

SLOW PAUL: THINKING THROUGH EPHESIANS

Introduction

For an explanation of the method of *Slow Paul* please see the 'Introduction' elsewhere in the Resources section.

Did Paul write Ephesians, and if so, where was he and whom was he addressing? It has to be said that the evidence is inconclusive on all three questions. The traditional view is that it was indeed written by the apostle Paul from his house arrest situation in Rome around AD 61-2; and that it was sent to a church or churches in the Ephesus region of Asia Minor, at roughly the same time as Colossians and Philemon. Opponents of this view (basing their arguments on style, theological content and lack of personal references) have tried to produce alternative hypotheses, but these raise more problems than they solve. Perhaps Ephesians reads more like a homily, or an essay, than a letter, because it was a circular to a group of churches – it may even have been 'the letter from Laodicea' (Col 4:16). If it wasn't by Paul, then it was by someone else equally inspired, because by any standards it is a *tour de force*.

As for outside help, I ought to acknowledge that though I have tried to think through these chapters without consulting other works beforehand, I may consciously or unconsciously have drawn upon writers and teachers such as H C G Moule (1893), Watchman Nee (*Sit Watch Stand* 1964), J R W Stott (1979), Tom Wright (2004), Ben Witherington III (2007), G K Beale & D A Carson (*Commentary on the NT use of the OT* 2007) and others. Needless to say, none of these should be held responsible for any distortions or misinterpretations in what follows.

The text of *The New International Version* (2011) is printed at the head of each section for ease of checking back to what Paul 'really' wrote. Those who have the original Greek may wish to have it beside them. Section headings have been inserted, not to break the flow but to allow readers to catch their breath. As with *Romans*, there are in reality no breaks, no pauses, in the onward flow of this exhilarating work.

THE LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS

¹ Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to God's holy people in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus:
² Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Initial greeting (1:1-2)

Dear Christian believers in Ephesus and neighbouring churches,
Greetings from Paul! Yes, this is a genuine communication from Paul the apostle, and no fake missive circulating under my name. I am writing to you in the name of my Lord and Master Jesus Christ, God's own Messiah-Son, who has personally appeared to me and commissioned me to tell the world about him. The initiative has come entirely from God, not from myself in any way – though I have eagerly embraced his call.

Right from the start I want to reassure you of the unconditional love God has for you. You may think that, even though you've put your trust in Christ for salvation, you've still got to prove you are worthy of that love. Well, you aren't and never will be, but that doesn't make the slightest difference. The point is that by the simple act of committing yourself to Jesus as your Lord, you have identified yourself with him in God's sight. You are 'in' Jesus (we're going to explore this truth in all its wonderful richness). When the Father sees you, he sees his beloved Son with whom he has always been utterly delighted. So let all the tensions drop away! Your account is clear as far as God is concerned. His peace treaty with you is signed in his Son's blood. Enjoy his favour; accept it gratefully. 'Why me?' you ask. I'm going to tell you.

1³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

Imaginative centre (1:3)

Have you ever thanked God for making you spiritual billionaires? When we think of God, we don't normally burst into rhapsodies of praise for the way he's given us everything we could ever want or need. We're much more likely to go straight into our default mode of bewailing our shortcomings and secretly wondering what we've got to do to squeeze even a dribble of blessing from this Person whom we dutifully address as 'Our heavenly Father'.

Start with him, not with yourself. Take your cue from the Lord Jesus Christ, who every time he prayed (except once) called upon him as 'Father' and even used the tender and intimate name of 'Abba'. The secret of Jesus' amazing relationship with God was that even while he was on earth experiencing the creaturely limitations of a human being, his imaginative centre was with his Father in that place beyond sin and evil and pain. Though in voluntary exile far from home, he had mentally never left home.

Now, of course, his exile is over and he is back where he has always belonged, at the heart-centre of the Godhead, for ever enjoying the inexhaustible inheritance due to him as the Son. Now hold your breaths! You are there too. How is that, you ask? By the simple act of coming to him in faith, you have become one with him. Not only is he unfailingly where you are, you are where he is.

Is Jesus in heaven, resting in the Father's love? So are you. Is he serenely triumphant over any conceivable opposition? So are you. Is he heir of all things, whether in time and space or beyond? So, dear friends, are you. Your earthly address may be Ephesus or wherever, but your simultaneous address (and, I would emphasise, your true home) is c/o Jesus, the Father's right-hand side, city of God. You were born there; you live there; you are full members of the celestial company.

We can sing the songs of Zion while walking the streets of Babylon. Take time out to praise God for this fundamental reality.

1⁴ For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will — ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.

God's grace in action (1:4-6)

'But it all seems to distant, so insubstantial. How can I be sure I'm a member of the city of God?' You didn't come to Christ by accident. Way before time began or a single atom of the universe was launched into space, the High King held a meeting of the heavenly hosts and opened a book, in which he had lovingly inscribed with his own hand the names of all who should one day appear before him in the beauty of holiness. As he named each one aloud, he linked them with the name of his eternal Son.

My name is there, and so are all yours. Our birth certificates are securely lodged in the kingdom archives. There is no family jealousy in this royal household, no sibling rivalry, no jostling for preeminence or advantage. We are all sons and daughters of one Father, and brothers and sisters of one Son. This isn't something God was forced unwillingly into, or persuaded to do against his better judgment. It hasn't been a last-minute change of mind based on yesterday's acts of devotion on your part. It is his unalterable decision, taken in creative love and sovereign pleasure, as sure and certain as his eternal love for his own Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Don't look within yourself for evidence of your membership of God's family. The power that drew you and Christ together didn't originate from you. What seems like chance or coincidence from an earthly point of view is really God's grace in action, coming from beyond the horizon of space and time, from the eternal delight of Father and Son in generating star-children. That's why we think he's wonderful. That's why knowing Christ is such a precious thing for us. That's why we love him.

17 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace ⁸ that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding,

Walking free (1:7-8)

'But, Paul, just now you slipped in that all-important phrase about "the beauty of holiness". I wish! The reality is, with my history – and it continues right up to the present moment – I haven't a chance of coming within a million miles of God's holy presence. Haven't I got to clean up my act in a radical way before I start thinking about treading the streets of the new Jerusalem, let alone walking into the throne-room itself?'

I don't think you quite understand. Christ is your 'act'. He has dealt with your history – and your present and future too, for that matter. Before you asked him to be Lord of your life, you were like a prisoner shuffling round the floor of your cell dragging chains from your ankles. Today everything is different: you're walking free, no chains, no cell, no prison sentence, nothing on your record. True, we (myself included) did have a death sentence passed upon us; but he dealt with it. Does all that crucifixion agony count for nothing? When Jesus ended his life with the great cry, 'They've all been paid for!', did he add 'Except for those dreadful sinners in Ephesus'?

Superabundance of grace

We've been forgiven. To be precise, Christ and I have exchanged life records. He has taken on mine, and has accepted the full consequences. I have taken on his, and all the Father now sees, when he looks at me, is his own Son's spotless life. If you ask, 'How have I deserved this?', the answer is, you haven't. It's all down to the extravagant generosity of love, the superabundance of grace that streams from God like the light and heat of the sun, only the nearer you get to it, the less it consumes you.

God is nobody's fool. He has always known what he is doing. He has seen the end from the beginning. He has written your names and mine in letters of love, and has countersigned them with the name of Jesus, his own name; and they remain there, inscribed from everlasting to everlasting.

He knows exactly what we are like, and it doesn't make the slightest difference. We are 'in Christ', and that's all that matters. And if our act still needs cleaning up, he is committed to doing that – with our full cooperation.

⁹ he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, ¹⁰ to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfilment – to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

Everything adds up in Christ (1:9-10)

How do I know all this? Because he's told us. The secret is out! Nothing happens without God's will; but sometimes, most of the time perhaps, that 'will' seems to us completely unknowable, or at least deeply obscure. It's like a puzzle, or an intricate mosaic, whose pieces lie hopelessly jumbled up on the floor. Then one figure emerges, the figure of Christ, central to the eternal and wonderful purpose of God. He was there in the centre at the beginning, and he's going to be there when the whole magnificent plan reaches its denouement, as it is most certainly going to do.

Perhaps we could see the sum total of reality as a column of figures. We talk about everything 'adding up.' In Roman accounting it is the custom to put the final sum at the top of the column. Without that all-important figure, all you can see is an apparently haphazard sequence of unrelated pieces of evidence. What matters is the 'capital', the total at the top of the column.

Christ is that supreme and final figure. Everything is 'summed up' in him; and in a very real sense, everything also flows down from him. Everything in heaven and earth – all the individual items in the cosmos – stars, galaxies, physical laws, time, cause and effect, humanity and all life – derive their significance from and will be summarised in their Head. For some, Jesus is history. For us, history is Jesus. We are his story.

So what does this mean for you and me? Trust God to take care of the detailed planning. He has catered for every eventuality. Just concentrate on the King at the centre of the picture. In Christ I find my origin and my end, my full meaning, the sum total of my life.

1¹¹ In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, ¹² in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory.

Sovereign Father (1:11-12)

'But if it's all predetermined – if the final sum has been worked out before any of the individual figures are in place – do I have any real choice?' You are making the mistake of seeing everything in impersonal terms, as if God were just a heavenly calculating machine producing strings of figures, human ciphers who have no say in their destiny at all. Instead, he is so personal that he needs three Persons to express his nature – Sovereign, Saviour and Spirit.

Imagine that one day the Sovereign Father calls us in to sit in a family circle round him while he tells us all about his will. 'You are all younger brothers and sisters of my beloved Son. You therefore have an inheritance in store for you. I've been planning this inheritance from eternity because I've known you were coming. Your birth as my children wasn't some kind of mistake or freak happening – it has been the result of careful and detailed family planning. The only thing is, it has involved several billions of you all coming to Christ in one way or another so you'll have to forgive me for not explaining the complicated processes I've had to set in motion. Each of you has the family characteristic of hopefulness; however you may choose to express it, you have put all your eggs in the Christ basket, you are looking to Jesus alone as your once-for-all Lord and King. You have 'Jesus saves me now' tattooed visibly on your body. It may all seem a bit confusing at the moment, but one day you are going to be able to see the full picture and join in the glory-song of the new creation.'

1¹³ And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession – to the praise of his glory.

Saviour Son (1:13-14)

I hope you understand that this inheritance is inseparable from Christ. It is only by having a living relationship with the Son that you can qualify for the family destiny. Those of you who are Jews have known for centuries about the messianic hope, how the eternal Father and mighty God is also the Prince of Peace to be born among you. But of course this hope isn't just for Jews. Nor is it just for those who were called to be the first generation of disciples. The message is for everyone.

How do you come into a living relationship with the Son? Not by human birth, not by religious or moral achievement, but by faith. Let me give you a simple illustration. You have set out in your fishing boat at

dusk to do a good night's trawling, and next thing you know you have hit a rock, and your boat is sinking. You are about to drown in the unforgiving waters when you hear out of the darkness a voice shouting 'We're here to save you!' You give an answering shout and soon you are grabbing the life-line thrown to you and are being pulled aboard the sturdy rescue ship. A similar drama was enacted when you came (by whatever means) to Christ. You heard a voice out of the darkness of sin and failure, shouting 'You don't need to die – I've done that for you!' and you grabbed that hope like a drowning person. You trusted that the message was true, and you made contact with the living Lord.

Guaranteeing Spirit

But how do we know, really know, that we belong to the kingdom family of God? There is still so much in our lives that provides direct evidence of the contrary. How do we know, not only that our inheritance is going to come to us, but that we are going to be part of the inheritance promised by the Father to the Son?

The Father now takes us to the bank vaults of heaven, buried deep beyond human grasp or devilish corruption. To each believer he explains: 'In amongst the treasures is a strong-box, unique and marked with your name, sealed tight with a doubly-strong bonding agent – the blood of Christ, and the Holy Spirit. One day there is going to be a grand opening of the seals, and the contents of the boxes (believers throughout time and space) are going to be claimed by their supreme Owner.

'The Spirit is us, Father and Son making our home in your life and marking you for our own. We are that bond of love, that guaranteeing seal of ownership. No-one can snatch you from our hand. Just hang in there, and keep believing.'

1¹⁵ For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all his people. 1⁶ I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. 1⁷ I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better.

The light of revelation (1:15-17)

'But, Paul, my faith is so weak, and it comes and goes. Sometimes I wonder whether the whole thing isn't just a mirage.' That's why I've got you on my prayer list. I may be under house arrest here in Rome, but news reaches me regularly about how things are going over in Asia Minor, and I'm so grateful to God for the way you have obviously continued to trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, and for the practical care you demonstrate across the churches for each other.

I'll tell you what I am asking God to do for you, to keep that faith and love flowing and growing. (I don't find that prayer comes naturally or easily, in fact it's quite a struggle at times; but it's so vital if we are all to become mature faith-warriors.) My number one request is that God will open your eyes to heavenly realities through his Spirit. The world doesn't know what God is really like, and it tries to persuade us to take its view of him. It doesn't realise that he's like Jesus who went to the cross and rose again for us; that he's our loving Father; that he is great and good and so very, very wonderful. It is only as the Spirit floods your hearts and minds with the light of revelation that you can develop your faith-friendship with him. Otherwise you'll lapse into the old boring idea that Christianity is just a matter of rituals and duties and rules you can't keep and don't want to keep. Please God, save the Ephesians from all that stuff!

1¹⁸ I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his people, 1⁹ and his incomparably great power for us who believe.

Heart knowledge (1:18-19)

Here's my next prayer. It's that as well as growing in your knowledge and love of him, you get a stronger internal grasp on some of the great essentials of the faith. This isn't just head knowledge, like getting a university degree in theology; it's heart knowledge, irradiating your attitudes and worldviews with a fundamental conviction about this God who calls and keeps and enables.

He calls us to be with him, and this hope, fuelled by the resurrection of Christ, should (I pray) be bubbling up in you like an ever-flowing spring, giving you an unquenchable optimism in the face of the most desperate of circumstances. You may not have heard your name called in a literal sense, as I did, but you've caught a glimpse of the eternal glories, and you know you belong there, and you're determined to follow wherever his voice takes you.

He keeps us as his own special possession. We are incredibly precious to him. I keep going on about the inheritance God gives us, but even more wonderfully, we are the inheritance God is saving up for his own Son. This worldwide fellowship we've joined, this motley collection of would-be saints, is the coronation present God has planned all along for the Lord Jesus. Once we see this fantastic truth, our view of each other magically alters – every believer is a glittering jewel, a priceless treasure. May your eyes be opened to appreciate the value of each other in the sight of God. May every time you gather together be a rehearsal for the presentation party at the end of time.

He gives us strength. I've known moments when everything is shouting at me to give up, to throw in the towel, to opt out of this absurd charade. Also, I've felt so keenly the feebleness and inadequacy of the church on earth. It takes more than ordinary willpower to stay faithful to him. But his supplies never run dry. Whenever I hear that a church, or an individual believer, is having problems or really struggling, I claim extra reserves for them in the name of Jesus. And help comes.

1⁽¹⁹⁾ That power is the same as the mighty strength ²⁰ he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, ²¹ far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.

Christ is sovereign (1:20-21)

You're not expected to produce these resources all by yourself. It's like trying to warm yourself with a candle-flame when you could draw back the curtains and let the reviving energy of the sun stream in upon you. If you doubt the effectiveness of God to save you from the state you've got yourself into, go back to the first Easter day. It's an hour before dawn and Jesus' body lies there in the cave-tomb with not a shred of life anywhere in him. Then the moment comes and the power of God that generated the original universe is released into a second and even more dynamic act of creation. Death itself dissolves into thin air and Jesus wakes up, rubs his eyes and walks quietly into the new morning.

Nothing is ever going to be the same again. He meets a few of his initially disbelieving followers, makes sure they know roughly what's been going on, then takes his leave. Where has he gone? The resurrecting power of his Father has lifted him back to where he had been from eternity: in the seat of honour, next to his Father's throne, undisputed King, Ruler supreme. Oh yes, down in the valley his growing but still desperately outnumbered band of followers are battling it out with their hard-as-nails opponents: authorities who forbid them to preach, judges who throw them in jail, emperors who cut off their heads, dark forces of evil that would suck every vestige of faith from their souls. These opponents' names, so mighty now, will be utterly forgotten, even though they commanded empires on earth or revolutions in heaven. But the name of Jesus reigns over all. He is sovereign over time and eternity. And he hasn't forgotten your name, not for a single moment. He's there for you.

1²² And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

The character of Christ's rule (1:22-23)

There is a Psalm which I'm sure you often sing, which says all this much better than I can. 'Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens.' Jesus is our Lord, and his name and glory are supreme in heaven and earth. 'You put everything under his feet' – and this is said to a 'son of man' who for a while became 'lower than the angels,' and who as a 'mere mortal' became subject to death. Indeed, those 'feet' were pierced for us. The 'hands' which formed the cosmos were pinned to a cross of wood.

This is how we know the character of Christ's rule. It is exercised in power, yes, but also in self-giving love. Now, what does this mean for the church? Hang on to your seats for a big surprise. He's our Head, we're his body, so we run the universe. To be more precise, we are the co-creators of a new world order, builders of the new Jerusalem. We tend to fall into two errors regarding the church: (a) we're big enough to keep the show on the road by ourselves, (b) we're too small and insignificant to make any difference. Wrong on both counts! We're not supposed to go it alone; we report to our Head for instructions and we depend on him for the gifts and the strength to carry on. But given that, we're the only body Jesus has got on earth, so what an honour to represent him! However feeble we may sometimes appear in our own or others' eyes, we walk tall because of our crucified and risen Lord.

Here's a lifeboat setting out in rough seas. There are people to be saved from disaster. The lifeboat needs a crew of resolute and dedicated people who won't give up when the going gets tough. Every single person on board the rescue vessel has a job to do, under the captain's directions, and the whole enterprise depends on them doing that job well. The medals come later. We are the crew of God's ship of salvation. This is where prayer comes in – it's the power that drives the boat, the compass that sets the course. Don't ever think the church is useless or prayer is a waste of time. They, we, are the only means Christ has of getting his job done. He is the Lord of the five loaves and two fish, who can fill with eternal significance every tiny bit of service any of us do for him. Nothing in this vast cosmic order is wasted or pointless; everything is infused with his presence and serves his will. So it's fairly obvious that we need to keep in touch with him, because without him there's no life, no energy, no purpose.

2¹ As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, ² 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. ³ 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 deserving of wrath.

Just like everyone else (2:1-3)

Yes, the God you have come to know and trust is a God of resurrection power. But Jesus isn't the only one he has raised up from the dead. He's performed the same miracle for you and me! We were

designed to walk with God in love, obedience and freedom, delighting in his will and responsive to his guidance. Those are the conditions for sharing the divine life that is eternal in quality. Cut yourself off from the life of God and you die, just as surely as trying to fly off a high cliff will bring a person crashing to the rocks below. Sin kills; and if you think you've never sinned, never gone against God's commands, always obeyed his every prompting in preference to your own self-will, then I'm sorry, but you're living in a fantasy world and you need to wake up.

Don't think I'm just sermonising from some lofty pulpit – I've been there myself and I've had to face these facts, unpalatable as they are.

Yes, I know you've now responded to the gospel and everything's changed. But the 'life' you used to live consisted in going with the crowd, adopting the viewpoints of the society around, generally assenting to the morals of the herd. You didn't realise that behind the easy-going tolerance of the all-too-familiar world stalked a far more dangerous reality, a dark figure of immense spiritual power, actively involved in breeding a race of humans who wanted nothing to do with God and would never inherit the heavenly destiny their Father had planned for them.

The evidence is all there in your record. Did you never go with the crowd? Have you always resisted the promptings of your lower nature? Did you never once crave the forbidden thing? Have you consistently refused to set up the idol of self in the throne-room of your hearts? However religious your outward performance might be, however lofty your profession of clean living, in raw fact you were just like everyone else. And God, who sees and assesses every thought and word and deed, had to write the word 'No' across your life-record. I created this one and that one, says the Lord, made them in my image and called them into glory with me, and they've gone rotten to the core. They're fit for nothing. Chuck them out!

2⁴ But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions — it is by grace you have been saved. ⁶ And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, ⁷ 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.

God reversed the Fall (2:4-7)

Only that wasn't his final word. If you think God is a mean, ill-tempered and sadistic tyrant, then think again. His patience, kindness and forbearance are absolutely amazing. His treasure-chests are heaped high with mercy and overflow with compassion. Not only did his heart yearn for his lost creatures, but he personally put his love into action and went all the way to the cross for us. It wasn't just a human friend suffering and dying there in the darkness, it was God in Christ bearing a world's evil and corruption. Going into the snake-pit of death, joining us where we all were.

So do you see what then happened? Just as God didn't leave his Son in the grave, he didn't leave us there either. As surely as he brought Jesus up from the dead, so he brought us up with him. Take a good look at that little word 'with.' It's the rescue word, the grace word (as I'll explain). Without Christ, we're dead, and we can't blame anyone else, because we deliberately crashed through the barriers designed to keep us on the road. But he joined us in our crazy, suicidal plunge, and hit the depths with us. Then the miracle happened. God reversed the Fall. He took his Son Jesus up again, back into life and light and glory; and he took us with him, right up to his own throne in the highest heavens. That's where we are now, royal family members, awaiting our coronation Day.

So our future, once so dark and cheerless, is bright with hope. You simply cannot believe the good things God has in store for us. As eternity unrolls, the blessings get better all the time. This was his

purpose all along. He replaced our death-wish with his own life-gift, lavishly and unreservedly presented to us, and all because we took him at his word and put our trust in the Christ who is that gift.

2⁸ For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.

Grateful for grace (2:8-9)

Let's explore this grace idea. I hope you now realise that you could never have saved yourself. It had to be God who did it. But why did he choose to do it? Was there some quality about your life, some gleam of spirituality, a nugget of gold here and there in the rubbish heap? (I used to think there was in my own case, until I met the Jesus I had been hounding to death all that time.) No – all the goodness is on God's side, and all we had to do was to receive it, to accept it as given freely to us in Christ, to link up with him (there's that word 'with' again) in grateful and joyful surrender to our Lord. So can we then at least boast the virtue of having had the good sense to believe in Christ? There's a mystery here, because there are so many who have heard the good news and yet haven't believed, or have gone on mistakenly crediting themselves with heavenly favour when their account's had nothing in it for years. You could easily have been one of them.

Here's a man who has fallen into the river through his own stupid fault, but instead of drowning, he's being rescued just in time. Why? It's not because he's more valuable than anyone else, or because he's yelled for help loud enough to wake up the rescue team. It is simply and solely because there are people out there prepared to sacrifice time and effort and even their own lives to pull him out of the mess he's got himself into. Instead of grumbling about why they were so long in coming, he's humbly grateful that they bothered to come at all.

So don't let's think there was something about us, some quality of goodness that impelled God to roll up his sleeves and help us. It was simply and solely his own generous love. Just think of the people whom he used to bring you to a living faith in Christ. You probably gave them quite a hard time. How much credit are you going to take for their patient and persevering friendship? The Lord's been trying to open your eyes for years! Have you ever said 'Thank you'?

10 For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Wise and loving purpose (2:10)

God has done a new thing where we are concerned. Here is a poet lovingly crafting a poem. It's not just another string of words, it's something magically new emerging into the world of human ideas and culture. Or here's an architect designing a residence for a person of significance: it's not just a pile of bricks and stones, it's a completely fresh presence in a society which needs beauty and stability so badly. When God gave you and me new birth in Christ, he added another living jewel to the world to come, which is surely and steadily growing as each day passes. He has designed the shape our lives should take, the good things his Spirit wants to produce in us hour by hour. He may have to use tough methods to work us into the people of grace and holiness his Master-plan decrees, and he certainly needs our full cooperation as the work goes on – but make no mistake, he knows what he is doing, and what he has started he will finish. As you walk the streets of this age, and touch other lives, ask him to achieve his wise and loving purpose for you, and all for his glory.

2¹¹ Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called 'uncircumcised' by those who call themselves 'the circumcision' (which is done in the body by human hands) — ¹² remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise,

without hope and without God in the world. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

Distant exiles (2:11-13)

Now I want to talk a bit about this Jew and Gentile business. I hope you realise that this is a purely artificial distinction; it's all about physical marks made on people's bodies by other human beings, and has nothing to do with God's true estimate of us. Many of you in the Ephesian group of churches aren't Jews by birth, and you will meet people who will tell you that it's simply impossible for you to join the kingdom of God as full members. What is going on here?

This circumcision thing is a symbol of a much more fundamental spiritual reality. The dividing line isn't between people who are genetically or culturally different from one another, it is between a holy God and a sinful humanity. Gentiles and Jews are in this together. Let me take you back (again!) to the time before you had ever put your trust in Jesus Christ, before you had any living and vital connection with him.

Firstly, you weren't members of God's true people. I'm not talking about outward conformity here, or physical birth – I'm talking about the allegiance of the heart, a citizenship of the heavenly country, the true Jerusalem. You belonged to the other side, if the truth be told.

Next, you had never signed up with God himself. His covenant agreements (with Abraham, with Moses, with David) were utter gibberish as far as you were concerned. His wonderful promises of an eternal inheritance were a foreign language to you. You didn't know him, nor did you hold his word precious.

Consequently, your horizon was bounded by life in this world. The only certainty was death and there was nothing beyond that. There was no God, none that made sense anyway, so you might as well get on with life in the here and now and make the best of it.

If even some of that describes you, then you were uncannily like that lad Jesus was talking about who was in a 'far country', miles from his true home where his Father lived. Yet in the end he came home. The story doesn't say (perhaps because Jesus himself was going to act it out in stark reality) that there was another Son who went all the way into the far country, suffering the pains of hell as he did so, to rescue the renegade and accompany him back to the Father's embrace.

You have been that renegade, that distant exile. You were comfortable (some of the time) in that godless society; but then you heard that Jesus had died to save you from certain death, and in famine of soul you found the promise of heaven strangely desirable. And you put your hand in his and (however long it took) you came home.

²¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, ¹⁵ by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶ and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.

All one in Christ (2:14-16)

Jesus takes us right into the Father's presence and assures us of our unconditional acceptance and welcome at the throne. And, because he is the Peacemaker *par excellence*, he undertakes another act of reconciliation. You will remember the elder brother in the story, who cannot accept that his sibling could ever be forgiven for his act of apostasy. After all, he himself had faithfully stayed at home and slaved away for his Father – while all the time his heart could have been in that far country for all the true affection he felt.

Jesus deals with the elder brother too. He takes each of the estranged family members, one in either nail-scarred hand, and ever so gently brings them face to face. He says in effect, 'You've been building a massive barrier between you, piled high with prejudices and principles and holiness laws and religious taboos, until you can't see each other over the top of it or realise that you've all been in the far country, whichever side of the wall you've been. I've dismantled that barrier. I've taken it down and pulled it to pieces, just as surely as I tore apart that great heavy curtain in the Temple on Good Friday afternoon.

'I died to bring you together. I lost touch with my own Father in the darkness so that you could find him in the dawn of a new day. When the nails went into my hands and feet, they passed the death sentence not only upon me but upon all the hostility that has built up on this earth over the long centuries, between race and race, religion and religion, tribe and tribe, human creature and divine Creator. Then I got up out of death and left all that hatred in the tomb, over and done with. Now there's going to be one race, one nation, one family.'

All one in Christ. No more backs turned, arms folded in defiance, sniping from prepared positions. No walls to keep each other out. A single, united people; a new world.

2¹⁷ He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

Join the family! (2:17-18)

His message is peace, reconciliation, weapons laid down. This was the heartbeat of the old prophets, and it's happened in our time. There is a permanent treaty in force between God and humanity, Jew and Gentile, whatever grouping you can think of. Yet people are still slugging it out with each other all over the place. Remember the message of the angels when Jesus came into the world not so many years ago? 'God is so great! Peace has come down to earth and he's here among you! Wake up, you dozy humans – he loves you!' And what was the first thing Jesus said when he walked quietly into the upper room, having ripped death into small pieces? 'Peace has broken out - there's nothing left to be afraid of!' And now the Holy Spirit is saying exactly the same thing, using our voices, our faces, our feet. We're to start at Jerusalem and not stop till we've got to the last place on earth. The message is simple and straightforward: 'Come in! It doesn't matter who you are or where you are– come and meet God. Join the family!' And they've all been streaming in: Jew, Roman, Greek, priest, pagan, emperor, slave, men, women, children, old and young, all have gathered round the Father's knees, weeping with relief, shouting for joy. Because Jesus has levelled all barriers and replaced that forbidding curtain with, quite simply, himself.

2¹⁹ Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. ²¹ In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. ²² And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

Level footing (2:19-22)

So are Gentiles on a level footing with Jews in the sight of God? Yes, and yes again! This is how it was always meant to be. From the beginning God promised us that we would be his people with his presence among us. And so there emerged this nation of Israel, centred upon the Temple at Jerusalem. A people belonging to God – not racially, not physically, not geographically distinctive, but spiritually set apart to be holy in this world, God-bearers to humanity. They were never meant to be exclusive, but inclusive – they were to expand and grow until the whole earth would be filled with the knowledge of God, and all kinds of people would love and praise the One True God.

But they lost this vision. They excluded you Gentiles, calling you 'foreigners' and (at best) 'fellow-travellers', who could never be the people of God in a true sense. Now, take a deep breath. All that's over, finished, gone. Thanks to Jesus taking a cross-shaped key and unlocking the door of the kingdom, then propping it wide open with a stone that no-one will ever shift, absolutely anyone anywhere can walk in and become a full kingdom member with citizen privileges, exactly like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and any saint you care to name. You all have the freedom of the city; you can run down the corridors of God's palace-home as his own children.

The multi-national Temple

And, just as the Israel of God has become a worldwide people, so the Temple has broken free from its geographical and temporal location and has gone multi-national. The apostles of Christ have joined the prophets and patriarchs of old as foundation members. The promised Messiah who is now revealed as Jesus is the keystone of the whole building, meaning of course that every other stone (living and breathing stones as you are), however large or small and wherever it finds itself in the whole scheme of things, is organically connected with him and derives its architectural purpose and positional stability from him.

God's Temple is no longer at Jerusalem. It's at Ephesus, Antioch, Corinth, Alexandria, Rome. It's wherever God lives and walks among his people. It's growing bigger with the addition of every new believer. And it becomes more wonderful and more magnificent day by day, as you its priests (there is no 'laity') grow in faith and holiness and unity. It's called the Temple of the Holy Spirit.

So don't let anyone tell you that you're not full members. You are.

3¹ For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles — ² Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you...

In prison (3:1-2)

This is the vision that drives me and keeps me going. Admittedly things aren't too easy just at the moment, as I'm in prison awaiting trial. How did I get here? Well, first and foremost because I'm serving the Lord Jesus Christ, and if he has allowed me to be here, it must be because that's where I can serve him best— and anyway prison walls are nothing to him. Maybe I need time to write a few letters to people like you! It's not so easy when I'm travelling on foot or getting shipwrecked or recovering from a good thrashing.

And that brings me to the second reason for my imprisonment, which is that I'm determined to bring the gospel to people like you who have no Jewish background, and the Jews don't like that one little bit. So they take every opportunity to discredit my apostleship, and when that fails, they manipulate the Roman authorities into putting me away. Please don't let all this fool you into thinking that God has dismissed me from my post. His plan is still exactly what it has always been, and it's called 'grace'. The fact that he has opened the doors of the kingdom to outsiders like you, and the fact that he has chosen me to spearhead this movement when I was doing my best to stop it in its tracks, is down to the sheer generosity of his merciful love.

3³ ...that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. ⁴ In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, ⁵ which was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. ⁶ This mystery is

that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.

Out in the open (3:3-6)

Earlier in this letter I was beginning to explain about the 'secret' of God's will, and how everything was going to be summed up in Christ. You may reasonably ask, as you read this staggering claim, how someone like me could possibly be allowed to have such amazing insights. It's not down to my superior brainpower or holiness, it's thanks entirely to God's decision to make public a precious truth that has always been there, but hasn't been allowed to see the light of day before. I must stress that this truth doesn't originate with me – it's been entrusted by the Holy Spirit to Christ's chosen apostles and others gifted with special understanding. It hasn't come quickly or easily – we've had to wrestle with all kinds of complexities and paradoxes – but ever since Pentecost it has been out in the open.

You will know about the techniques of glass-painting, and how a design can be embedded in a cup or ornament in such a way that viewed from the outside it seems dark and obscure, whereas when you light it from the inside, you can see every detail of the picture. Similarly, precious stones, which may look quite ordinary and lacklustre in a dim light, will reveal their astonishing beauty and variety when irradiated by the sun. Just so, God's many-faceted will has been permitted to remain in obscurity for centuries, but now, at exactly the right time, the Holy Spirit is flooding it with light, so that everyone may see its glory.

This precious and secret will of God is, of course, what we call the gospel. The Jewish nation has been its guardian for centuries, but it has never understood its true beauty: that people completely outside the original Abrahamic promises, who have never for one moment been included in the covenants of mercy, can freely share in the inheritance. Anyone anywhere can now become a member of the people of God! Every class of human being, no matter what their racial origin or traditional outlook or status in society, can walk with head held high into the kingdom of God. Why? Because Jesus Christ has died to bury the old divisions, and has risen to inaugurate a completely new world order.

37 I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. ⁸ Although I am less than the least of all the Lord's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ...

Unconditional love (3:7-8)

So please don't even begin to think that I'm having delusions of grandeur about being out there ahead of anyone else, or being the only person God has thought fit to be told his secret plans. I'm just one of a long line of servants. Like the rest of us, the only explanation for my experiencing the free forgiveness of God, and his resurrection power lifting me out of the mud, is that he is that kind of amazing God. In fact, I probably needed the gospel more than any of you. Even before the Damascus road, when I was God's self-appointed hatchet man, I recognised a quality of faith in those humble saints which I certainly hadn't got myself. Some of them even prayed for me to be forgiven as they went to their deaths!

That could be the reason I've been spared to take the gospel to the Gentiles, and why I can preach so wholeheartedly about Jesus, and how he's like treasure buried in a field which you could never have discovered by detective work, but suddenly he's right there in front of you, spilling out limitless supplies of unconditional love. I can talk to Gentiles because I've been outside the pale myself.

39 and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. ¹⁰ 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,

Gather my people (3:9-10)

At the risk of going well over the top, I've got to keep talking about this commission I've been given. My critics say, 'If this plan of salvation, this crazy way of saving the human race by getting himself crucified, was God's full intention all along, how come there's hardly a trace of it in the Hebrew scriptures? What teacher would prepare his class for the final exam without telling them about the most important thing in the entire syllabus?' Well, it's been there all the time, but we've never seen it, never believed it. It's woven into the fabric of the universe itself. What does God do to kick-start everything? He sends his Word. Light out of darkness. Order out of chaos. Plenty out of emptiness. Then how does he deal with his benighted people? Life out of death. Freedom out of helpless servitude. A human Saviour out of the least significant people on earth. Love for no other reason than his own decision to love.

Our wonderful kaleidoscope of scripture, so varied in its character and method of approach, reflects God's own mind, so deep, so faithful, so wise. He knew exactly what he was doing at every stage in the process. Not even archangels and the hosts of heavenly powers guessed what he was really up to – they just did as they were told: 'Go out and gather my people.' You are that gathered people. You in your tiny, beleaguered church are a lesson to spirit beings of the wisdom and glorious faithfulness of God. Whenever you share the gospel, or give your personal testimony, angelic hosts are eavesdropping.

3¹¹ ...according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. ¹² In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. ¹³ I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.

You don't approach God as a stranger (3:11-13)

God's intention is older than time. It is sourced in eternity itself. You may be tempted to think that your decision to accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour (a decision which you may have taken after a long and agonising struggle) is fully your own choice – and of course it is! But there's another choice that was made long before you were born or the universe came into being. In fact 'before' has no meaning here. Just as Jesus the Son has always been with God the Father, so all who unite themselves with Jesus become part of that fellowship, that permanent and unbreakable circle of Divine love which is for ever the same and yet expands with each new believer.

We may not understand this, but it's not too difficult to accept, is it? The practical consequence is that you don't approach God as a stranger. You don't have to wait nervously in the entrance hall, shifting from foot to foot while a stern-faced official thumbs through lists of names to find yours (or not, as the case may be). You can walk confidently into the very presence of God himself; you can run into his arms and hear him telling you that it's all right, there's nothing to be afraid of, you're family. Your name and the name of Christ are indivisibly linked. When he sees you, God sees his own Son. It's not so much that you have to summon up faith in him – rather, he already believes totally in you. That should make your prayers a bit less inhibited!

We need each other's prayers

And we can pray for each other. For instance, I'm well aware that my being here in prison and getting such a lot of stick from my own people may cause some of you to question your own faith. 'Why doesn't God step in to release Paul, and why does he let his servant go through so much pain for the sake of the gospel? Can I really believe in a Father who treats his children like that?' Please don't even begin to think such thoughts! Getting the gospel across to a sceptical world is always liable to arouse opposition – look what grief it caused the Lord Jesus himself. So I'm praying for you – and at the same time I'm beseeching you personally – not to be knocked off your convictions because I have to serve the odd jail sentence or get beaten up from time to time. It happened to me when I took the good news to Asia

Minor and many of you were converted. If that had to happen for you to come into your glorious inheritance in the kingdom, so be it!

In fact, that's the thought that stops me getting depressed when things are really bad. 'If people like those Ephesians are going to come to Christ, it makes it all worthwhile, even if I have to go through hell and high water.' Perhaps, then, I could ask you to pray for me to look on the bright side while all this is going on. We need each other's prayers!

3¹⁴ For this reason I kneel before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. ¹⁶ I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.

Family unit (3:14-17a)

This brings me back neatly to what I was saying about this Temple of the Holy Spirit in which you are full members. Neither prison walls nor national boundaries can keep out this great family of God that we all belong to. His Fatherhood pervades heaven and earth. In fact, wherever you find a family unit on earth, there you will find a dim reflection (in some cases very dim indeed) of the love that binds the Godhead together in heaven. So when I pray for you, it's for my own blood-and-spirit relatives that I'm interceding. We matter that much to God, and you matter that much to me.

Drawing on his power

My first prayer for you is that whatever happens to you in the external world, the imperfect world of the senses that seems so real to us, and yet is only a very small part of the total picture – that whatever is going on in your lives, you may be able to hang in there and keep going. This can only come true if you tap into the limitless and endless supply of the Spirit of God, which isn't dependent on whether the sun is shining or not but is Jesus always there for us, ascended and glorified and present with every believer. Only by drawing on his power can you find the resources to cope with everything that's going to come your way.

Permanent resident

I'm not talking about Christ being just an occasional visitor, dropping in once every so often to see how things are getting on, or turning up in response to a distress call when life is getting too much for us. I'm not even talking about him being the honoured guest for whom we put out the best silver and make sure the house is spotlessly clean. What I mean is that the Lord Jesus Christ should take up permanent residence in your hearts; that he becomes the home-owner rather than you, and that he is gladly given the keys of every room in the house. This isn't a question of waiting for some kind of overwhelming experience (though I wouldn't rule that out); it's believing that when he says he will come in he really means it, and that he's there day in, day out, whether we feel he's there or not. It's not summoning up some super-spiritual energy from within ourselves; it's simply relying on his promises, going on his word, living by trusting him.

3¹⁷ And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, ¹⁸ may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, ¹⁹ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Knowledge of Christ (3:17b-19)

Yes, I'm praying for this knowledge of Christ to become a regular and deeply established feature of your lives. It's like being in love; not a sudden emotional outflow of passion so much as a settled and deliberate intention to make this person the number one in your existence. It's like an oak seedling

growing into a mighty tree by sending its roots deep down into the earth; or like a temple-sanctuary built on such secure foundations that it can't be shaken by storms or earthquakes.

It's not just a special few who are privileged to be called the lovers of Christ; yes, we all know people who radiate an extraordinary sanctity and who seem to be closer to God than the rest of us, but please understand that even the most ordinary, run-of-the-mill believer can enjoy the wonderful friendship of Christ. His is a cross-shaped love: its arms stretch wide enough to embrace the whole world, its top connects us with heaven itself, its base reaches into the very depths of our flawed and twisted humanity, and its permanence extends backwards and forwards for all generations.

We may never fully comprehend the love of Jesus, or be able to explain it adequately, but we can take hold of it by faith and make it our own. And as we do so, we find that God in his entirety is dwelling within us, because that's what God is – he is love pure and simple, and we belong to him, and he belongs to us. Don't fall for any mystical nonsense about only the most special saints enjoying close fellowship with the Divine. When Christ moves into your life, you get the whole Godhead. Did you bargain for this? Please, God, open the eyes of their hearts to long not just for your gifts but to know you for yourself.

That's my prayer for you, the Lord's own prayer – and we haven't got beyond 'Our Father'!

3²⁰ Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

The honour due (3:20-21)

I've tried to use language appropriate to this magnificent theme of God's power and love, but of course his answers to our prayers aren't limited by the words we use, or the understanding we have of his generosity. The Spirit's power within us is enormously greater than anything we can experience or imagine. Don't assume that, because you can't feel him operating, he isn't there at all. He is ceaselessly working in each member of the church, in every local manifestation of the church, and in the worldwide universal church, to bring glory to the Lord Jesus Christ. What do I mean by 'glory'? It is making Christ known as the one he truly is, what he has done for us and how great he is. Then all creatures in time and space and in eternity will worship the One True God and give him the honour due to his name. I really long and pray for this to happen soon. Please join in with a heartfelt 'Amen!'

4¹ As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. ² Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.

Jesus people (4:1-2)

So here I am in prison, praying for you and writing to you, and still serving the Lord just as much as if I were freely talking to you in person. In the first part of this letter I've been trying to show you the incredible privileges we have in Christ, and how God himself has called you into this inheritance. Now, how is all this meant to work out at ground level, so to speak? How are you, God's royal family, brothers and sisters of the Lord Jesus Christ, supposed to behave as you walk the streets of Ephesus or wherever, and go about your daily lives?

You are Jesus people. Be like him. He may have been King of the universe, yet he was prepared to become the lowest of the low. He never thought of himself as being someone people should look up to. Instead of claiming his own rights, he consistently sought the welfare of everyone he met, and treated them as more important than himself. This required tremendous patience and good humour, because other people can be very difficult and demanding; but he was happy to be available to them because, quite simply, he loved them. It's that love of Jesus, which is in you by the Spirit, which you should be showing to your fellow-human beings, whether they are what you consider 'Christians' or not – but particularly if they are your fellow-believers.

4³ Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. 4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism; 6 one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Unity in Christ (4:3-6)

How can I talk about the unity of all believers in Christ, when it is patently obvious from all the divisions and rivalries and prejudices and 'preferences' that we are hopelessly disunited? I want you to cultivate a holy discontent about the way things are. When you're in prison (and I've known a few), you are guarded night and day, and it sometimes happens that the prisoners are shackled to their gaolers or to each other by heavy iron chains. The way I stay sane is to imagine that we are all one big happy family, and that these cursing, hairy and malodorous characters I keep bumping against are people I get on with really well and I am so privileged to share everything in common with them. Well, whenever you're tempted to complain about the people God has chosen for your fellow-believers, see them with the eyes of faith and get through to the underlying reality, which is that the 'chains' that bind us together are forged by the Spirit of Jesus, that we are all 'prisoners' of the Prince of Peace, and there is so much that we share in common with each other, whatever external differences we may exhibit.

Take a look at your own body. It's got all sorts of different parts, but it's a single unit, and the lifeblood coursing through it is the same wherever it operates. The lifeblood of the church is the Holy Spirit. Without him we're dead. And that's what we all were – but then we heard the voice of the Son of God calling us out of the sleep of death, and we clung to this new hope as a drowning person clings to a lifebelt. Just because someone has a different experience of the Holy Spirit from yours, it doesn't mean that there are lots of Spirits – there's only one, and he's Jesus, and you're a member of his body just like all the rest.

Fellowship of faith

When you became a Christian, whenever and however it happened, you made the basic confession 'Jesus is Lord, and he's my Lord.' In so doing, you entered into a fellowship of faith that is the same the world over, even though it may be expressed in a myriad of languages and emphases. And you publicly witnessed to that faith in a ceremony that is identical wherever it happens, which is called baptism, and consists of having water poured over you to signify the start of a new, eternal quality of life.

And if you still think God has got it wrong, and that the people down the road can't possibly be Christians in the same way that you are, go outside on a brilliant starry night and just take in all those billions of stars and suns and planets, so amazingly different from each other and so many millions of miles apart, yet all the work of the one Creator, all part of the same system, all with their special part to play, all shining with the glory of his light, all singing his praises fit to burst. As I said earlier, he's 'Our Father'; however many of us there are, there's only one of him.

4⁷ But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. 8 This is why it says: 'When he ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people.' 9 (What does 'he ascended' mean except that he also

descended to the lower, earthly regions? ¹⁰ He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.)

Amazing variety (4:7-10)

Now of course within this single system, this unity of Father, Son and Spirit which holds us all together, there is an amazing variety of individual talents and abilities. Every last one of us has received the undeserved and unconditional forgiveness of Christ through the cross, but there's more to come. If you are ever tempted to think that the Lord hasn't blessed you with any very special role in his kingdom, then please think again. Meanness has never been one of the attributes of God. His blessings come, not in trickles, but in torrents. Let's think for a moment about what happened at the Ascension of Christ. There's an old Psalm which celebrates the power of God as he leads his people to salvation, and in the middle of all the rejoicing we find these strange words: 'Having gone up into the highest heavens, leading a whole host of captives in your triumphal procession, you received gifts to shower upon the race of human beings, no matter how rebellious they have been, so that you may dwell among them' Ps 68:18. We now know what this means. It's all about Jesus – and it's written a thousand years before what has actually happened in our time.

Reverse journey

The key phrase is 'having gone up', 'having ascended'. The Lord Jesus Christ wasn't just a particularly holy man who was rewarded by God with a seat at his right hand in heaven. No, he was God himself all the time, coming down to earth and being born as a human being and as we very well know, descending to the utmost humiliation of the cross for our sake. (The terms 'up' and 'down' are a kind of visual language, a useful way of describing events in the history of the space-time universe which have their origin and significance outside space and time.) This self-humbling God, having plumbed the lowest depths, then made the reverse journey, through the events that we call the Resurrection and Ascension, to highest of heights which were his rightful and natural dwelling-place all along. In the process he achieved complete mastery over all the powers which had previously enslaved humankind, including sin and death; in fact, his prisoners included the evil force of captivity itself, trussed up like a chicken, powerless to do its malign work.

This doesn't mean, however, that Christ has gone somewhere else and left us in our timebound existence to struggle on as best we can. The whole point of this divine adventure was to demonstrate that he would be present in, and vitally concerned with, the whole of reality, whether within or beyond time and space. We call this moment of revelation by the name of Pentecost. It is the fresh self-giving of God to the people among whom, as he has repeatedly said, he wants to dwell. It's as though the first thing the Son said to the Father when he returned home was, 'They're waiting for us.' And orders were given for the treasury of the Holy Spirit to be unlocked.

⁴¹¹ So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers...

Foundation people: apostles (4:11)

This has huge implications for the church. The Holy Spirit isn't some alien power which does a few magic tricks then disappears again. He is Christ's gift of himself living in flesh-and-blood people. Just think for a moment how you came to faith, and how it is that you are still, by God's grace, believers. First and foremost, someone had to link you reliably with the person, teaching and work of the Lord Jesus right from the start – we know these people as 'apostles', the original witnesses of the resurrection, who won't be around for very much longer but have done their job of guaranteeing the authenticity of the faith you have been taught. They are the foundation-stones of Christ's building. They are, after Jesus, God's greatest gift to his church.

Prophets

Next, the Lord has given you prophets. These are the guardians of his Word. Just as the original prophets were the mouthpieces and instruments of God in transmitting what we call the Holy Scriptures, so we need (and are given) people who are entrusted with safeguarding the continuing revelation of God for this and future generations. This may take the form of written or spoken communication. Naturally, as Jesus warned us, there will arise false prophets who will try to lead us astray. But the work of the Spirit ensures that what he wants to say to his church will always have a self-consistency, an internal harmony (despite all its variety) with the truth as it has always been revealed. Thanks to these people in the church, you know that what you are hearing is indubitably the voice of God.

Evangelists

Of course, someone had to bring you the gospel itself. We call these people 'evangelists', proclaimers of good news. Somebody was used to bring the truth about Jesus to your very door. It might have been a recognised public speaker, or it might equally have been a friend who said the right thing at the right time. However it happened, and however long it took, you were brought face to face with Jesus and you 'received' him, 'came to' him, 'accepted' him as your own Lord and Saviour. Ever since Pentecost, this has been going on all over the place, people talking to other people about Christ, guided and resourced by the Spirit.

Pastors and teachers

To complete the process, you needed, and still need, nurturing and developing in your knowledge of God in Christ. So the Spirit sends and equips 'pastors' and 'teachers'. These may or may not be the same – it's rare that all these gifts combine in the same person, but the Lord isn't fussy about who does what in his church, as long as they stay humble and usable. 'Pastors' are your local leaders who shepherd the sheep and are responsible for their safety, nourishment and sympathetic nursing when they feel fragile. 'Teachers' make sure that the word of God is interpreted and applied in a regular, systematic way, not only to the gathered local church but also to small groups and individuals.

4¹² ...to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up¹³ 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.

Growing towards full maturity (4:12-13)

Obviously we could say much more about the different gifts Christ pours out by his Spirit, but we mustn't lose sight of the object of the whole exercise, which is to grow a church that is serviceable to the Lord for his continuing work on earth; which is, in essence, Jesus himself teaching, healing, confronting, bringing new hope and establishing a kingdom which will never be moved. It's all too easy to think of *diakonia*, 'ministry', as being a solo performance by specially qualified people, whereas it's meant to be a symphony performed by the whole orchestra. The essential point of these Pentecost gifts I've been talking about is that all the Lord's people should be trained as 'ministers', because they are all members of the body of Christ which is continually growing towards full maturity.

Keep this vision steadily before your eyes. I tried to explain earlier how Christ Jesus fills the universe, and how he has left behind a people on earth who are his representatives, who are Jesus wherever they go. Well, looking at the state of the churches now (and I've seen quite a lot of them in my short life), we've all got a lot of growing up to do. We quarrel heatedly about inessential or peripheral points of doctrine. We think we know all about Christ, when the real Christ remains strangely unknown to our hearts. We are immature teenagers when we should be responsible adults. The gap between the vision and the reality is grotesquely wide. But the Lord has no other plan. What he has in mind is a people gradually and steadily forming into his own image, reflecting him in his myriad aspects, each one different, yet all the same Jesus. Let's go on together to perfect unity in him!

4¹⁴ Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming.

Seagoing dangers (4:14)

This isn't just rose-tinted rhetoric. There are real dangers out there if we behave like children who let themselves be led by the hand by friendly-seeming strangers. (This is completely different from the childlike simplicity and trustfulness which the Lord insisted is crucial if we are to be genuine members of the kingdom.) The yachtsman putting out to sea in a flimsy little dinghy may think it's all calm and cosy at first, but once he gets beyond the harbour walls he finds the waves beating into his boat and the wind tugging him in several directions at once. That's what happens to us if we listen to certain sorts of teaching when we haven't really thought through the issues. We allow other people (whose motives may not be all that creditable) to do our thinking for us, and before we know it we're way off course. Don't underestimate the father of lies. His tactics are subtle and his one aim is to manipulate Christian believers off a healthy dependence on the word of God and the Spirit of Christ, and to feed them a diet of human philosophy, religious tradition and esoteric 'wisdom', couched in clever language that may seem impressive but is just playing conjuring tricks with words and ideas.

4¹⁵ Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. 16 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.

Living organism (4:15-16)

We, however, who have put our trust in the One who is the Truth of God himself, and have had our eyes opened to his love and faithfulness, can share words of true wisdom with each other. We can speak frankly and directly without ever sacrificing the courtesy and respect which should characterise our dealings with other members of the family (and outsiders as well).

Our pride has a lot to answer for. True humility is to recognise that we all have a great deal of growing up to do. We ought to be comparing ourselves, not with what we were like a week ago, or what others are like, but with Christ himself. He is the one we are answerable to; he's the boss of the whole outfit. The church isn't some kind of headless corpse, occasionally galvanised into life by the application of an

external stimulus. It's a living organism with a working Head. The Lord Jesus isn't sitting up on some remote cloud, looking disapprovingly at us while we flail around in uncoordinated chaos. He's the brains of the enterprise, the mind and will that controls every member and manages every part of the body in its proper function. He's the heart who pumps his life-giving blood around the whole system, resourcing, guiding, reconciling, encouraging each one of us so that we can fulfil our service role with energy and effectiveness. As I've said, we all have a different part to play, with differing gifts, but it's all directed (under him) to the growth and healthy operation of this magnificent Body of Christ, whose motive power is the heartbeat of the same divine love that went to the cross for us.

4¹⁷ So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. ¹⁸ They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. ¹⁹ Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, and they are full of greed.

Sharply distinct (4:17-19)

So, given that you are this body of Christ, his re-incarnation, his vehicle for him to go around everywhere on earth – what sort of people are you meant to be? I'm going to lay it on the line here, because these aren't simply my own ideas, they're what the Lord Jesus himself is saying to us. You're not unbelievers any longer, so don't live as if you were. Just as Jews are supposed to behave differently from Gentiles, so you belong to a nation (a royal, holy people) that is called to behave differently from every other nation on earth. I'm going to use sharply distinct categories here so that you know exactly what I mean. What are the differences between you who believe in Christ and those who don't?

Their lives have no purpose; they don't know where they're going. You do, because the whole point of your existence is to live for the Lord.

Their thinking proceeds from worldly assumptions and even their best philosophers grope uncertainly for the truth. You think straight because God has shone the light of Christ into your hearts.

They don't want anything to do with God, because they don't know who he really is; they won't respond to his love, so to all intents and purposes they are spiritually dead. You've been won over to the friendship of God through the death of Jesus, and you're fully alive.

They have become desensitised to right and wrong; they've discarded their moral compass. You live to please Christ and to do good to others for his sake.

Their one aim is to 'enjoy themselves' as much as possible, which usually means the unrestrained pursuit of sexual pleasure; they want it now and they can't get enough of it. You have responded to an altogether higher call, and you have signed up for the Holy Spirit's training in self-discipline.

4²⁰ That, however, is not the way of life you learned ²¹ when you heard about Christ and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus.

School of Christ (4:20-21)

As I said, I've deliberately used hard-and-fast distinctions, and I'll go into some of these points a little more in due course. But my point is this. You are disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ. A disciple is a learner. In a very real sense, you have enrolled in the school of Jesus. The whole curriculum has changed: it's all about him. He is the syllabus, he is the schoolteacher, he is the Principal. In your very first lesson you had your ears opened to learn about him from the inside, and every subsequent lesson has been a continuation of that teaching. You might think that this would become boring, but it never does, because he contains all truth and all knowledge; as we get to know Jesus, a whole eternity of discovery lies before us.

Note that this isn't just learning facts 'about' him. It's going to affect your whole life; and it's a lifelong study. You will never graduate from this school, however 'senior' you get.

4²² 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; ²³ to be made new in the attitude of your minds; ²⁴ and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

New clothes (4:22-24)

This isn't just theoretical knowledge or abstract theological indoctrination. It vitally affects your life in the here and now. You're learning the science of character transformation, the art of Christlikeness. Do you remember the first day you got up to go to school, and instead of climbing automatically into your sloppy old home clothes, you proudly put on your new school uniform? Well, when you accepted Christ as Lord, you decisively rejected the old character you used to dress up in; in fact you took it round to the reject shop or even threw it on the tip, because it never did you any good – it led you into one compromising situation after another, and gradually destroyed any high ideals you might once have had. It muzzled you with the bridle of selfishness and lust, and led you blindly down roads you would never in your right senses have chosen to take.

These new clothes you've put on are a revelation. Your whole outlook has changed. All your attitudes are being revised one by one. You're becoming a radically different person: the same essential you, yes, but with Jesus' divine Spirit coursing through your veins. It's not too much to say that a decisive event of new birth has taken place, as much a miracle as the original Genesis creation. You've been given a second life as a child of God, and you're now growing steadily into his family likeness. Your destiny isn't, as it once was, to be a twisted specimen of humanity with a thin veneer of goodness masking your corrupt ambitions. It is to be a magnificent, unique work of art, painted lovingly by the Master and radiant with all the colours in his palette; a glorious reworking of his own utterly good, faithful, pure, attractive personality. And you have a big part to play in this process, as I shall now explain.

4²⁵ Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbour, for we are all members of one body.

Truthfulness (4:25)

If you are claiming to have put on the new Jesus-clothes, you have committed yourself to modelling him before the world. Let's take a few practical examples. The first essential is truth – a transparency before God, an integrity in your dealings with everyone you meet, and a ruthless honesty with yourself. We are individuals-in-relationship, and the genuineness of these relationships depends on truthfulness in words and deeds. This is particularly vital in the body of Christ, where there is no room for lying or deceitfulness of any kind.

4²⁶ 'In your anger do not sin': do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, ²⁷ and do not give the devil a foothold.

Anger: a thin line (4:26-27)

Then there's anger. Anger isn't necessarily wrong – there are things that quite rightly arouse our indignation, and Christians aren't called to be doormats. The Lord Jesus himself was stirred to action when he saw his Father's house being defiled. Just remember, though, that it's God's sole and sovereign right to deal out judgment on another human being. The Psalmist recognised this when he started getting steamed up about the evil plots of his enemies, and he gives us wise advice: 'Don't let your anger lead you into sin, and don't let it spoil your sleep!' Ps 4:4. There's a thin line between righteous indignation and vindictiveness, and it's all too easy for the devil to push us over it. In fact, if you are

nursing some resentment, however 'harmless', you may be offering the enemy a base to operate from. Lose your temper, and you lose the battle.

4²⁸ Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need.

An honest day's work (4:28)

Then take stealing. Well, don't 'take' anything! If you've been in the habit of dipping your hand into the till when no-one's looking, or fiddling your tax returns, or keeping things you've 'borrowed', now you've put on the Lord Jesus all that's over and done with. You can use those hands for good, for doing an honest day's work and (joy of joys!) actually having something left over to share with others who aren't so fortunate.

4²⁹ Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.

What people need to hear (4:29)

Another example is what we allow ourselves to say. Once you let a word get past your teeth you can't get it back again; it's out there doing its work in the world. Some of our words are frankly rotten: they spread moral contagion, they destroy reputations, they undermine good resolves. If you've adopted the Jesus attitude, you'll find that he gives you insights into what other people really need to hear. This applies to public speaking and private conversations alike. Words are wonderful instruments for healing and helping; they are morsels of God's grace, individually gift-wrapped for each one who hears them.

4³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.

New relationship (4:30)

Yes, it's all the effect of grace – I'm not trying to lay down just another set of rules. I'm so grateful for this precious new relationship God has given me with himself, Jesus living in my life, changing me by his Spirit. How can I possibly do or say or think something I know will cause him grief? The world will tell us we need its shoddy goods, and we need them now. Our reply is that there's a day coming when we are going to be truly and gloriously free, and we're quite happy to wait for that, thank you very much! Meanwhile, like a bride-to-be gazing at the diamond stone in her engagement ring, we look into the eyes of our Friend and tell him, 'You're worth waiting for.'

4³¹ Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. ³² Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

Christ-clothes (4:31-32)

Here's another change of clothes we may need to make. Just now I mentioned rightful anger – but it so easily tips over into personal resentment. From then on, things escalate: tempers fray, there's a shouting match, we call each other names and soon we're actively plotting how to do the other person tangible harm. We climb into our all-too familiar suit of armour and there we are, bristling with weapons and spitting defiance. But there's another suit of clothes close at hand, tailored to our exact shape and so much more beautiful. They are the Christ-clothes I've been talking about, the goodness of Jesus himself. See him showing kindness to hard-as-nails racketeers or culpably unfaithful women. Watch him pouring himself out in compassion to rotting lepers and devil-crazed rejects. Hear him forgiving the soldiers who are driving great iron spikes through his flesh. Compared to what he went through, what are our little grudges and animosities worth? There was God himself begging for water for his parched throat, while absorbing in his own human body all the malice and cruelty of a loveless world. Result – instead of the

condemnation we so richly deserve, unconditional acceptance and welcome. After that, how can we possibly keep our petty list of each other's supposed failings, rather than tearing it up and chucking it in the bin?

5¹ Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children ² and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Supreme demonstration (5:1-2)

Stay with the cross a little longer. It is the supreme demonstration of God's love, as I never tire of saying. What happened there? It was God's Man, his Servant King, offering himself as a Passover lamb, the blood splashed against the wooden doorpost, so that we could walk out of slavery into the promised country of heaven. It was Abraham binding Isaac to the altar all over again; only this time, instead of the sweet scent of a sacrificed animal, it was God's own and only beloved Son, hanging up there on Mount Moriah, making our death his, and his life ours. If God was prepared to go to such lengths and depths in his love for his children, should we not walk the road of love and forgiveness ourselves, humbling though it may seem?

5³ But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. ⁴ Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. ⁵ For of this you can be sure: no immoral, impure or greedy person—such a person is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. ⁶ Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient.

Pleasure without responsibility (5:3-6)

You and I have been rescued from the world, but we've still got to walk its streets, and that's not going to be easy. God created men and women as equal partners in physical union (I'm going to talk about marriage in a moment), but the purity of this design has been twisted and disfigured. Our fallen race wants the pleasures of sex without its responsibilities. Once you set up physical beauty as something desirable in its own right, women – and men – become objects to be possessed, mere means to self-gratification. It is so easy to slip into casual talk and join in the general banter and swapping of suggestive allusions, but remember who you are. You are God's redeemed people, deeply grateful for what Jesus did for you on the cross, and on your way to receiving the most astonishing inheritance, reserved for members of Christ's kingdom. Those who sell their birthright for a tasty goulash of earthly delight may find temporary satisfaction, but all too soon they realise that they've lost what is of permanent worth. In fact, they've set up idols to worship (as the Israelites did in the Sinai wilderness) which incur the deep displeasure and hostility of the One True and Holy God. Don't let yourselves be fooled by the plausible rhetoric of sexual 'freedom'; it's tempting you away from the highway of God's loving will, and the cliff edge isn't far away.

5⁷ Therefore do not be partners with them. ⁸ For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light ⁹ (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) ¹⁰ and find out what pleases the Lord.

What would Jesus like? (5:7-10)

It's all too easy to go along with the crowd and join in the general drift. No-one likes to be unpopular, or to be considered a prig or an oddball. But look at it like this. The crowd doesn't really know where it's going. It's like a traveller blundering through a thick wood at dead of night without any means of illumination; it's almost as if the darkness has become part of him, penetrated his soul. Well, that was your spiritual state before you came to know the Lord. Now everything's different: the light of Christ has started shining brightly within you and you can *see!* You've been reborn as a child of the day, and

that affects every part of your life; there are still choices to be made, of course, but now it's second nature to prefer decency to selfishness, purity to lust, fair dealing to corruption, honesty to deceitfulness. Your guiding principle isn't a manual or a rule-book, but one single and overriding criterion: 'what would Jesus like?' He hasn't left you in the dark about this – he's there to show you the path, even if you may have to feel your way step by step.

5¹¹ Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. ¹² It is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. ¹³ But everything exposed by the light becomes visible—and everything that is illuminated becomes a light. ¹⁴ This is why it is said: 'Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.'

Wake up! (5:11-14)

You may think all this is too black-and-white – surely most of our choices in life are between differing shades of grey? Of course that's true, but doesn't it make it all the more important to be able to distinguish good from evil? One line of conduct may seem plausible enough, but in fact it leads nowhere; it doesn't matter how many people are blindly following it, you don't have to; in fact it's your positive duty to stand out against it and tell people why you think it's wrong. I don't mean you should go around exposing all the grubby little compromises people settle for; we're not moral crusaders, we're a chain of beacons showing the way to the heavenly city.

The point is this: whatever people get up to (and some of it is frankly unmentionable), they're going to keep on doing until the truth dawns on them. It's not your moral strictures that will turn sinners from their ways, it's the light of the Lord Jesus Christ. When someone comes to know the Lord, as I've said, the lamp of the Spirit comes on inside them and they understand things properly for the first time. His word speaks personally to them. Maybe when you were baptised, people sang that little song that mothers sing to their children first thing in the morning: 'Wake up, wake up, sleepy-head; Christ is risen from the dead; day has banished dreams of night; Jesus' Spirit gives you light.' It's just a jingle; but sometimes the simplest things are also the most profound.

5¹⁵ Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, ¹⁶ making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. ¹⁷ Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is.

Every second counts (5:15-17)

So I strongly recommend that you put your whole lifestyle through a rigorous examination. You may think you're behaving thoroughly sensibly, but are you (in God's sight) really performing like a complete clown? You've only got a limited number of hours in each day, so ask yourself whether you're using them to the best advantage. Are you missing some golden opportunities? Is there some activity that could be sacrificed for something else much more worthwhile? If you simply drift along thinking you've got all the time in the world, that world (plus the flesh and the devil) will make sure you never achieve anything for Christ.

Jesus wants shrewd operators for his kingdom network. Every second counts as the world hurtles towards its day of final reckoning. Keep in close touch with the command centre, and use the brains God has given you. It may seem sometimes that you're walking in a thick fog and can't be sure of the next step; but you have someone by your side who will never let you down and who has promised to show you the way ahead. He knows what he's doing, and you are his responsibility.

5¹⁸ Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit, ¹⁹ speaking to one another with psalms, hymns and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, ²⁰ always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Spirit's friendship (5:18-20)

You will never find complete satisfaction in this temporal world. Some people live for the next chance to get smashed out of their minds, or to end up in somebody's bed, or whatever. You don't need all that, because you've got the Spirit. When I said earlier that he's a kind of foretaste of your future inheritance, I didn't mean that he's only a tiny fraction of God; no, he's the whole of God fitted into your human life – so does he have the whole of you? Do you look to him alone for your earthly satisfaction? This isn't a one-off experience, it's a settled attitude, a habitual mindset. His friendship and companionship is the best thing in your life, and it's new every morning and every moment of the day.

Of course, you will also find rich satisfaction in your fellowship with other believers. Sometimes we feel we can't express how precious the things of God are to us; this makes us reticent about talking to others about it. But the very things we found so odd before we became Christians – chanting psalms, belting out hymns, humming little lyrics about Jesus – have now become second nature to us. They're ways of sharing our faith with each other, and more important still, they're a prime way of telling the Lord how much we love him, without embarrassing ourselves or others.

The Holy Spirit's in this too, I hardly need to say. His work is to fill us with a deep sense of gratitude to God our heavenly Father, in bad times as well as good, because he's given us the Lord Jesus Christ. So even when our hearts feel like lead, or the future looks as black as thunder, we can still murmur his name, tell him we love him for dying for us, tell him we're just so grateful that he's still there despite everything.

5²¹ Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. ²² Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. ²³ For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour. ²⁴ Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

Marriage: a sacrificial partnership (5:21-24)

5:21 This doesn't mean our relationships are going to be perfect – they won't be, this side of heaven. We've all got to adjust continually to each other, and resist the temptation to play God to one another. There's only one God, and that's Jesus as far as we are concerned. He's the Head of the Church and under him we're all equal. None of us has an absolute right to order anyone else around. Yes, there may be temporary hierarchies, as long as they serve a dynamic purpose, but we've all got to be humble enough to take instructions from each other.

This applies especially to the marriage relationship, which like everything else takes on a completely new character in the light of the gospel and of the command to every Christian to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

Now, the freedom we have in Christ doesn't mean that anything goes. I'm aware that Christian women are asking whether they need to play a subordinate role to their husbands, because the old distinctions have gone. For instance, must they do everything their husband tells them, or are they allowed to have independent opinions? And can't they have friendships with other men as well, especially Christian ones? Well, let me ask this one question: what does it mean for you to have your own husband? One who is absolutely special and unique to you and no-one else? Isn't there a precious relationship here which must be safeguarded at any cost?

I'm not married myself, but I know perfectly well that there are stresses and strains in every marriage, and I'm not trying to insist that we put on rose-tinted spectacles and pretend that everything in the garden's lovely. I just want to give you a practical theology of marriage which will stand the test of experience. The first point is about who is ultimately responsible for the marriage working properly, and I want you to be perfectly clear about this – it's the husband. I know you wives get exasperated

sometimes and want to take over the running of the whole show, but that leads to disaster. Once the man washes his hands of it and walks away, for whatever reason, the thing's finished. The same applies after all to Christ's headship of the church which we were thinking about earlier. Can you imagine Jesus himself saying, 'I know I'm supposed to be their Saviour and the good Shepherd who looks after the sheep, and I know they're supposed to be my body on earth and to do everything under my direction, but quite honestly this Church thing is a complete shambles and I'm fed up. I'm going to walk out and leave them to get on by themselves as best they can'?

Of course not. Love involves sacrificial partnership. So when I tell wives that they're to place themselves gladly and willingly under the leadership of their husbands, I'm not advocating a military dictatorship or an imperial tyranny; I'm envisaging a warm and intelligent sharing of decision-making, with the man being answerable for the final outcome.

5²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ²⁶ to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, ²⁷ and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.

Permanent makeover (5:25-27)

So what does this mean for you if you're the husband? Quite simply, you're responsible for making your marriage work. Love isn't just a feeling, it's a settled attitude. Take Jesus and the Church again. He didn't die for us because we were perfect; he went to the cross because he couldn't face losing us. We had absolutely no prospects at all; we had let God down too badly ever to be restored to his favour again. So Jesus says to his Father, 'I'm going to make you proud of this bride of mine – I'm going to give her a good bath in the waters of baptism, I'm going to tell her that she's forgiven and she's mine, I'm going to clothe her in beautiful robes – and however much people may criticise her for being wrinkled and ugly and unattractive, I'm working on a permanent makeover that will leave her radiantly lovely and desirable and, yes, perfect!' And one day all this is going to come true. People may consign the church to the rubbish-bin, but her Lord and Saviour hasn't. Just wait and see!

I hope you husbands are beginning to see what this involves for you. If both you and your wife are believers, then of course your primary duty of obedience is towards the Lord Jesus himself. In that sense, neither of you are meant to be the Saviour of each other. There is only one Saviour, and that's Christ. But the same kind of sacrificial love he showed for us should be mirrored and reproduced in your marriage. This is a high ideal, no question; but are you ready for it? Or are you in your marriage for what you can get out of it, whether pleasure, wealth, power, status, or whatever? And if things start to go wrong, are you simply going to abandon ship?

5²⁸ In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.

²⁹ After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church—

³⁰ for we are members of his body.

Life and health (5:28-30)

So don't ever give up hope for your marriage. There will be ups and downs, of course; but if you pack it all in, it would be like committing suicide just because you'd broken your leg. Your wife is as precious to you as your own body is to you – ever thought of that? When we get ill, we don't punish ourselves and make it worse; we take the proper medicine and nurse ourselves back to health. It may take time, but it's worth it because it makes us well again. This applies to our marriages: if things go wrong, we work at it, we treat the other person as being as valuable to us as we are to ourselves, and we do everything we possibly can to restore the relationship. The same applies to the church of Jesus Christ: if it succumbs to

some illness or other, he is committed to making sure it's not terminal, and he loves it back to life and health again. If we hurt, he hurts. That's how close we are to him.

I'm writing this because it's so often the man who walks out on a marriage. I'm also writing it because Christ's love never changes. However disastrous the situation's become, he's still there for you, he hasn't walked out on you, he's still Head of your family as he is of the church he died to save. Go to him about everything. Tell him you belong to him and that, ultimately, you are responsible to him above all else.

5³¹ 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' 32 This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. 33 However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

Part of each other (5:31-33)

Is marriage a failed institution? Let me take you back to the creation of man and woman in Genesis. All this stuff about ribs and flesh-and-bone isn't a primitive fantasy – it's trying to hammer home a fundamental fact about the way we are made. We really are part of each other. 'This is the driving force in nature that impels a male human being to grow away from a childhood dependence on father and mother, and to form an indissoluble unit with a woman who is God's personal gift to him as his wife. The bond between them isn't just physical – it's so strong that their two separate personalities and existences fuse into one.' Familiar words, yes, but they express a profound truth which must never be taken lightly or dismissed thoughtlessly. Marriage is God's idea; it's the way he has arranged things, and it's designed to work.

I've been drawing this parallel between human marriage and Christ's headship of the church. I've emphasised its commitment and sacrificial nature. I've tried to do justice to the sanctity and solemnity of the union between man and woman. Now it's up to each one of you to put this into practice. If you're the man, maybe before you met her you were used to putting yourself first and pleasing yourself – right then, transfer this policy to the one you've asked to be your wife. She's your new self – so by being unselfish towards her, you're doing yourself good!

And if you're the woman, I've got one small piece of advice to you (remembering that I'm no kind of expert in this field): you may or may not have married him because you were passionate about him, but in accepting him as your 'lord and master' you will probably find that he's not always a shining example of Christlike living. At such times it's difficult to give him your unconditional agreement, or even to respect his viewpoint. (This could particularly be the case if he doesn't share your faith in Christ.) Just go back to this fundamental fact about you both, which is your God-given and God-designed unity. You're in this together – so never take him less than seriously. It could be the saving of him.

6¹ Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 2 'Honour your father and mother'—which is the first commandment with a promise— 3 'so that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.' 4 Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

Parenting course (6:1-4)

I seem to have given you a short burst of marriage guidance, so I might as well add a mini-parenting course. Children, you're in this as well, so I'll take you first. Legally you're under the power of your parents until you come of age, but teenage is a difficult transition period and it's natural to feel restless and even to kick over the traces when you think you're not being understood. Non-Christian parents often try to solve the problem by beating their kids into submission, but when you come to know the Lord it's all different. They are trying to treat you as Jesus would have done, with love, fairness and tolerance. Don't take advantage of this or dismiss it as 'softness' – go along with what they say. This is the true spirit of the old fifth commandment, after all. It isn't, 'Respect your father and mother, do

whatever they tell you and shut up in the presence of your elders and betters, full stop.' Uniquely among the Ten Commandments, it's got an extra bit tacked on (not often quoted) which is a kind of inducement to behave properly. 'If you take your parents seriously and give them credit for wanting what's best for you, you'll find that things begin to work out for you in a way that they never would have done if you had told your mum and dad to get lost. In fact, if you don't go off the rails when you're young, you have a better chance statistically of living to a ripe old age' Exod 20:12. Even Jesus had to rein in his natural independence – and he was closer to his heavenly Father than any of us.

And this is where you come in, you dads. If you love the Lord (which you probably do if you're still listening to me going on), you'll want to tell your children about him from their earliest years. You're not 'indoctrinating' them or 'pummelling them into submission' – that's the quickest way to get them seriously disturbed – you're training them by personal example, by constant reminder and by appropriate discipline to understand the ways of God and to love him first and their neighbour next. Every child needs this kind of patient and persistent upbringing – then they are less likely to fly off the handle and become angry young men and women. Some will anyway, of course; but don't berate yourselves as failed parents – at least you tried! And one day the seeds you planted may come up as unique and lovely creations of God.

6⁵ Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. ⁶ Obey them not only to win their favour when their eye is on you, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. ⁷ Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people, ⁸ because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free.

Slaves and workers (6:5-8)

'And what about us slaves?' I can hear a voice asking. 'We're part of the household too.' Oh, yes – in fact, you belong to two households, an earthly one and a heavenly one. Christ is the Head of the heavenly one – so what's your attitude to him? I hope you'd agree it's one of deep respect and holy awe and a desire to serve your Master devotedly and singlemindedly. Well, I know your earthly master isn't God, even though some of them think they are, but your attitude to him (and to the mistress of the house) shouldn't be any different, short of total worship and adoration.

In fact there may be some societies in which slavery as such doesn't exist as an institution; but there will always be tensions in the relationship between employer and employee. Let's think of some examples where the fact that you belong to the Lord Jesus Christ body and soul should make a significant difference. Firstly, in the quality of your work. Some workers think they can get away with sloppy service or grumpy remarks when their boss isn't around to see or hear them; but you know that the Lord is always at your side, so you should say and do everything as in his presence. Then again, a lot of slaves try to curry favour with those in authority: they will be ostentatiously obedient and compliant in the great person's presence, but be thoroughly disloyal when their back's turned. You Christian workers, however, really want to find out, and do, what pleases your Lord and Master who died for you.

In fact, because your real motivation is to bring a smile to the face of God himself, not to chalk up credit with temporal authorities, you will be the kind of employee that every household and every business rejoices to have, someone who is genuinely proactive in seeking the welfare of those he or she works for. This is because you know this precious secret: your earthly service may never get the credit or reward that it deserves, but that doesn't matter to you one bit, because you know that the smallest act of goodness you do on earth will receive an answering 'Well done!' in heaven. This applies to you whether you are currently a slave, or whether you have gained your precious freedom, or whether you work entirely for yourself – everything you do in this short life is a building-block for the kingdom of God.

6⁹ And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favouritism with him.

Managing people (6:9)

Now exactly the same applies to those of you who employ slaves or run an outfit however large or small. You're working for a Master yourselves – never forget that! And his service is perfect freedom. Do you serve the Lord Jesus because he's continually standing over you with stick raised and threatening all kinds of punishment if you're not a model of perfection? No, you serve him because he died for you and you live by his grace, a continual flow of love and strength that is always more than you need. So in managing people, please, please, resolve never to use threatening language or to punish someone excessively 'as an example to everyone else not to step out of line.'

And be very careful not to favouritise those who cosy up to you or who try to make themselves specially attractive. Once again, think of the kind of God you have. He loves us all equally. He doesn't value some more than others, or keep a special pat on the head for those with outstanding natural qualities. He is scrupulously fair, and he rewards us for the work we do. You may think you're answerable to nobody but yourself – in which case you're in for a shock, because the work you've done on earth is scheduled to come under the scrutiny of heaven. Master, mistress, slave or slave-girl – each of us will be treated exactly alike at that final interview. We're all going to need mercy in the sight of God!

6¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.

Having what it takes (6:10)

I've got a final word to say, and it's about our capacity to meet the challenges of being a Christian believer in today's world. Remember how earlier in this letter I said I was praying for you to know the power of God in your lives through his Spirit? I used several different words for 'power' to hammer home two key truths: (1) we don't have what it takes; (2) he, overwhelmingly, does. And the best news of all is, he lives in us and we live in him – by faith.

Faith doesn't consist in a massive effort of willpower on our part. Nor is it day-dreaming because we can't face the realities of daily life. It's reckoning on the presence of a Lord who said he'd be with us and for us, whether we feel he's there or not. It's going on his word of promise, day in and day out. It's ceaselessly drawing upon his strength to meet our every need. In a word, it's exchanging his sufficiency for our insufficiency.

Is this like plugging into some secret source of power so that at the touch of a faith-button we are flooded by a dynamism greater than our own? Well, yes and no. Yes, because the Spirit's power really is available to cope with all our pressures and inadequacies. No, because we aren't supposed just to sit on our hands while he takes on the enemy for us. We are called into full cooperation with him, and we have a vital part to play in the battle.

I'm going to illustrate this by going through the fighting equipment of a Roman legionary soldier. But please keep in mind that what I'm really talking about is the defensive and offensive power of the Spirit of Christ, wonderfully available to even the weakest and feeblest of God's people.

6¹¹ Put on the full armour of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. ¹² 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.

Knowing the enemy (6:11-12)

You are all soldiers in Christ's army. No soldier wants to be caught still struggling into his armour when the enemy arrives in force, so make sure you are prepared before the battle starts. God has a full

set of equipment and weapons for each of us, which is more than capable of dealing with anything the opposition can throw at us.

Before I describe the armour, I'd better say a few words about the enemy themselves. I'm not just using picture language here, I'm talking spiritual reality; but I want to use terms that are in general use and easily understood. I've already shown how before we were Christian believers, we were hopelessly dominated by a controlling spirit that had set itself up in opposition to God and had effectively taken over the entire world. We call this spirit 'the devil', and I'm going to move between the singular 'he' and the plural 'they' interchangeably. What is he, what are they like?

Firstly, their intelligence. They have studied all our weak points, and they vary their attacks accordingly. They are extremely cunning and resourceful, and use a wide range of stratagems.

Next, their power. Never think that you can deal with them as easily as you might wrestle off a physical attack from another flesh-and-blood human being. They can't be defeated by ordinary tactics, or discouraged by any show of strength however impressive. Their fire-power is devastating and crippling.

Then their authority. They are really well-organised, with a unified command structure. They are world-rulers who operate in total secrecy, leaving their victims confused and ignorant about where the next attack is going to come from. They cloak themselves in darkness and leave no trace of their movements.

Finally, they are completely immoral and malicious. Don't be under any illusion that they play fair or observe the rules of the game. They are set on taking over heaven itself; earthly sovereignty is a mere stepping-stone to achieving their ultimate aim, which is to dethrone the True and Holy One and reign as gods themselves. Yes, the devil's ambition is to be worshipped as the Most High God. That's what the war is all about, and all earthly wars pale into insignificance and triviality beside the one in which you and I are – under the Lordship of Christ – involved.

6¹³ Therefore put on the full armour 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.

Undefeated (6:13)

I'm not exaggerating the might of this army that is arrayed against us; the danger is that you will underestimate it and wander into battle with only half your equipment. But here's the amazing thing: you're on the winning side. You're going to be able to deal with the worst the enemy can throw at you. You may have to fight tooth and nail – you may even think the hosts of evil have won the day – you will certainly be called upon to keep going until the very end – but when the smoke of battle has finally cleared, you're going to be standing there undefeated. How could this ever be? Because the armour you wear is not of human manufacture; it's designed, made and supplied by God himself. It's the armour the Lord Jesus himself wore – and he went through everything we shall ever experience, then worse.

6^{14a} Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled round your waist...

The belt of truth (6:14a)

So, in the confidence that you're going to be still on your feet at the end of the day, stand tall right from the start. I hope you don't mind if I'm utterly realistic and practical in the first piece of equipment I talk about. The devil is going to go for the weakest and tenderest part of your anatomy, which is located in and just below the region of your waist. Roman legionaries wear a massive belt of metal-studded leather which protects their sensitive parts (kidneys and groin) as well as carrying their sword and dagger. In spiritual terms, this belt stands for the truth. The devil is the father of lies and consistently distorts the

way things are. By contrast, Christ sets us free from deception and clears our vision, so that we can be ruthlessly honest with ourselves and hold on to the word of God with confidence. We talk about an unfair opponent attacking 'below the belt'. Well, the devil loves to go for our weakest point, whatever that may be. It may be our vanity, or our fear of what people think, our impatience, our acquisitive streak, whatever; it is uncanny how the attacks come in relentlessly at that very place. It may of course be the very obvious area of sexual attraction – this could happen as much within the Christian fellowship as outside it. Once you recognise that you are being subjected to some kind of assault (and it can come quite slowly or very suddenly), don't try to cope with it by using ordinary human willpower or commonsense – go straight to Christ, tell him the situation and ask him to set you free by his truth. And he will, because he himself is the truth and we're safe close to him.

6^{14b} ...with the breastplate of righteousness in place...

The breastplate of righteousness (6:14b)

We're going through the defensive armour just at present, so the next area to be covered is the chest and the heart. (I'm not listing these in order of importance, because, as I said, it's not just some of this equipment that's vitally necessary, it's all of it together.) The legionary wears a breastplate of metal chain-mail; so what does the Christian soldier wear? Well, the devil is not only the 'deceiver', he's also our 'accuser' or 'prosecutor'. (The actual titles 'devil' (*diabolos*) and 'Satan' (*satanas*) carry this meaning.) Our conscience quite correctly warns us whenever our behaviour or intentions are not acceptable to God; so the enemy takes advantage of this and challenges our right to call ourselves children of God at all. In military terms this is like a javelin being flung straight at our midriff. So how do we cope with this onslaught, particularly as we know perfectly well that we often fail to meet God's standards of love and unselfishness? The answer is to have already buckled on the chain-mail jacket supplied by God, which is Christ's own impregnable goodness or 'righteousness'.

Isaiah talks about this in his famous chapter about how the Lord deals with his people's sinfulness. He shows how we are all too conscious of our unfaithfulness to God and our inability to live up to his standards of justice and integrity. So what does our God do? Why, he acts himself. He 'puts on righteousness as a breastplate' and 'comes as Redeemer to Zion'. We believe that this has been fulfilled in the perfect life and sacrificial death of the Lord Jesus Christ. His righteousness is now ours by faith. Whenever the enemy flings a charge at us, we let Christ himself answer it with his memorable words, 'Who convicts me of sin?' In effect, he flings the javelin straight back at the accuser.

6¹⁵ ...and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace.

Gospel readiness (6:15)

The soldier has to march for long hours along hot and dusty roads, then be nimble enough to change formation in battle for tactical purposes. For this he will need a stout pair of leather sandals which allow his feet to breathe yet also be flexible and quick-moving. The Christian, too, is constantly on the move, in this demanding war of aggression against Satan's kingdom which is fought not by actual weapons but, paradoxically, by bringing the good news of reconciliation through Christ; and, when the call comes, by marching to the ends of the earth with the message of the peaceful reign of God. The prophet pictures the welcome given to the messenger who comes over the mountains with the news that God's kingdom is here at last, that peace has broken out, and that the King has come in person to bring relief to his despairing people. Are we ready for this call?

At the original Passover every Israelite ate the simple meal with their belts fastened, their sandals on their feet and their staff in their hand, knowing that at any moment the call would come to be on the move. Is it too fanciful to suggest that our church meeting, rather than being a ritual performance for its

own sake, should be seen by everybody as a preparation for mission – being with the Lord in order for him to send us out, as the first apostles were? People may respond to the gospel in various ways, including outright rejection; but they're never going to hear it in the first place, unless someone is commissioned to travel to where they are and tell them how Christ Jesus has finally ended the human war against God.

6¹⁶ In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.

The shield of faith (6:16)

Never be without your shield! Legionaries have a semi-cylindrical metal shield, which effectively covers their whole body and blocks or deflects incoming missiles. It's like a great door, shutting out potentially deadly intruders. This represents faith. The devil is going to hurl everything he can at you by way of thoughts, ideas, misinterpretations or outright lies, designed to weaken or upset your trust in Christ. You will find yourself tempted to question God's goodness. Your friends will pour scorn on your Christian profession. All the usual stuff! Notice that these attacks on your faith very often come in the shape of words – the Psalmist likened his opponents' deceitful lies to 'barbed and flaming arrows shot by a skilful archer.' But if you hold firmly to what you have always believed, these missiles will fall harmlessly to the ground, their fury extinguished. If people's words unsettle you, hold fast to the Word himself, the Son of God who gives us the victory.

I'm talking about intelligent faith here – not mindless literalism or stubborn traditionalism, but the greater than human wisdom that comes from the Spirit of truth. Feed your faith regularly – if a soldier hasn't had a proper breakfast, he won't have the strength to keep his shield up in the stress of battle.

6^{17a} Take the helmet of salvation...

The helmet of salvation (6:17a)

I've deliberately left the helmet till last, as far as the defensive armour is concerned. Your legionary's helmet protects his head, obviously, but also the temples and neck; it's made of iron or bronze and it has a horsehair crest, so it presents a fine sight with its glittering steel and waving plume. In the Christian analogy it represents hope, the certainty that our Lord God will never let us down. Time and again the Lord has called me to go into dangerous situations, or to embark on apparently hopeless enterprises, where my only prospect of survival, let alone success, has been in his presence and protection. This enables me to hold my head high and face whatever's coming with clear-sighted confidence. One day soon Christ is going to return, there's going to be an endless victory celebration, and his soldiers will exchange their battered and dented helmets for crowns of glory. Until then we fight on – not just for personal survival but also to bring the hope of life to others.

6^{17b} ...and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

The sword of the Spirit (6:17b)

Now for the sword. The sword is the soldier's best friend. It always hangs by his side, ready for use; it is double-edged; it is kept sharpened and sparkling clean; and its use requires constant practice and exercise. So what does it represent in the Christian's armoury? Once again I must emphasise that I'm not talking about fighting human enemies – this war is a spiritual one, against immensely powerful and intelligent forces, where aggression and resistance go hand in hand. And the secret of victory is this: it's not we who do the fighting in our own natural strength, it's the Holy Spirit living in us and winning the battle through our trust and obedience. So what weapon does he love to use? None other than God's

word coming to us supremely in scripture, but also in preaching and prophecy. The Spirit, Christ-in-you, gives the word its peculiar power; but he needs you to hear it and respond to it.

How to use the Bible

Let's then apply the points I was making about the legionary sword to our practical use of the Bible. It's our best friend: not something remote or forbidding but constantly encouraging and supporting us in our up-and-down lives. It is there by our side, instantly ready for active service, a living presence in our minds and memories. It's double-edged, in the sense that it can be turned not only against the enemy when temptation comes, but also upon ourselves when we need self-examination or discipline or instruction of any kind. It needs to be kept sharp and vivid in our minds and hearts, and not allowed to grow rusty or dull. And just as the soldier regularly practises sword drill, and exercises his sword-arm to keep it firm and muscular, so we should be wrestling daily with the Bible, whether in private study and meditation, or exploring it with others and seeing how it can shape our character and transform our attitudes.

One more thing: we come to the word to meet the Word. The Spirit above all longs to show us Jesus. He is the desire of our hearts, and the desire of all people on this earth. We feed on the word not for duty's sake, nor to gulp down our breakfast as fast as possible, but as the Spirit's appointed way to know the Lord better and grow more like him.

6¹⁸ And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people.

Continual contact (6:18)

Our encounter with the word (and the Word) is in fact a two-way conversation – as though the soldier on the field were to be in continual contact with the commanding officer. (I've probably exhausted this analogy by now; but I don't want you ever to forget that while we are on earth, we are in enemy-occupied territory, fighting to reclaim it inch by inch for the King.) Prayer is the disciple's key weapon (I'm at it again!). I was talking just now about the secret of victory being not in our own strength but in the Spirit's power. Well, every member of Christ's army 'has' the Spirit as their birthright, but sometimes we forget what a wonderful ally he is, particularly when we're under acute pressure or when we reach a crisis of some sort. In fact, the weaker we feel (and really are), the more he can take over and meet our need, whether we feel him there or not. We can pour out our hearts to him – share everything with him – tell him all the details of our shortfall – rest in his love and presence. We all need to get enough sleep, of course, because our days are full of endless demands; but our Lord was always telling us to 'watch and pray', so we might just ask ourselves whether we could afford to shave a little off our hours of sleep to add it to our time for prayer. (But not so much that we spend our prayer times dozing off!)

There is so much to pray for. And there's no doubt that the more we do it, the better we get at it and the more adventurous our prayers become. Not only for ourselves but for others as well. One day we will discover how much we owed to our fellow-believers who took the time to bring our names before the Lord and asked him to bless us and strengthen us. Well, we can do the same for them. Maybe our circle of prayer is quite narrow at first; but it can widen to encompass the whole world, wherever in fact Christians are battling it out for their Lord and meeting unaccountable obstacles and very real perils. It may seem ludicrous to suppose that muttering a few names and needs before the throne of grace could make all the difference, but it does, it really does, and all because of the One who now sits upon that throne and whose marks of love guarantee our acceptance and attentive welcome.

6¹⁹ Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, ²⁰ for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.

Pray for me too! (6:19-20)

So if people ask you to pray for them, don't consider it a waste of time. It's kingdom work, and we all depend on one another to see this thing through. In fact, I'm now going to ask you to say a specific prayer for me. I may be under close confinement, but at least I'm currently free to witness for Christ, and I've never forgotten that I'm his representative here. But I do find it difficult sometimes (believe it or not!) to know what to say, and I have to confess that the gospel sometimes seems to be a completely foreign language to many of the good folks here. The very people who ought to see most clearly are completely blind! This is where your prayers could make a mighty difference. Please ask God to open things up for me – I don't mean release from jail (that would be nice, but it's not a priority) – I mean that the gospel should flow freely around this place, streams of living water irrigating the barren soil. Pray for courage for me to open my mouth, for inspired words to be given me, and for open minds and hearts to receive the lifegiving seed. I don't want this wonderful news of Christ and his cross to be adulterated, or to come over as just another set of moral ideals to be striven for. I want to make a difference to everyone's thinking, whether they're Jews, interested Gentiles or complete pagans. Now – when's your next prayer meeting?

6²¹ Tychicus, the dear brother and faithful servant in the Lord, will tell you everything, so that you also may know how I am and what I am doing. ²² I am sending him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are, and that he may encourage you.

Personal contact (6:21-22)

I realise that I haven't really told you much about my situation here, how I'm getting on healthwise and so on, but parchment is expensive and anyway Tychicus, who is bringing this letter, will be able to fill you in on anything you need to know. I've no need to write a formal recommendation for him, as he's well-known to you. I have so appreciated his companionship, his dependability and his practical initiatives on my behalf. He lives for Christ and I'm going to miss him. But it's so important that you have this personal contact with me and realise that things here could be much worse than they are; he will put paid to any discouraging rumours you may have heard, and he might even tell you a few good stories to leaven this highly serious epistle I've just spent the last few weeks composing for you.

6²³ Peace to the brothers and sisters, and love with faith from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴ Grace to all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love.

Final word (6:23-24)

In fact, this letter's not really from me at all. I'm simply passing on what I've been learning from God our heavenly Father, and from the Lord Jesus who is simultaneously the Anointed King at God's right hand and the Friend who never leaves my side. I've been emphasising the battle we're all fighting, you my brothers and sisters out there in Asia and me here in Rome, with enemies who seem so real and so menacing – but they're mere phantoms compared to the solid realities of the gospel: God's peace and reassurance flooding our hearts, his love and mercy dispelling our guilt and fears, and the promises of his word strengthening our faith day by day.

Let me leave you with the greatest word of all, the treasure we can carry around with us wherever we go – grace. Don't ever let this word become so familiar that it loses its wonder. It's the supreme love-token, the engagement ring he has placed on our finger. He went into the depths of death and out again the other side to deal finally with our sins and bring us eternal life. That's why there are so many Christians all over the world who love him with undying gratitude, and who are so looking forward to the day when they can thank him face to face. Yes, it's coming!

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1:4-6 In the beauty of holiness Ps 29:2; Rev 3:5. That's why we love him 1 Jn 4:10.
1:7-8 Nothing on your record Ps 107:10-16; Isa 43:25; Isa 61:1. He dealt with it Gal 3:13. They've all been paid for Jn 19:30. He is committed to doing that Phil 2:12-13; 1 Thess 5:23-24.
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1:11-12 Three Persons to express his nature Mt 28:19. Hope for many centuries Job 19:25; Lk 2:25, 38.
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- 2:1-3** Cut yourself off from the life of God and you die Lk 15:24; Col 2:13. A dark figure of immense spiritual power Eph 6:12; 1 Jn 5:19. Promptings of your lower nature Gal 5:16. Gone rotten to the core Gen 6:5.
2:4-7 Bearing a world's evil and corruption 2 Cor 5:19; 1 Pet 2:24. Brought us up with him Rom 6:3-4. Good things God has in store for us 1 Cor 2:9.
2:8-9 Boast of ... the good sense to believe in Christ Rom 3:27; 1 Cor 1:29-31. Senselessly crediting themselves with heavenly favour Rom 10:3. Pull himself out of the mess Zech 3:2, 9:11.
2:10 Produce in us hour by hour Col 3:10. What he has started he will finish Ps 138:8 (KJV, NIV); Phil 1:6.
2:11-13 The only certainty was death Ps 88:3-7; Prov 16:25. In a far country Lk 15:13.
2:14-16 The elder brother in the story Lk 15:25-30. On Good Friday afternoon Mk 15:38. All one in Christ Jn 17:20-23; Col 3:11.
2:17-18 Heartbeat of the old prophets *Isa 52:7; *Isa 57:19; Nah 1:15; Zech 9:10. The message of the angels Lk 2:14. Nothing left to be afraid of Lk 24:36; Jn 14:27; Jn 20:19. Last place on earth Mk 16:15; Acts 1:8. Replaced that forbidding curtain with himself Heb 10:20.
2:19-22 His presence among us Gen 3:8; Exod 33:16; Jer 31:33-34; Rev 21:3. Filled with the knowledge of God Hab 2:14. Praise the One True God Zeph 3:9-10. Full kingdom member Mt 8:11. Living and breathing stones 1 Pet 2:5. You its priests Exod 19:6; Rev 1:6. Temple of the Holy Spirit 1 Cor 3:16; Rev 21:22.
- 3:1-2** Where I can serve him best 2 Cor 4:7-12. The Jews don't like that one little bit 1 Thess 2:14b-16a. Chosen me to spearhead this movement 1 Tim 2:7.
3:3-6 Earlier in this letter Eph 1:10. Out in the open Jer 31:33-34; Acts 2:17-18. At exactly the right time Gal 4:4. Freely share in the inheritance Isa 2:2-4; 25:6-9; 56:6-8; Jn 10:16. Anyone anywhere Isa 49:6, 22.
3:7-8 Prayed for me to be forgiven Acts 7:60. Treasure buried in a field Mt 13:44. Outside the pale myself 1 Tim 1:12-16.
3:9-10 We've never believed it Isa 53:1; Acts 28:26-27. He sends his Word Ps 33:6; Jn 1:1-3; Heb 1:2. Least significant people Mic 5:2; Jn 1:46. Knew exactly what he was doing Isa 40:14. Angelic hosts are eavesdropping 1 Pet 1:12.
3:11-13 Your own choice ... another choice Jn 6:37. Part of that fellowship Jn 17:24; 1 Jn 1:3. Walk confidently into the very presence of God Isa 45:19; Heb 4:16; Heb 10:19-22. Took the good news to Asia Minor Acts 19:8-10; 2 Cor 1:8.
3:14-17 What I was saying Eph 2:19-22. By drawing on his power Ps 84:5-7; Isa 40:31. He becomes the home-owner Jn 14:23; Rev 3:20.

3:18-19 *Sending its roots deep down* Isa 37:31; Jer 17:8; Col 2:7. *Cross-shaped love* Jn 3:16; Jn 12:32; 1 Jn 3:16. *You get the whole Godhead* Col 2:9-10. NIV 2011 is inconsistent in its spelling of 'fulness/fullness', see 1:23.

3:20-21 *The Spirit's power within us* Jude 24. *Making Christ known* Jn 17:3-4; Rom 16:25-27.

4:1-2 *Particularly if they are your fellow-believers* Rom 12:10; Gal 6:10.

4:3-6 *Heavy iron chains* Acts 12:6; Acts 16:26. *It's a single unit* 1 Cor 12:12-13. *Heard the voice of the Son of God* Jn 5:25. *Jesus is Lord, and he's my Lord* Rom 10:9; 1 Cor 12:3. *There's only one of him* Mal 2:10; 1 Cor 8:6.

4:7-10 *There's more to come* Rom 8:32. *So that you may dwell among them* Ps 68:18. *Powerless to do its malign work* Isa 49:24-25; Lk 11:21-22. *They're waiting for us* Lk 24:49. *Holy Spirit to be unlocked* Acts 2:33.

4:11 *Faith you have been taught* 2 Tim 1:11-14, 2:2. *Foundation-stones of Christ's building* Eph 2:20; Rev 21:14. *Truth as it has always been revealed* Jn 6:45; Gal 1:11. *As your own Lord and Saviour* Mt 11:28; Jn 1:12; Acts 8:26-40; Tit 3:4-7. *Resourced by the Spirit* Acts 8:4; Rom 10:17. *Stay humble and usable* 2 Tim 2:21; 1 Pet 5:1-4. *A regular, systematic way* 2 Tim 2:15.

4:12-13 *More about the different gifts* Rom 12:6-8; 1 Cor 12:4-11; 1 Pet 4:9-11. *Trained as ministers* Exod 19:6; Num 11:29; 1 Pet 2:9. *I tried to explain earlier* Eph 1:22-23. *We should be responsible adults* 1 Cor 3:1-3; Heb 5:11-14. *Perfect unity in him* Jn 17:22-23; Heb 6:1.

4:14 *Genuine members of the kingdom* Mt 18:1-3. *The father of lies* Jn 8:44; 2 Cor 11:3-4. *Esoteric wisdom* Col 2:4, 8.

4:15-16 *The Truth of God himself* Jn 14:6. *Speak frankly and directly* Prov 27:5-6, 28:23; Gal 4:16. *And outsiders as well* Col 4:5-6. *With Christ himself* 2 Cor 10:12. *Boss of the whole outfit* Eph 1:22; Col 1:18.

4:17-19 *A royal, holy people* Dt 7:6; 1 Pet 2:9. *To live for the Lord* Rom 14:8; Phil 1:21. *Light of Christ into your hearts* 2 Cor 4:6; Eph 5:8-9. *You're fully alive* Rom 5:10-11. *Good to others for his sake* Mt 5:16, 7:12. *They can't get enough of it* 1 Cor 15:32. *Training in self-discipline* 1 Thess 4:3-8. *Live to please Christ* Col 1:10.

4:20-21 *A little more in due course* Eph 4:25-6:9. *Eternity of discovery lies before us* Jn 17:3; 1 Cor 13:12.

4:22-24 *Act of creation has taken place* 2 Cor 5:17. *Reborn as a child of God* Jn 3:5-6; 1 Pet 1:4, 2:2; 1 Jn 3:1-3.

4:25 *Transparency before God* Ps 51:6; Ps 139:23-24; 1 Jn 1:6-7. *Truthfulness in word and deed* *Zech 8:16.

4:26-27 *Father's house being defiled* Mk 11:15-17. *Judgment on another human being* Dt 32:35a; Rom 12:19. *Don't let it spoil your sleep* *Ps 4:4, 8; Ps 37:7-8.

4:28 *Doing an honest day's work* Acts 20:35.

4:29 *Each one who hears them* Prov 15:23; Prov 25:11; Eccl 10:12a.

4:30 *Cause him grief* *Isa 63:9-10; 2 Cor 5:9.

4:31 *Forgiving the soldiers* Lk 23:34. *Chucking it in the bin* Gen 50:15-21; Mt 18:21-22.

5:1-2 *Supreme demonstration* Rom 5:8. *His life ours* Gen 22:13; Jn 3:16.

5:3-6 *Talk about marriage* Eph 5:21-24. *Objects to be possessed* 1 Thess 4:3-8. *Tasty goulash of earthly delight* Heb 12:16.

5:7-10 *Feel your way step by step* Ps 25:9; Ps 27:1; Mic 7:8; Jn 14:6.

5:11-14 *Distinguish good from evil* 1 Ki 3:9; Isa 7:15; Heb 5:14. *Properly for the first time* Job 32:8; Ps 37:31. *Gives you light* Isa 26:17; 60:1.

5:15-17 *The flesh and the devil* Eph 2:2-3. *For his kingdom network* Dan 12:3, 10; Mt 10:16; Rom 16:19.

Show you the way ahead Prov 3:5-6; Jas 1:5. *You are his responsibility* Jn 15:15-16; 1 Pet 5:7.

5:18-20 *Foretaste of your future inheritance* Eph 1:13-14. *For your earthly satisfaction* Ps 16:11; Ps 73:25-26. *His friendship and companionship* Jn 14:15-23. *New every morning* Lam 3:22-23.

5:21-24 *Humble enough to take instructions* Col 3:12-18; 1 Pet 5:5. *Thinking about earlier* Eph 1:22, 2:21. *Warm and intelligent sharing* Eccl 4:9-12.

5:25-27 *You're responsible* 1 Pet 3:7. *She's forgiven and she's mine* Jn 15:3; 1 Pet 2:24. *Beautiful robes* Isa 61:10.

5:28-30 *As precious to you* Gen 2:23; Col 3:19. *Restore the relationship* Hos 3:1.

5:31-33 *Man and woman in Genesis* Gen 2:24. *The saving of him* 1 Cor 7:16; 1 Tim 2:4; 1 Pet 3:1-2, 6.

6:1-4 *Fifth commandment* Exod 20:12. *Closer to his heavenly Father* Lk 2:49-51; Heb 5:8. *Appropriate discipline* Prov 22:6; 2 Tim 3:15; Heb 12:7-11.

6:5-8 *Everything as in his presence* Col 3:17, 23; 1 Pet 3:12. *Seeking the welfare* 1 Pet 2:16. *An answering 'well done' in heaven* Mt 25:21; Col 3:24.

6:9 *You live by his grace* 2 Cor 12:9; Gal 2:20; *Rewards us for the work we do* Acts 10:34; Rom 2:11; Jas 2:1, 9; 1 Pet 1:17. *Mercy in the sight of God* 1 Cor 3:13; 2 Cor 5:10.

6:10 *Power ... through his Spirit* Eph 1:19; 3:16. *His sufficiency for our insufficiency* 2 Cor 2:16, 3:5; Phil 4:13; Col 1:11.

6:11-12 *I've already shown Eph 2:2. Worshipped as the Most High God Ezek 28:1, 6; Isa 14:13-14.*

6:13 *Everything we shall ever experience, then worse Jn 14:30; Heb 4:15; 1 Jn 3:8, 4:4.*

6:14a *Father of lies Jn 8:44; Eph 4:14. Clears our vision 1 Jn 5:20. Within the Christian fellowship 1 Thess 4:3-8; 1 Tim 5:2. Set you free by his truth *Isa 11:5; Jn 8:32, 36. We're safe close to him Ps 27:1-2; Ps 62:8; Jn 14:6.*

6:14b *Carry this meaning Zech 3:1. Christ's own impregnable goodness or righteousness *Isa 11:5; 2 Cor 5:21; 2 Cor 6:7; 2 Pet 1:1. His famous chapter Isa 59. Comes as Redeemer to Zion *Isa 59:17, 20.*

*Now ours by faith Rom 3:24; Phil 3:9. Who convicts me of sin? Jn 8:46; Rom 8:33-34. Straight back at the accuser *Zech 3:1-5.*

6:15 *The prophet pictures the welcome Isa 52:7; Nah 1:15. Staff in their hand Exod 12:11. As the first apostles were Mk 3:14. Tell them about Christ Acts 1:8; Rom 10:14-17.*

6:16 *Question God's goodness Gen 3:1. Your Christian profession 1 Pet 4:14. All the usual stuff 1 Cor 10:13. Shot by a skilful archer Ps 120:4. Who gives us the victory 1 Cor 15:57; 1 Jn 5:4-5. Spirit of truth 1 Jn 4:4-6.*

6:17a *Will never let us down *Isa 59:17; 1 Th 5:8. Clear-sighted confidence 2 Cor 1:10. Hope of life to others 1 Tim 4:10; 2 Tim 4:17-18.*

6:17b *This war is a spiritual one 2 Cor 10:4. Our up-and-down lives Ps 119:98. In our minds and memories Josh 1:8; Ps 119:11. Instruction of any kind Ps 19:7-13; Lk 4:4; Heb 4:12. To meet the Word Ps 27:8. To show us Jesus Jn 15:26; 16:14-15. The desire of all people on this earth Ps 73:25; Isa 26:8-9; Jn 12:32. Grow more like him 2 Cor 3:17-18.*

6:18 *Watch and pray Mk 13:33, 14:38. Very real perils Dan 10:12-13. Acceptance and attentive welcome Dan 9:23; Rom 8:32; Heb 4:16; Rev 8:3-5; Rev 5:9-10.*

6:19-20 *His representative here Acts 28:30-31. Completely blind Acts 28:26-27. Irrigating the barren soil Isa 30:23; 32:20. Receive the life-giving seed Ps 147:15; 2 Thess 3:1.*

6:21-22 *He's well-known to you Acts 20:4; Col 4:7-9; 2 Tim 4:12.*

6:23-24 *At God's right hand Ps 2:1, 6; Ps 110:1-2. Thank him face to face 2 Tim 1:9-10.*

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