whole tradition of the church prior to that time had affirmed that this letter was sent to Ephesus. And no early church witness contradicts Tertullian on this point. In short, there is strong evidence for believing that Paul intended this letter to be read by the church at Ephesus.

Now that we have looked at the evidence that the church in Ephesus was Paul's primary audience, we should turn our attention to his secondary audience, particularly the churches of the Lycus Valley.

Secondary Audience

In the first century a number of churches grew in the Lycus Valley. We know that there were churches in the cities of Colosse and Laodicea and have good reason to suspect that there was also a church in Hierapolis. Although these churches are not mentioned in Paul's letter to the Ephesians, there is good reason to suspect that Paul had them in mind as he wrote.

We will consider two types of evidence that point to the churches of the Lycus Valley as Paul's secondary audience: first, the evidence that Paul wrote to an unfamiliar audience, and second, the relevance of this letter to the churches of the Lycus Valley. Let's begin by looking at some details that suggest Paul's audience was unfamiliar to him.

Consider first Paul's words in Ephesians 1:15:

Ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints (Ephesians 1:15).

Apparently, there was a significant portion of his audience whose faith he had not seen firsthand. His words in Ephesians 3:2-3 suggest the same thing:

Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly (Ephesians 3:2-3).

Paul stated that his audience knew about his gospel, not because he had taught them previously, but because he had written about it in the earlier chapters of this very letter. But of course, Paul had personally taught the Ephesians.

Another indication that Paul wrote to many unfamiliar people is that his letter contains no personal references. In all his other canonical letters, Paul indicated that he knew his readers personally by including such things as:

- the names of individuals he knew in his audience;
- greetings to specific people;
- mentions of time he had spent with his readers;
- familiar terms of address, such as “brothers,” directed to the readers;
- expressions of his love for his readers; and
- his characterization of himself as the “spiritual father” of his readers.

In fact, Paul's epistle to the Ephesians is his only canonical letter that doesn't contain any personal references. And this is despite the fact that he had a very close relationship with the church in Ephesus. This indicates that Paul wanted his letter to circulate to a variety of churches beginning with the church in Ephesus, but continuing on to churches with which he was unfamiliar.

Having seen that Paul's audience included unfamiliar churches, we are ready to examine the evidence that he wrote to the churches in the Lycus Valley, including those in Colosse, Laodicea, and Hierapolis.

One connection to the Lycus Valley can be found in Paul's friend Tychicus. According to Ephesians 6:21-22 and Colossians 4:7-8, Tychicus delivered at least two letters for Paul: one to the church in Ephesus and one to the church in Colosse. And it is most likely that he delivered them on the same trip. Also, Paul simultaneously wrote a letter to the church in Laodicea, although this letter has not survived.

Paul mentioned his letter to the Laodiceans in Colossians 4:16, writing these words:

After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea (Colossians 4:16).

It is reasonable to assume that Tychicus also delivered the letter that Paul wrote to the Laodicean church. This would have been the best method of ensuring that both churches read both letters. And it is reasonable to think that he also carried copies of the Ephesian letter for them to read as well.

Another reason to think that Paul intended the churches in the Lycus Valley to read Ephesians is that these churches were prominent in Paul's mind during his imprisonment. Listen to his words in Colossians 2:1:

I want you to know how much I am struggling for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally (Colossians 2:1).

Paul was worried about the false teachings in Colosse, and he apparently believed that similar problems existed in Laodicea, and perhaps in other churches in the region.

For example, Paul mentioned the church of Hierapolis in Colossians 4:12-13, writing:

Epaphras ... is working hard for you and for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis (Colossians 4:12-13).

Paul's mention of Hierapolis probably indicates an organized church there. The implication seems to be that the churches of the Lycus Valley were jointly paying for Epaphras to stay with Paul, making Epaphras a constant reminder of the churches he represented.

Paul's concern for the churches of the Lycus Valley suggests that he would not have overlooked an opportunity to minister to them, especially if it only required making an additional copy of a letter for Tychicus to carry.

A third factor that should incline us to think that Ephesians was intended for the churches of the Lycus Valley is that Paul's letters to the Ephesians and Colossians address similar problems. And so, it is fair to say the epistle to the Ephesians would have been relevant and appropriate for the churches of the Lycus Valley. We will mention just one example for the sake of illustration.

As we saw in a prior lesson, the Colossians struggled against false teachers who worshiped and venerated demons. Paul countered their heresies by emphasizing the surpassing greatness of Jesus Christ over the entire cosmos and especially over the demons.

For example, in Colossians 1:16 Paul described Jesus with these words:

For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him (Colossians 1:16).

Compare this to Ephesians 1:20-22 where Paul described Christ in these terms:

Christ ... [is seated] ... far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given... And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything (Ephesians 1:20-22).

In this passage, just as in the one from Colossians that we just read, Paul used the Greek words *archē* and *exousia*, here translated rule and authority. Both these words referred primarily to spiritual beings. He also repeated his use of the Greek word *kuriotēs* which can refer either to human leaders or to spiritual beings like angels and demons. Finally, Paul employed the Greek word *dunamis*, here translated dominion. Although *dunamis* is often used to mean simply "strength" or "ability," first-century Judaism had come to apply this term to the demons that align themselves with Satan to fight against God.

The role of Tychicus as Paul's messenger, the special concern Paul had for the churches of the Lycus valley, and the similar themes between Ephesians and Colossians strongly suggest that Paul also had the churches of the Lycus Valley in mind as he wrote to the Ephesians.

Now that we have seen that Paul's original audience probably included both the church in Ephesus and the churches in the Lycus Valley, we are in a position to look more closely at his purpose in writing. Why did Paul feel the need to send this letter?

PURPOSE

Normally, Paul tailored his letters to address the specific problems of a relatively localized group of people whom he knew directly or personally. But in Ephesians he did something different: he responded to the problems of several churches in different locations, many of which he had never met.

Now, Paul's purpose in writing this letter was to deal with the problems of all these churches. But his strategy was not to address each issue individually.

Our discussion of Paul's purpose will divide into two sections: First, we will consider the theme of the kingdom of God in Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Second, we will look at how Paul addressed several challenges to the church in terms of God's kingdom. Let's look first at the theme of the kingdom of God.

Kingdom of God

Most Christians associate the expression kingdom of God with the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke. But the kingdom of God was an important motif for Paul as well. He explicitly referred to God's kingdom sixteen times in his letters, and he used other royal vocabulary at least as often.

In prior lessons we have emphasized that Paul's eschatology, his doctrine of the last days, was central to his thinking. Paul understood that Christ was bringing history to its great climax, beginning with his earthly ministry, continuing in the age of the church, and eventually reaching completion in Christ's triumphal return. Paul commonly spoke of Christ's work in terms of the overlap between the present age of sin and death, and the age to come in which God will pour out ultimate blessings and curses.

But when Jesus and the gospel writers spoke of the age to come, they generally described it in terms of the kingdom of God. They saw it as the time when God's kingdom would be manifested on earth as it is in heaven. And of course, Paul believed this too.

From this perspective, it would be hard to overstate the importance of the kingdom of God in Paul's thinking. In fact, according to Paul's friend and traveling companion Luke, preaching about the kingdom of God formed the core of Paul's apostolic ministry. Listen to Luke's words in Acts 28:30-31:

For two whole years Paul ... preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 28:30-31).

At the time in question, Paul was in prison in Rome — probably the very place and time that he wrote his epistle to the Ephesians. And notice how Luke described Paul's ministry there. Instead of saying that Paul preached "the gospel," Luke said that Paul preached "the kingdom of God."

In the modern church, people most often associate the "gospel" or "good news" with things like the forgiveness of an individual's sins and the promise of an individual's everlasting life. And these are wonderful aspects of our hope.

But in the Bible, the gospel is cosmic in scope. It is the message that our divine King is using his power and authority to subject his enemies and to conquer sin, to redeem his people from their bondage and to establish them as rulers over the new earth. This is why Jesus and the gospel writers so often spoke of “the gospel of the kingdom.” And so, it is fair to say that when Paul instructed the Ephesians regarding the nature of the kingdom of God, he was giving them the larger picture of the gospel.

Although Paul explicitly mentioned the kingdom of God only a few times in Ephesians, he alluded to it frequently. Often his vocabulary recalled both the Old Testament kingdom of Israel and the contemporary Roman Empire. Both these associations reminded Paul's readers that his gospel was about a kingdom, specifically, the kingdom of God.

Let's consider six ways that Paul drew attention to God's kingdom in Ephesians beginning with the concept of citizenship, which Paul mentioned in Ephesians 2:12, 19. In the Old Testament God's people were organized as a kingdom, specifically, the kingdom of Israel. God was their king and they were the citizens of his kingdom. Similarly, the most valuable and well-known citizenship in Paul's day was citizenship in the Roman Empire. For these reasons, when Paul spoke of Christians as “citizens,” his audience would have understood that they were citizens in a kingdom.

The same is true of the concept of inheritance, which Paul mentioned in Ephesians 1:14, 18 as well as in 5:5. In the Old Testament, only citizens of the kingdom of Israel were given an inheritance in the Promised Land. And in the Roman Empire, only citizens had rights of inheritance. In other words, inheritance rights were only available to citizens of the kingdoms. And in fact, Paul explicitly associated our inheritance with Christ's kingdom.

And consider military service which Paul mentioned in Ephesians 6:10-18. War was associated most directly with the concept of kingdoms. In the Old Testament, all able-bodied male citizens of the kingdom were required to serve in the army of Israel. And in the Roman Empire, only citizens were required to perform military service. So, Paul's insistence that Christians engage in spiritual warfare also implied citizenship in God's kingdom.

Further, rule over creation, mentioned in places such as Ephesians 1:20-2:6, was associated with God's kingdom. In the Old Testament one of Israel's chief goals was to expand its dominion over the earth. The same was true in the Roman Empire. So, when Paul taught that believers are seated with Christ in positions of authority over all creation, he indicated that Christ was a king and that believers are both citizens and authorities within his kingdom.

Even the reference in Ephesians 3:15 to the source of our names has royal associations. In the Old Testament God's people were called by his name because they were part of his kingdom.

For example, listen to the words of Amos 9:11-12:

“In that day I will restore David's fallen tent... so that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations that bear my name,” declares the Lord (Amos 9:11-12).

When the Lord spoke of restoring David's tent, he meant that he would restore the

kingdom of Israel under the kingship of David's descendants as part of the climax of human history. And those who were added to this restored kingdom were to be called by God's name.

Naming also had a kingdom connection in the Roman Empire. Specifically, it was common for those who were granted citizenship in the empire to take the name of the one who sponsored them for citizenship, or the name of the emperor who granted citizenship. In either case, taking the name of another was an aspect of joining the empire.

Finally, in Ephesians 6:20, Paul spoke of himself as God's ambassador. In both the Old Testament and Roman settings, an ambassador was an official representative of the king or emperor.

In these and many other ways, Paul revealed that his broad concerns in this letter were directly related to his concept of the kingdom of God.

Now that we have looked at the theme of the kingdom of God in Paul's letter to the Ephesians, we are ready to turn to the challenges to God's kingdom that Paul addressed.

Challenges

Paul mentioned many challenges that faced the churches in Ephesus and the Lycus Valley, but for the sake of time we will mention just three: the "old self" or sinful nature that fights against the "new self" within every believer encouraging us to sin; the racial tensions between the Jewish and Gentile Christians; and demonic forces.

First, when Paul wrote about our sinful nature and sinful habits, he appealed to kingdom language, teaching that sin must not characterize the citizens of God's kingdom. For example, in Ephesians 5:5, Paul wrote these words:

No immoral, impure or greedy person ... has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God (Ephesians 5:5).

Citizens in God's kingdom may either obey or disobey Christ. If they obey, being faithful to their king, they inherit the blessings of the covenant including things like forgiveness of sins, and eternal life. But if a citizen rejects Christ, rebelling against the king and the salvation he offers, that person has no inheritance in Christ's kingdom.

Second, Paul used the imagery of the kingdom of God to address the matter of racial or ethnic tension between Jews and Gentiles in the church. Listen to his words in Ephesians 2:11-13:

Formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" ... were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise ... But now in Christ Jesus you ... have been brought near (Ephesians 2:11-13).

Here, Paul contrasted the condition of his "uncircumcised" Gentile readers before they came to faith in Christ with their condition after they came to faith. Before they

came to faith, they were foreigners rather than citizens of Israel, God's kingdom on earth. But once the Gentiles came to faith, they became full citizens of the kingdom.

Paul also said that when the Gentiles used to be excluded from the covenants of promise. The Old Testament covenants were national, theocratic treaties between God and Israel. They were the legal arrangements by which God administered his kingdom on earth. Once the Gentiles were grafted into God's kingdom by Christ, they came under the authority of these national covenants. And as a result, they were entitled to the covenant blessings.

Paul's discussion of the church in terms of citizenship and covenants indicated that Paul was speaking of the church as God's kingdom. In short, Paul taught that Jews and Gentiles are reconciled to one another partly because they are now citizens in the same kingdom.

Finally, Paul used kingdom language to address the matter of the demonic forces that challenged the church.

As we saw in a prior lesson, the churches in the Lycus Valley were troubled by false teachers. These false teachers borrowed from Greek religion and mistaken understandings of Jewish law in order to persuade Christians to worship various spiritual powers including demons as well as the basic elements of the universe: earth, air, water and fire. Paul characterized these demons and basic elements in a number of ways that related to his theology of the kingdom of God. But his most explicit statement to this effect appears in Ephesians 2:1-2.

You were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient (Ephesians 2:1-2).

Paul said that the demons have their own kingdom, which he called the kingdom of the air. This kingdom has a ruler, or king, who governs it. As we know from the rest of Scripture, that evil spirit is Satan. Not surprisingly, Paul later described the opposition between the church and the kingdom of Satan as a war between kingdoms. Listen to his words in Ephesians 6:12:

Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 6:12).

The church as God's kingdom is in a cosmic battle with the kingdom of darkness, which is ruled by Satan and his demons.

Paul's original audience had a fairly broad variety of problems, ranging from personal sin to racial tension to paganism and demons. And Paul determined that the best way to address these divergent problems was by relating them all to a common theme. So, he cast them all in light of the sweeping, cosmic reality of the kingdom of God in Christ, giving his readers the big picture of what God was accomplishing.

The Lord had created his people anew, giving them citizenship in his kingdom so

that they were no longer enslaved to their sinful natures or to Satan's kingdom. He had called them and enabled them to live in harmony with one another, partaking of the blessings of his kingdom. And he had armed them against their demonic foes.

By appealing to the theme of the kingdom of God in this manner, Paul gave these early churches a way to conceive of the Christian life as a whole, and encouraged them to live it with love and dedication.

STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

Now that we have explored the background to Paul's epistle to the Ephesians, we are in a position to survey the structure and content of Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus.

Paul's epistle to the Ephesians can be divided into five major sections. It includes a salutation in 1:1-2; praise to God in 1:3-14; an explanation of Paul's constant prayer for the Ephesians in 1:15-23; the main body contrasting the kingdoms of light and darkness in 2:1-6:20; and final greetings in 6:21-24.

SALUTATION

The salutation appears in 1:1-2. It states that the letter comes from the apostle Paul, and mentions that he holds his apostleship "by the will of God." This reference to God's will identifies Paul as God's official representative so that Paul's words carry divine authority. The salutation concludes with a standard greeting in the form of a brief blessing.

PRAISE

A section of praise to God appears next in 1:3-14. This is Paul's only canonical letter in which the salutation is followed by such a section of praise to God. Typically Paul followed his salutation with a personal reference or greeting. But as we have seen, there are no personal references of any type in the epistle to the Ephesians.

We don't know for certain why Paul decided not to include any personal greetings. Maybe he thought that a section of praise would work better in a circular letter. Or maybe he wanted to lay the groundwork for the doctrinal sections that followed. Some have seen this section as the beginning of a dialog of prayer that spans the first three chapters. Others have pointed out that in the ancient world doxologies to the king were common in official writings. In all likelihood, Paul's reasons for structuring the letter in this way were complex. Probably he did it for a variety of reasons, including at least some of those we have mentioned.

Figuring out Paul's motives for including this praise may be hard, but recognizing its content is easy. We might focus on such things as: its strong Trinitarian theology

throughout these verses, explicitly honoring the work of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; or its emphasis on salvation through the atonement of Jesus Christ in verse 7; or the revelation of the mystery of the gospel in verse 9; or the promise of our future glory, ensured by the gift of the Holy Spirit, in verses 11-14. And all of these ideas are worthy of attention.

But there is a larger idea that not only includes all of these threads of Paul's praise but also explains many more details mentioned in this passage. And not surprisingly, that idea is the kingdom of God.

For example, in verses 4 and 5, Paul honored God for his sovereign rule, praising him for predestining certain individuals to be his special people. In verses 9 and 10 Paul also praised God for his sovereign rule over all creation that will eventually bring all things under the headship of Christ.

Beyond this, in verses 5-7, Paul praised God's benevolence toward his people. God demonstrated his mercy by adopting, redeeming and forgiving his people. Great benevolences were commonly directed by ancient kings toward their people, although God's benevolences certainly outweigh any offered by merely human rulers.

And in verse 14 Paul praised God for our inheritance in Christ. This pertains to God's kingdom because in 5:5 Paul identified our inheritance as an "inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God," and because inheritance rights belonged only to citizens of the kingdom.

PRAYER

After this introductory praise, the next section is a prayer for Paul's readers found in Ephesians 1:15-23.

Paul's prayer consists essentially of three parts: his thankfulness for the believers to whom he wrote; a twofold petition that the Holy Spirit would enlighten them; and an extended explanation of that enlightenment.

Paul's prayer repeats all the same elements that we looked at in the preceding section of praise. It includes strong Trinitarian theology explicitly honoring the work of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, as in verse 17. It emphasizes that salvation comes through the atonement of Jesus Christ in verses 19 and 20. Its main petition, in verses 17-19, is for further revelation of the gospel, in the form of enlightenment that enables believers to understand the blessings they have received. And it speaks of the hope of our future glory in verse 18.

And just like the section on praise, the larger idea of the kingdom of God provides the context in which all of these other ideas are mentioned.

When we explored the theme of the kingdom of God in Paul's praise, we focused on three details: God's sovereign rule, which includes his power and authority; God's benevolence, which consists of the good things he freely gives to us; and our inheritance in Christ, which includes all the blessings of God's covenant with his people. And not surprisingly, all three of these kingdom elements are present in his prayer as well.

Paul mentioned God's sovereignty when he spoke of the Father's "incomparably great power" and "mighty strength" in verse 19 and when he spoke of Christ being enthroned above all other rulers in verse 21.

And he spoke of God's benevolence when he mentioned that God's power is "for us who believe" in verse 19, as well as when he said that Christ rules as king for the benefit of the church in verses 22 and 23.

And finally, in verse 18 Paul spoke directly of Christ's "glorious inheritance in the saints," which is the hope to which believers are called. Paul was able to speak of Christ's inheritance as our hope because, as he teaches in the body of the letter, Christ shares his inheritance with us so that his inheritance is our inheritance, too. Simultaneously, this alludes to the common Old Testament idea, found for example in Deuteronomy 9:26-29, that the kingdom of Israel was God's own inheritance, and that the people of kingdom were greatly blessed by this arrangement.

BODY

Having seen the kingdom focus of Paul's praise and petition, we should turn to the main body of this epistle found in 2:1-6:20. The body focuses on the contrast between the righteous kingdom of God on the one hand and the sinful kingdom of demons and fallen humanity on the other hand.

There are many ways to outline the main body of Paul's epistle to the Ephesians. But in line with our focus in this lesson, our outline will emphasize how the themes of the main body relate to the topic of God's kingdom. We will divide the body into three primary sections: first, Paul's teaching on citizenship in the kingdom in 2:1-22; second, his explanation of the administration of the kingdom in 3:1-21; and third, a code for living within the kingdom found in 4:1-6:20. We will take a closer look at each of these sections, so let's begin by looking at citizenship in the kingdom of light in 2:1-22.

Citizenship

Paul's teaching on citizenship in God's kingdom of light can be divided into three sections: First, Ephesians 2:1-3 focuses on the fact that fallen human beings are born into the kingdom of darkness and are enemies of God by nature. Second, Ephesians 2:4-10 details the way God grants us citizenship in his kingdom by transferring us from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light. Third, Ephesians 2:11-22 discusses the nature of our citizenship in the kingdom of light.

First, Paul reminded his readers that the human race is sinful and fallen. We are spiritually dead; we have evil natures; we serve God's enemies; and as a result we are liable to fall under God's wrath on the Day of Judgment. Listen to the way he described fallen humanity in Ephesians 2:1-3:

You were dead in your transgressions and sins ... you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air... All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath (Ephesians 2:1-3).

Fallen human beings are God's enemies. Before God saves us, we willingly follow our sinful natures, and we serve Satan, the ruler of the kingdom of the air.

But as we saw earlier in this lesson, God sovereignly ruled that some people would inherit salvation. So, in Ephesians 2:4-10, Paul turned to the fact that God uses his royal prerogative to transfer them from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light. As part of this process he renews our spirits so that we are spiritually alive. And he recreates us in Christ so that we have new natures that love God. He also predestines good works for us to do so that we serve God instead of his enemies. And as a result, we look forward to incomparable riches in the coming age, rather than to God's wrath and judgment.

The final topic Paul addressed in this section was the way God has now fulfilled the Old Testament ideal of combining both Jews and Gentiles into one kingdom under God's sovereign rule. This ideal is mentioned throughout the Old Testament.

For example, in Psalm 22:27-28 David laid out this vision for the future of the kingdom of God:

All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations will bow down before him, for dominion belongs to the Lord and he rules over the nations (Psalm 22:27-28).

In Paul's day, however, the status of Gentile Christians was a highly controversial matter. The Jewish Christians did not generally object to the conversion of the Gentiles. But some of them did feel that Gentiles were second-class Christians.

Before Christ came the Jews actually did receive preferential treatment in God's kingdom. God's covenant people consisted primarily of the nation of Israel, and the fullest covenantal blessings belonged to free male Jews. Paul knew this truth of Old Testament faith. But through the apostles, the New Testament teaches that that all believers — whether Jew or Gentile, male or female, slave or free — receive eternal covenant blessings only through union with Christ. In Christ, each believer is counted as if he or she were Jesus himself, the free male Jew who kept God's covenant perfectly, and inherited all the covenant blessings.

As a result, the old distinctions between Jews and Gentiles in God's kingdom are obsolete. Because everyone gains salvation in the same way, the new standard is equal status and equal treatment for every citizen regardless of ethnicity. And because of this, all citizens of the kingdom of light are full citizens with the same rights and privileges, including full access to God. As Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:13-19:

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near... For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household (Ephesians 2:13-19).

Now that we have looked at the idea of citizenship in God's kingdom of light, we should turn to Paul's teachings on the administration of the kingdom, which he presented in Ephesians 3:1-21.

Administration

It should be obvious that every kingdom needs some sort of administrative structure. Kingdoms can't function well if they have only a king and a citizenry. Other government offices must exist through which the king administers his kingdom. In typical human governments, these include various levels and types of leadership such as those who make the laws, those who execute the laws, and those who judge violations of the laws. And the same is true in God's kingdom of light, especially as it is manifested in the church. The Bible teaches that the church is to be ruled by elders and that these elders are accountable to one another and to God.

In Paul's day false teachers were challenging the authority structure of the church. In fact, just before his arrest in Jerusalem, Paul had warned the Ephesian elders that false teachers would arise from their own ranks. In Acts 20:28-30 Luke recorded these words that Paul spoke to the Ephesian elders:

Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers... I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them (Acts 20:28-30).

Paul knew that false teachers would arise and that they would trouble the church. So, he instructed the elders to guard against these false teachers.

But what gave Paul the right to assign this task to the elders and to condemn the false teachers? Well, in Paul's day, there was another church office through which God administered his kingdom, one that existed as a foundational office but that no longer exists today. And this was the office of apostle. It was held by those who were picked and trained by God himself and who had met the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ — men such as Paul. The apostles were vested with God's authority and ruled infallibly over the entire church, including over the elders.

In Ephesians 3:2-7 Paul described his apostolic authority in relation to the administration of God's kingdom. Listen to his words there:

Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation ... which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets... I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power (Ephesians 3:2-7).

The apostles possessed special grace from God that empowered them in their ministry, and special revelation from God that taught them infallible truth. And they received an assignment from God to teach this revelation to the church. So, as an apostle it was Paul's obligation and right to explain the rules of God's kingdom to its citizens and to condemn

those who stood against him.

God appointed Paul to be his official representative on earth, his apostle. And this apostleship made Paul's word authoritative, as if it had been spoken by God himself. But why was Paul's authority so important at this point in his epistle to the Ephesians? To put it simply, the church needs to know whom to trust. If we are to please God, we have to be informed. We have to know what God requires of us. But in Paul's day, there were so many false teachings circulating that it was hard to know what God's requirements really were. The false teachers said one thing, the established leadership of the church said another.

Paul solved this problem by exerting his apostolic authority. He reminded his readers that because he was an apostle, his authority and insight were greater than all others. No false teacher could claim to be an apostle, and therefore no false teacher could have Paul's insight, or speak with divine authority. Paul, on the other hand, spoke God's words to God's people in order to lead them into the truth.

Wisely, Paul's teaching on the administration of the kingdom did not end with his assertion of authority but with a prayer, found in Ephesians 3:14-21. Paul had been a missionary, pastor, and apostle long enough to know that people don't recognize or accept the truth just because they hear it. He knew that he had the words of life, but he also knew that he couldn't make fallen people believe them. And so, he prayed that the Holy Spirit would illumine their minds so that they would accept his authority and teaching. And he prayed that consequently they would live in ways that built up the kingdom of God and blessed its citizens.

Now that we have looked at the ideas of citizenship and administration in relation to God's kingdom, we should turn to the code for living in the kingdom of light, recorded in 4:1-6:20.

Code for Living

This code for living in the kingdom contains many different instructions on Christian behavior. But it can be summarized in the following way: we read of ecclesiastical order in the kingdom in Ephesians 4:1-16; purifying the kingdom in 4:17-5:20; domestic order in the kingdom in 5:21-6:9; and finally, the warfare of the kingdom in 6:10-20.

The section on ecclesiastical order in the kingdom, found in Ephesians 4:1-16, focuses primarily on positions of leadership, influence, and authority in the church. And Paul's teaching emphasizes the ways these roles work together for the good of all. Citizens are not to be envious of one another, but rather, appreciative of the contributions their brothers and sisters make. When each person does his or her assigned tasks, it benefits Christ. And because it benefits Christ, it benefits the whole kingdom.

Consider in this regard Paul's words in Ephesians 4:8:

When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men (Ephesians 4:8).

In this passage Paul referred to Psalm 68:18, which portrays the Lord as a

victorious king returning from battle. In Psalm 68 the Lord receives spoils of war from his conquered enemies. Paul, however, focused on what the Lord does with these gifts. Like ancient kings he shares them with his army. So, in a very real sense, these gifts benefit not only Christ, but the people of his kingdom.

Paul described some of these gifts in Ephesians 4:7-12:

To each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it... It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up (Ephesians 4:7-12).

Christ has divided his gifts in ways that enable the citizens of his kingdom to serve one another. And by this service, Christ's kingdom is increased and strengthened.

Chapter 4:17–5:20 explains the issue of purifying the kingdom of light from the corruption that remains within it. This corruption, or sin, was bred and nourished within us when we were citizens of Satan's kingdom of darkness. It is the product of our old, sinful nature, which we still retain even as citizens of the kingdom of light. But those within the kingdom of light who are believers also have a new nature that they can rely on to overcome their sin.

As Paul wrote in Ephesians 4:22-24:

You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness (Ephesians 4:22-24).

God's kingdom is to be as morally pure as possible; it is to reflect the character of its king. And this is for the benefit of the whole kingdom. After all, God blesses and rewards moral purity. So, by refraining from sin, and by doing good works, the citizens increase the blessedness of the kingdom and ensure their inheritance in it.

The subject of domestic order in the kingdom of light is handled in Ephesians 5:21–6:9. This section speaks of maintaining the proper authority structures that exist within households and of the way each party within the authority relationships is to relate to one another.

In many ways this section resembles Paul's teaching on ecclesiastical order, found in Ephesians 4:1-16. In that section, Paul taught that everyone should honor and respect those who hold positions of leadership, influence, and authority in the church, and he taught those in positions of leadership to work for the benefit of all.

In this section on domestic order, Paul affirmed the authority structures between husbands and wives, parents and children, and masters and slaves. And he taught each party in these relationships to function in ways that honored and benefited all parties. And again, the reason was that these structures enhance life in the kingdom of God.

Lastly, in 6:10-20 Paul spoke of the warfare between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness. Here Paul spoke of the fact that everyone in the kingdom of light is

called to serve in God's army, fighting the spiritual war against the kingdom of darkness. Paul summarized this final section of the letter's body in Ephesians 6:11-12 where he wrote these words:

Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 6:11-12).

The devil and his kingdom war against the church and the kingdom of light, and our divine king demands our loyalty in this battle. To make sure that we can stand firm against our enemies, he suits us in his armor and arms us with his word.

FINAL GREETINGS

The last section of Paul's epistle to the Ephesians is the closing, found in Ephesians 6:21-24. In this short passage, Paul offered a closing blessing, and indicated that Tychicus would deliver this letter.

MODERN APPLICATION

Now that we have investigated the background to Paul's epistle to the Ephesians and explored its structure and content, we are ready to address the modern application of the teaching Paul originally directed to the Ephesians.

Our application of Paul's letter to the Ephesians will divide into three parts, moving from narrower to broader aspects of God's kingdom: First, we will talk about honoring the king. Second, we will discuss building the kingdom. And third, we will address the topic of conquering the cosmos. Let's begin with the subject of honoring the king.

HONORING THE KING

As we have seen, Paul's epistle to the Ephesians appeals to the idea that God is the divine king over all creation, and especially over the kingdom of his people. And our divine king has done so many wonderful things for us that we should eagerly respond by honoring him, especially through thankfulness, obedience, and loyalty.

Now, in keeping with the way ancient societies talked about kings and their people, Paul described God's royal benevolence to us in terms of "love." And he described our obligations to him in the same way. For example, listen to Paul's words in Ephesians 2:4-7:

Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions... And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms ... in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:4-7).

This passage is part of Paul's larger argument explaining how God makes us citizens in his kingdom. And his point in these verses is that God demonstrates his love when he regenerates us, transfers us into his kingdom, places us in a position of authority and honor, and gives us our inheritance.

In the ancient world, kings often expressed love for their subjects, and they also required their subjects to love them. In this national context, the word "love" described faithfulness and devotion, much like we speak of loving our countries even today. And it was expressed primarily by benevolence and protection on the part of the king, and by obedience and loyalty on the part of his subjects.

And this is precisely what we see in Paul's description of God's love for his people. The historical facts of the gospel prove that God is committed to the people of his kingdom and that he values us highly. His faithfulness to us is demonstrated through his kindness and protection as expressed in things like our predestination, Christ's death on our behalf, the regeneration of our spirits, our citizenship in God's kingdom, our union with Christ the heavenly king, and the glory we will inherit in the future. And because God has done all these wonderful things for us, we are obligated to honor him in return.

Listen to Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3:17-4:1:

I pray that you ... may have power ... to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge ... Now ... to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen. As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received (Ephesians 3:17-4:1).

Paul drew two applications from God's love in this passage: First, he honored God in doxological praise by ascribing glory to him. Second, Paul exhorted his readers to honor God through their obedience by living a worthy life.

We will look more closely at both of these ways we are to honor God, beginning with the praise and worship we are to render to him, and then moving on to our lives of obedience to him. Let's turn first to praise and worship.

Praise and Worship

In Ephesians 5:19-20, Paul explicitly instructed his readers to honor God through praise and worship, writing these words:

Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ (Ephesians 5:19-20).

Christians are always to be thankful for all of God's blessings. And we are to express our heartfelt gratitude in psalms, hymns, spiritual songs, and music in our hearts. These are all forms of praise and worship, whether we express them outwardly to others or inwardly to the Lord alone.

Besides instructing us to praise God, Paul included several models of praise for us to follow, including his introductory praise in Ephesians 1:3-14 and his doxological prayer in Ephesians 3:14-21. Both of these passages show us how to honor God through similar praise and doxology.

As we have seen, in both these sections Paul focused on the work of each person of the Trinity, the atonement of Jesus, God's revelation to us, and the future glory God has planned for us. And he mentioned these things in the context of honoring God for his kingship over us, speaking of God's sovereign rule, his benevolence toward us, and our inheritance in Christ.

Now, these are not the only acceptable ways to honor God as king. On the contrary, as Paul taught in Ephesians 5:19-20, we are to honor God for everything, not just for these few things. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that when we honor God in praise and worship, it is right to acknowledge specific things that he has done.

Besides praise and worship, Paul also taught us to render obedience to our divine king as a way of honoring him.

Obedience

One way that we are to express our obedience to God is by remaining fervently and persistently loyal to him, forsaking the powers and principalities. As Paul wrote in Ephesians 5:8-10:

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light ... and find out what pleases the Lord (Ephesians 5:8-10).

We used to be citizens of Satan's kingdom of darkness. But now our loyalties have shifted. Because God has saved us, we owe him our obedience; we owe it to him to leave behind the sinful ways of the kingdom of darkness and to live in ways that please our new Lord and king.

Paul wrote again of this loyalty in Ephesians 6:24, where he pronounced this conditional blessing:

Grace to all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love. (Ephesians 6:24)

Our love for the Lord is to be “undying,” never-ending, persistent, devoted, steadfast.

God wants and demands our complete devotion and dedication. It won't work simply to add him to a pantheon of gods that we worship; he insists on our undivided loyalty. And he does not just want our passive loyalty, as if we might turn away from false gods and then simply rest in the blessings of his kingdom. No, he wants us to obey all his commands, not only forsaking other gods, but also actively doing the many good works he has planned for us.

Paul's words in Ephesians 2:8-10 offer insight in this regard:

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God... For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do (Ephesians 2:8-10).

God did not save us just to keep us from perishing, or just so that we would enjoy a comfortable life in his kingdom. Rather, God also created us anew in Christ so that we would be productive citizens in his kingdom, doing the good works he has assigned to us.

In God's kingdom, good works play a specific role: they are tools by which God expands and purifies his kingdom, receives glory, and ministers to his people. And according to Paul, God's purpose in saving us was to ensure that we would do these good works. So, the proper response to God's grace is to accept our appointment as his servants and ministers. It is to adopt his goal as our goal, his purpose as our purpose. This is why Paul so often encouraged his readers to live in a “worthy” manner, one that reflected the character of the king and of his kingdom.

Now that we have considered some ways of honoring the king, we should turn to Paul's strategy for building the kingdom. Just as God requires our loving praise and obedience, he also requires that we help him expand and grow his earthly kingdom.

BUILDING THE KINGDOM

To help us understand how to build the kingdom of God on earth, Paul employed a number of metaphors. Each one offered insight into how the citizens of God's kingdom are to relate to one another and to Christ, as well as into how we are to cooperate in growing God's kingdom. We will mention two such metaphors, beginning with the way Paul compared the kingdom to God's temple.

Listen to Paul's words to the Gentile Christians in Ephesians 2:19-22:

You are ... members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit (Ephesians 2:19-22).

Paul taught that the Gentile Christians were full citizens in God's kingdom, with equal

status to the Jewish Christian citizens. And to emphasize this fact, he described the kingdom of God as a building, with each Christian being a stone in the structure.

In this metaphor Christ has the position of preeminence, being the cornerstone of the foundation, the one on which all the other stones rely, in whom the whole building is united. The apostles and prophets held positions of high authority under Christ, being specially called as his representatives. All other Christians are stones in the structure, without distinction among us.

Now, the goal of this building was to become God's dwelling so that God could live in the midst of his people. The nation of Israel realized a blessing like this in the Old Testament, especially through the Temple in Jerusalem, just as Solomon proclaimed in 2 Chronicles 6. But the Old Testament also taught that the Gentiles would eventually live in God's presence, too.

For example, listen to God's words in Isaiah 66:19-20:

They will proclaim my glory among the nations. And they will bring all your brothers, from all the nations, to my holy mountain in Jerusalem as an offering to the LORD (Isaiah 66:19-20).

In this passage God taught that when he restored the kingdom to Israel — which he began to do in the New Testament through Jesus — the Israelites would return to the Temple in Jerusalem to worship the Lord. And strikingly, the Gentiles would come with them, actually bringing the Israelites to God as a holy offering from the nations.

So, when Paul taught that both Jews and Gentiles would live in God's presence as his Temple, he meant that God's kingdom was moving toward its final goal. This meant that God's kingdom blessings were now being extended to all races. But why did Paul use this specific metaphor? Appropriately, he used it to foster racial reconciliation between the Jews and the Gentiles in the church.

In Paul's day, some Jewish Christians perpetuated the idea that Jews were superior to Gentiles because they were the chosen people of God. They had received preferential treatment from God for so long that they had begun to think they deserved it.

But the truth is that all mankind, Jew and Gentile alike, is lost without Christ. None of us is the least bit deserving of blessing; all of us deserve to be condemned. Only Christ is deserving of blessing. Thankfully, because we are united to him, God counts us as deserving of blessing too.

So, as we build God's kingdom today, we must focus on the big picture of honoring God and living in his presence, and of striving to increase Christ's glory rather than our own. And we must be humble toward one another, recognizing that no believer is more deserving of blessing than any other.

Obviously, this means that modern racial and ethnic barriers in the church must be destroyed. But it also means that we must repent of other ways that we wrongly divide from one another, or wrongly elevate ourselves to the detriment of others. Perhaps our church leadership considers itself more important than the laity, or perhaps we treat wealthy Christians with more respect than we treat poor Christians. Perhaps we value our local congregation or our denomination so highly that we look down on those in other churches and seek to work independently from them as we build God's kingdom. In all such cases, Paul's teaching is that we must put aside our vanity and arrogance and

embrace all believers as our equals in the kingdom of God.

Now, as useful as the metaphor of the temple was, the metaphor that Paul used most frequently to explain kingdom building in his letter to the Ephesians was that of a body — specifically Christ's body, with Christ as the head, and with all believers collectively composing Christ's body. Paul used this metaphor in chapters 1, 3, 4, and 5 in order to draw out several different points of application.

He introduced this metaphor in Ephesians 1:20-23 with these words:

[God] raised [Christ] from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority... And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body (Ephesians 1:20-23).

Like the metaphor of the temple, this one also described the kingdom of God: Christ was seated as king in heaven, and ruled for the benefit of his people, the church.

Paul continued with this imagery in Ephesians 3:6, adding:

Through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 3:6).

Paul's emphasis on racial reconciliation was evident again in this passage. He argued that Jewish and Gentile Christians are all united to Christ, and to one another in Christ, and that both receive blessings only because they partake of the promises in Christ.

Paul's fullest use of the body of Christ imagery, however, appears in 4:1-16 where he argued for ecclesiastical order in the kingdom. There he focused primarily on positions of leadership, influence, and authority in the church as means through which the rest of the church is empowered for ministry. He argued that the good works God has prepared for us consist largely of services to one another, for the purpose of building up the church so that it becomes a fitting kingdom for the Lord of the universe to rule. Listen to Paul's words in Ephesians 4:11-13:

[God] gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-13).

God has established leaders in the church who are to prepare the rest of us to minister to one another.

And these leaders are to guide the church toward two goals. The first of these is reaching "unity in the faith." Here Paul had in mind that the church is to be doctrinally unified, having a mature and accurate understanding, and not being satisfied with only a basic understanding of the gospel. This is in keeping with Paul's earlier prayers that God would enable Paul's readers to understand God's kingdom blessings in Christ.

The second goal is “attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” This goal is cosmic in scope; it is to bring all of creation under the rule of Christ, just as Paul taught in Ephesians 1:10. As amazing as it might sound, through proper church leadership and dedicated ministry among Christians, the entire universe can be brought under the lordship of Christ.

Paul continued this metaphor in Ephesians 4:15-16, where he explained some specific things the church leaders were to teach the people to do:

Speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work (Ephesians 4:15-16).

As each church leader speaks the truth in love to the church body, the body learns that truth. As a result, each Christian is able to minister meaningfully to others, performing works of service and encouragement. But notice something else as well: love must characterize both the leader's teaching and the church's works of service.

Now, just as God's love for us and our love for God are defined primarily in terms of loyalty and dedication within the kingdom, our love for other Christians is also defined in this way. Our love for our neighbors is not so much a feeling of personal connection, but rather a loyal commitment and dedication that seeks their benefit, even if we don't know them personally.

But this love is not mere cooperation or synergism. Rather, Christian love understands that our fellow believers are part of Christ's inheritance. Christ was willing to die in order to make them his, and he receives glory and honor because they belong to him. This should inspire us to value them more highly too, and to put forth the effort it takes to minister to them.

Now that we have explored the subjects of honoring the king and building the kingdom, we should turn to our final topic: conquering the cosmos. Jesus is the king over the church right now, but a day is coming when he will conquer all his enemies and rule over the entire universe.

CONQUERING THE COSMOS

As we have seen, God's kingdom currently co-exists or overlaps with the present age of sin and death. During this time, God's forces — including his church — battle against the kingdom of the demons and fallen humanity. But eventually Jesus will return. And when he does, he will deliver final judgment against his enemies, forever crushing their ability to resist him. Eventual victory over the powers of darkness is certain. But until that day, we are obligated to stand and fight against them.

But even in the present age of sin and death, we have the upper hand in the battle against the demonic forces. As we have seen, our king is already seated in power and authority above them, and we are seated with him. God has already rescued us from their evil dominion and restored us to a state of blessing within his kingdom. And he has empowered us with his Holy Spirit to withstand the worst attacks our enemies can

muster. Consider Paul's words in Ephesians 6:13, 16:

Put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand... Take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one (Ephesians 6:13, 16).

Through his grace and Spirit, God provides us with power to stand against the demonic hordes.

And not only this, but the many blessings that the church receives are proof to the demons that their defeat is certain. In fact, Paul went so far as to say that the very existence of the church testifies to the doom of all of God's enemies. Listen to Paul's words in Ephesians 3:8-11:

This grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord (Ephesians 3:8-11).

Even before the creation of mankind, God planned to use his church to reveal his glory to his demonic enemies. But he kept this fact a secret until the time of Christ. But now that Christ has come, God is using the church to demonstrate his wisdom and power to all his enemies. He is holding up the church as an example of his ability to defeat even the greatest schemes of the Devil, as proof of his power to reconcile all things to himself. After all, if he can redeem the human race from the corruption of sin, if he can reconcile even us to one another and to himself, there is nothing he can't do.

But we are not just on display. The church is God's prize. We are the treasure he has fought for and won from the kingdom of his enemies. We are the people God controls history to save, the beloved bride Christ gave his life to protect and to marry. Listen to Paul's description of Christ and the church in Ephesians 5:23-27:

For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church ... Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ... to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless (Ephesians 5:23-27).

God loves and values us. And in the process of reconciling all things to himself and renewing and purifying the cosmos, he is starting with us. And therefore, the existence of the church, and the forgiveness of the church, and the sanctification of the church, prove that the kingdom of God has begun. And if it has begun, then it will certainly be completed. And when it is, the demons will be utterly destroyed, and Christ's reign will be absolute. As Paul wrote of Christ in Ephesians 1:22-23:

God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way (Ephesians 1:22-23).

Paul's words here are stunning: Christ has been exalted as king of the universe in order that the church might be blessed. We are his fullness, his body.

As much as Christ deserves to rule because of his own status and merit, the reason he actually does rule is that it blesses us. And therefore, the fact that the church is blessed — the fact that Jews and Gentiles, husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and slaves are reconciled to each other and to God — is proof positive that God is powerful and good and wise, and that he has begun to renew the cosmos.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we have explored Paul's circular epistle to the Ephesians. We have looked at the background that provides the setting for the letter, and we have examined the letter's structure and content. Finally, we have considered the modern application of Paul's teachings in this epistle.

Paul's letter to the Ephesians has a very important lesson to teach us today. It teaches us that salvation is not just about individuals being redeemed from their sin. Rather, it is about building, maintaining and thriving in God's kingdom. As we improve our understandings of God's kingdom, we will be better prepared to resist its enemies, to live in ways that please God, and to gain his blessings for ourselves and for our fellow believers.

Dr. Reggie Kidd (Host) is Professor of New Testament Emeritus at Reformed Theological Seminary. He received his M.A.R. and M.Div. from Westminster Theological Seminary and his Ph.D. in Christian Origins from Duke University. He is a member of the Evangelical Theological Society and is an ordained priest in The Episcopal Church. Dr. Kidd teaches at the Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies and has served as a pastor and elder at multiple churches. He is the author of *With One Voice: Discovering Christ's Song in Our Worship* (BakerBooks, 2005) and has contributed to many other publications, including *The Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible* (Zondervan, 2003) and *The Reformation Study Bible* (Ligonier Ministries, 2005).