

Ephesians

A Bird's Eye View of the Major Movements of Thought

David Gooding

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Introduction: A Bird's Eye View of the Epistle

Reading: Ephesians 1:1–14

Two things, among very many, fill me with happiness as I stand here before you this evening. The first, and not the lesser, is the memory of your warm-hearted kindness and hospitality to me in those days when I was here with you for the last series on the book of Judges. The encouragement of your fellowship lingers yet in my memory, and I thank God and you for it once again.

The second thing that causes me some happiness is the knowledge that some of you have been studying the Epistle to the Ephesians seriously over many weeks in recent times. That relieves me of a considerable burden, for I am no longer under necessity to explain every detail of this rich and wealthy epistle, being assured that you have already done those steps and gathered its riches. What I must do, perhaps, for my small contribution to your studies, is to gather up what you have learned in detail and attempt to show how it hangs together as a whole: to show what this part has to do with that part, and to put the book as a whole and its individual details against the background of their context, in order to better bring out its ultimate significance.

We have only eight sessions, and it would be impossible for us to dwell on every word or phrase, as would be appropriate if we were conducting a seminar together. Therefore, I shall be attempting more of a bird's eye view of the major movements of thought of this book.

And then, of course, the knowledge that you have been studying this book together encourages me wonderfully, because two things will accrue to me by way of benefit. Where you see that I am amiss in my interpretation—and that could be in many places—you will, in your kindness of heart, come alongside me and help me to correct my erroneous views. I mean that sincerely. This is the epistle that tells us that, in order to plumb the depths of the great mystery of God, we need the help of all our fellow saints, so that,

being rooted and grounded in love, [we] may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge. (3:17–19)

If I miss points that glow with riches and the gold of divine grace, I trust you will not be niggardly with what the Lord has shown you, but that you will add to my small store by your kind communication.

Because my purpose is to give you a bird's eye view of the major sequences of thought in the book, I have prepared a handout (see Appendix). Here you will see that I have put a very

slight table of contents together, not of course a complete table. What I have done is to indicate, as I read it, that there are three major movements of thought in the book and each of those is composed of three minor movements.

I have put just a few little jottings from each part of these movements of thought on this paper before you so that you should notice at once certain similarities. Each comes to its climax in a tremendous burst of triumph of God over the opposition. I would like you to notice that; and not merely the fact coldly stated on a page, but even now begin by God's grace to grip with your hearts the tremendous sense of triumph and victory: the overcoming of the opposition that God has achieved in his great purposes of redemption and salvation for each one of us.

Ephesians is a wealthy epistle and full of deep matters. Let us not so much try to gather its riches and plumb its depths, but see how all the details hang together as a whole, by examining what this part has to do with that part and by putting the individual details against the background of their context, in order to bring out its ultimate significance. As I said, it would be impossible to dwell on every word and phrase, and we shall be attempting to take a bird's eye view.

The first major movement of thought (1:1–2:10)

The purpose of God in creation¹

We are thinking here of God's purpose in creation and his purpose for us, that we might be before him to be his sons (1:1–14). But we shall be reminded of the desperate opposition there had come to be against the plan of God (2:1–10). Every one of us, instead of being alive and sparkling with the vigour of God's created life, was in fact dead in trespasses and sins. And more than dead: like prisoners in a prison yard, doing our exercises under the control of a guard, we walked day in and day out regimented in our thought-patterns by the prince of the power of the air. It was such an utter disaster when we think of it in the light of God's original creation.

The glorious message of triumph in this first movement of thought as it comes to its finale is the tremendous triumph that God has wrought. He has burst the bonds of death and broken the chains of the patterns of thought that the god of this world had forged in order to keep us thinking exactly as he wants us to. God has made us alive in Christ and set us at his own right hand with Christ in the heavenlies. He is not merely promising to do this—he has done it.

So, the first major movement of thought as it comes to its climax echoes the opening bars of triumph, 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' (1:3). Blessed be God—why *blessed*? Because he has done what he planned to do. Did he choose us before the foundation of the world? Did he plan certain things before the foundation of the world? Then, praise God, he has done it! He has blessed us with those blessings that he purposed to bless us with before the world began. Let this great triumph of God over the opposition flood our hearts with encouragement as we begin our studies together.

¹ This has four subheadings: God's Plan for Us and for the Universe (in two parts); Prayer for Revelation and Illumination; Triumph Over the Opposition. These span chapters 2–5.

The second major movement of thought (2:11–4:16)

The role of Christ in history²

This concerns itself not so much with the role of God in creation, but with the role of Christ in the course of history, and where we fit into that (2:11–22). I ask you to notice again the great triumph with which it finishes: God's plan of development in the course of history is to have a temple (2:21). Like the very good architect that he is, God has had some prototype models made and put up, so that folks may begin to get some idea of the splendid building that one day shall be, and indeed now is.

If you have ever been along to an architect's office or a Civil Service department that engineers our roads and bridges and buildings, they may have shown you with pride that that terrible mess we see on the Antrim Road, and we think is utter chaos, is in fact proceeding according to a well-designed plan—according to the model which they have. There the model sits. It is not, of course, the real thing, but by looking at it we can understand what the real thing will be like when it is finished. The real thing will be of a bigger dimension.

Down the ages God has had his prototype models of this great temple that is in fact already being built. It is called both a *temple* and a *body*. As we come to the end of this particular movement, let us notice that there are forces arrayed against the completion of God's project within history, which the Apostle Paul calls 'the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness' (4:14 KJV). They seek to pervert the pure doctrine of Jesus Christ our Lord, and 'lie in wait' to catch innocent babes in Christ and lead them astray into this or that new-fangled heresy.

If you have attempted to preach God's truth, whether it is the gospel to the unconverted or expounding the word to believers, either here or abroad, you will have become aware that you are not merely engaged in imparting information but you are in the forefront of a battle for people's minds and spirits. You are battling in a war that will not be finished until the Lord comes.

But when we think of the opposition (we shall have to do that in some detail later on), of all Satan's attempts through men's heresies to oppose God's truth and plan, let us start by thinking of the triumph. Let us consider him who ascended far above all. That he ascended first implies that he descended to the lower parts of the earth and, rising again, he led captivity captive and overcame the opposition. In his sovereign triumph he has dispensed gifts to men, who, under his exalted control, are at this very moment ministering the gifts of the triumphant head to the Body of Christ throughout the whole world, until the great project comes to its glorious conclusion (4:7–16).

Did the thought cross your minds, as you see these matters on the table of contents, that this is going to be one of those difficult, complicated things? Let us take courage: of course it is going to be difficult! What do we think it is? Is it *Little Red Riding Hood*, or something like that, that we are dealing with? Is it some little pastime of innocent play? We are here dealing with the great purposes of God through the ages of history, the God of the far flung galaxies

² This has three subheadings: 1. Christ's Preaching to Jew and Gentile (in two parts); Prayer for Apprehension and Knowledge; Triumph Over the Opposition. These span chapters 6–8a.

of time and space. We are dealing with the very opposition of his satanic majesty and hell itself against the purposes of God—of course it is going to be complicated! Do we want a salvation that is a kind of a tuppence ha'penny novel?

If you find it difficult, get hold, even now, of some of the sense of triumph. The God who has chosen you to be saved, and has decided what you should know about this salvation, has made provision to overcome all the opposition in his ascended Christ. This very minute he looks upon us and takes notice of our small hearts and smaller brains, and he is able to communicate God's truth to us to enable us to take our fully developed part in the body of Christ and in that glorious temple that shall express the praise and the personality of God for all eternity.

The third major movement of thought (4:17–6:24)

The new man: imitator of God and Christ³

We can see what this third movement has to do with the other two. The first one bids us think of creation; for we remember that the first man, Adam, at creation, was made in the image of God. But then we remember that history had not long started its course perhaps, when man, made originally in the image of God, had fallen into disgrace, rebellion and sin, and the image of God was sadly marred and perverted.

Put Movements One and Two together. Think first of God's plan before the foundation of the world; then think of the great developments in history; and think finally of the great work of the redeeming Messiah within history. And then in Movement Three you come to a new start: a new man, a new creation, a new phenomenon in the entire universe, the like of which neither archangel nor demon has ever seen before (2:15; 4:24). It is a wholly new kind of a thing. The Bible calls it the *new man*. We shall find as we study this third movement of thought in detail that this new man goes about his way of living by imitating his Creator, God, and his Redeemer, Christ (5:1–2).

Wonder of wonders, of course as always there is opposition. But now, instead of it being God himself and Messiah himself taking on and engaging the foe, this new man in Christ is invited by God to enter the heavenlies and himself take part in the great battle of the ages and fight in the very army of God against the rebels of God (6:10–20). It is a fight that, by God's good grace and the wise strategies of the Messiah, shall issue in triumph; but it is a fight that, for all that, at this present time is a bitter and hard fought fight in which people get hurt, and some of them get wounded, and some nearly, but never, perish.

So there are three great movements of thought, which the merest glance at the epistle will show, each ending on this note of triumph. Let's leave it there at the moment, but promise ourselves a great treat later on in these studies as God is able to show us the glory of the triumph.

³ This has three subheadings: Christ's Teaching About the New Man; Exhortation to Imitation of God and Christ; Triumph Over the Opposition—chapter 8b.

Paul's prayers

There are no prizes for noticing that the middle three minor sections all talk of *illumination*. Paul speaks of the purposes of God in creation. He then prays 'that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you *a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him*, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened' (1:17–18). Paul thought it necessary to pray thus for people who he tells us were already believers. If he found it necessary to pray for them, that God would give them a spirit of revelation, then we would be wise to reckon that we too could do with a spirit of revelation and for our eyes to be illumined to take in what God's great purpose is about.

I shall do my best to make simple what I understand this epistle has to say, though, by my imperfections, it will seem at times more obscure than it might be. But let us remember that when the preacher has done his best, be he Paul or the archangel Michael, these things would still be difficult, if not impossible, to understand unless God by his Spirit does a work in our hearts and illumines our eyes, so that we leave here not merely with more knowledge in our heads, but with a spiritual revelation in our hearts. Have we not found by experience that it is possible to attend the preaching of God's word and to go away unmoved, for its truth not really to take hold and last?

The secret lies here, does it not? For these great purposes of God to become realities and not mere words to us, we shall need what Paul prayed for here—the granting of a spirit of wisdom and revelation, and the illumination of the eyes of our hearts, so that we might know what his purpose is.

In thinking of Christ's mission and role in history, Paul prays once more. This time too, it is a prayer for *knowledge*, which can scarcely be granted unless there comes a work of God's Spirit constantly in our hearts, strengthening us in the inner man (3:14–19).

Finally, when Paul comes to speak to us about the new man and his responsibility to live by *imitating* God the Creator and Christ the Redeemer, he reminds us of that flood of light that there is in Christ. He says that they once were darkness but are now light in the Lord, and should walk as children of the light and be done with the darkness of this ungodly world and the darkness of unreality in life (5:8–10). We must learn to wake up and open our eyes to God's reality and, if need be, so awake out of sleep as to rise from the dead, and Christ shall shine upon us (5:14).

We would do well in these studies to not only prepare ourselves by reading the text, but to find time to pray these very prayers, so that these days of waiting upon God and his word may prove to be times of illumination. Not the counting of the nice points the preacher makes, though let us hope that he makes some, but an experience of God's revelation to our hearts. These are three great matters: God's plan and purpose in creation, both for us and the universe at large; the role of Christ in history; and the pattern of life for the new man, God's new viceroy, living in imitation of God and Christ.

The three movements of thought

1. The purpose of God in creation

Before we actually get down to the text, we should perhaps ask ourselves why we should bother about creation. We have been saved out of the world and we are going home to glory. What a lovely thing it will be when we say goodbye to this old creation and never see it again. Really! Is that how we feel about creation? If we do, we should hope that we have got the right kind of salvation. With the salvation the Bible talks about, we shall have to see a lot more of this creation yet. God is not going to ditch it in that fashion. I know that it 'has been groaning in the pains of childbirth until now', but God is going to release creation from the bondage of corruption (Rom 8:19–22).

God will not admit defeat. Even when it comes to the creation around us he will yet have his will done. That great new stage of liberation and development waits for the manifestation of the sons of God; for the completion of our spiritual education. I hope you didn't think that you are going home to see the last of creation forever, for creation is waiting for you. One of the end products of your salvation is to one day administer this creation along with Christ.

Why should we think about creation?

Because we cannot conceive fully of what salvation means unless we start by observing that we are part of creation. It is a very high minded thought that, now that we are saved, we are going to say goodbye to creation forever. We are a part of it! Let the chemist get our bodies and dissolve them in a test tube or two, and we shall discover that we are very much a part of this creation, made of the very dust of the ground.

They tell us, I do not know with what accuracy, that the chemistry of the universe is consistent right to the end, and if that is so, we are a part of that very chemistry. It is what you are, and part of you. And the salvation that comes from God the Creator must, by definition, have something to say about creation. If not, it would raise a very serious doubt as to whether it comes from the Creator at all.

We have only to look at a person eating porridge at breakfast time and going out to work, to see that he or she occupies a very important, indeed a unique, place in creation. The carrots grow—but they are for humans. The weeds come up—but here is the farmer to deal with them. There are the beasts of the field and the fish of the sea—and humans manage them. Search as we may in our little planet and we have not as yet come across an intelligence higher than ours. It is evident even in the streets of Belfast, not to mention Los Angeles, that humankind is the governing principle of the organization of life on this planet. So, if we are going to think of our salvation, we are obliged to ask the question: How does this relate to the great creation around us?

It is a very interesting thing that nowadays some scientists are beginning, in the name of science, to tell us what a unique place humans hold in this great universe. Professor T. F. Torrance in one of his recent books has called our attention to what the famous and learned astronomer Sir Bernard Lovell says. Lovell is an astronomer who holds that when God created this world by his *fiat*, and said 'Let there be light', the physical counterpart to that action is what he is pleased to call *The Big Bang*, which set our great universe travelling at colossal

speed, expanding in all directions. He makes the point that if you were to measure the rate at which it is expanding you would find that, if it had been expanding at a slightly slower speed in those early first days, it would have collapsed in on itself and human life would have been impossible. If it had expanded at a slightly faster rate, then again conditions would have been impossible for human life in the universe. So the philosopher, according to his path of approach to these matters, concludes that the evidence is that somehow the expansion of our universe is critically controlled to make possible the appearance of human life in it.

It is a fact that in humankind the great universe has become conscious of itself. What a marvel we all are, made of the very dust of the ground like the cabbage is; made of the same chemicals as the bee, largely speaking (not altogether); and yet in us the universe has become self-conscious. We can reflect on it and organize it. In us creation has found not just sound, but a voice that can communicate. In us, creation has been given a spirit that can understand its Creator and even talk to him. What a magnificent feat of creation this is!

I sometimes go into an art gallery and look at pictures I can't afford. The gallery owner pays the rent and buys the pictures; I go in and enjoy them, and that's a fair division of labour. I was looking at some paintings that I admired, when I spied an artist whom I happened to know. He told me how he had just completed a commission to paint the portrait of a famous person in this province, and how difficult it was because he wouldn't look at him straight in the face.

He said, 'You know, when I paint somebody, I like them to look at me and I get them talking. When they start communicating back, it altogether transforms them and I can catch it on the canvas. And if I can catch it, then whoever looks at the picture might catch it too. But this man wouldn't look at me straight in the face.'

I said that that's like some people in a congregation, who won't look you straight in the face when you're preaching to them. (Not here!) I saw in the artist's heart and eye what he didn't notice perhaps—the wonder of creating a portrait. If you look at it, it can almost speak—but only *almost*.

What a magnificent artistry has been the artistry of creation, that created man so that he not merely almost, but could actually talk back to God! And not just like a computer that will talk back to you if you first programme it what to say, but talk to God of his own free will and tell God what he could never say in the same way to himself: 'God, I love you'.

What a wonderful thing you are, even as a creature of God. A salvation that cannot tell us how it is related to the great purposes of God in creation raises serious questions as to whether it comes from God at all. We must listen to God our Creator as he takes us into his confidence now as redeemed men and women and tells us the purpose he had in creating our universe—the purpose he had for us, and the purpose he had for creation itself.

2. The role of Christ in history

When we come to the second movement of thought, we find it is concerned with history. There are some who say that they are New Testament people, and ask us to stick to it. They would not think of cutting out the Old Testament altogether. 'It is all right, but it is old, and what does it have to do with us? Some preachers have said that in the New Testament we have something better than the Old, so why bother about the old times?'

It is like telling us that the modern bicycle is better than the penny farthing, and so we never needed, nor should we be interested in, the engineering of penny farthing bicycles.

Why should we bother about Noah, Abraham, Moses, David and Solomon, and tabernacles and sacrifices and all the old things, since we have something better? Why do we need to know about them?

I suppose you got saved somewhere about 1970? That's rather late in the day to be getting saved: it is nearly two thousand years since Jesus was here. What was happening all that time before his incarnation? Was there no salvation before then? We are not suggesting, are we, that we have got a salvation that is good for us in the period 1971–1981, and we could not care less about what happened to people in times BC? How could that kind of salvation be of God? Would we be comfortable in a heaven worshipping a God who said that he was interested in the people that lived in Belfast during the years 1971–1981, but as for the other multitudes who never heard of Jesus, he could not care less? Well, that is not our God.

Indeed, one of the great marks of the reality of the salvation which we have in Christ is that it is not some new-fangled philosophy that somebody thought up in recent times. Here is the hallmark of its genuineness, because it is the final stage in the great historical process. If we are going to understand the final goal that history is moving to, we had better understand all the architect's models.

They tell me that some of the models in surveyors' offices cost hundreds and hundreds of pounds. Why do they spend all that money on making models? Because they want to know where they are going. In spite of all appearances, it is not the case that the road makers in Belfast decide to make a road, and then, when they are three quarters of the way there, ask themselves where it is going. They know where it is leading to: the designers have got the ideas in their heads before they start, and they know exactly where the road is going to, and how it will get there.

This raises a point: Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday . . . January, February, March and all the rest of it, and the thousands of years there have been — tell me, is there any purpose and progress in all this history?

The schoolboy says, 'Our grandfathers rode penny farthings. We do not ride them; we ride Raleigh Choppers!' And once upon a time, men who are now captains of industry went to the infant classes in school and wrote with chalk upon slates, with the encouragement of a little stick! But it is not so now. The aim is to have a computer on every desk in the primary, if not in the infant, classes. That is progress. And some of us come from an age long since past when, if an aeroplane flew over the school, we ran out into the playground to see it, and so did the teacher!

What amazing progress: is it getting anywhere? Where and when is it going to end? Will it all go 'phut', or is there a purpose in history that is leading us somewhere? Without being melancholy, it is a fact that very soon our little time will be finished. Does that mean that with all this wonderful progress that is going on, we shall have been born just a little bit too early to take the full benefit of it?

Is there a purpose in history? We cannot possibly grasp the significance of our individual salvation unless we are prepared to put it against the background of God's ways in history.

3. The new man: Imitator of God and Christ

Finally, when we come to the third division of this epistle, we shall find it full of exhortation as to how we are to walk and behave. There are many helpful commentaries which point out that in all the epistles there is the doctrinal part, and then the practical part, so that when we have learned all the doctrines then we learn the practice. The doctrines say all the wonderful things that God has done for us, and the practical bit says that we had better pull up our socks and behave like Christians. Well, that is true, but there is somewhat more to it than that.

What does it mean to behave like a Christian?

You say, 'to be good—do not cheat, do not lie'. Is that all? Why should we not lie or cheat? Some Christians do, I regret to say—notably to the Income Tax inspector. Why shouldn't we cheat? Why shouldn't we act violently? Why should we not engage in spite and envy and jealousy and evil speaking?

We shall have to observe, when we come to this third major movement, that it is not a question, in the world's terms, of just being good. The great appeal will be that we learn to open our eyes to the realities. It is the fact that God has invented and produced a marvellous new thing in this universe that wasn't before, not even before Pentecost. God has invented, and at this moment is in process of developing, a new kind of an entity. It is called *the Body of Christ*.

It is a magnificent *reality*. Not a theory; it is real. That brother sitting down there is real, and this body of Christ that God has invented is more real than he is. Because it is a special kind of a body, each member is a personality in his or her own right, and yet it coheres because it is one living entity and organism. Don't run away with the idea that that is a *theory*: it is real. If you are in the Body of Christ because you have trusted Christ, and the man or woman beside you is also in the Body of Christ, then between you and in you and around you is none other than God the Holy Spirit.

That isn't theory either. The Body of Christ is made up of personalities that are like members of a body, kept together because the infinite power of God the Holy Spirit keeps them together. That is a reality, and we have the urgent need to open our eyes and hearts so that we live daily recognizing that it is a reality.

There have been people who have become very vexed and upset and have smitten their breasts and stamped their feet and said what fools they have been. But they do not get so angry with themselves that they get the carving knife and cut off their ears or toes or arms, or plunge it into their hearts; though there have been rare occasions when that has happened, but only by the demented. Why do people not do that? Because those are members of their bodies, and their bodies are real.

How I wish I could say the same thing about the Body of Christ. But you cannot live in this world, in Northern Ireland or England, or travel in other parts and enquire about the Lord's people, without finding that born again Christians are prepared to take the knife of their tongues and stab one another with it. It is heart breaking when the work of God in foreign places is flourishing, and then there comes a great explosion in a local church by petty jealousies brewing up until Christians are prepared to break the work of God.

Why is that? They do not believe in the Body of Christ; or, if they do, it is in the bit that is called theory. They have not got round to seeing that it is a reality, and that they might as well be cutting off their own arms (which they would never think of doing) as to behave the way they do towards their fellow believers. This behaviour is so natural, that, short of God opening our hearts by the illumination of his Spirit, we would go on acting like it, and think we were justified in doing so, unaware of the injury we inflict on the great reality which is the body of Christ, and the grief we do to the Holy Spirit by whose life that body lives.

Paul says in his practical way that we have never found a man hating his own flesh. That is why married men always get on so well with their Christian wives, isn't it? They have come to see what the reality is—their wives are part of themselves (5:28–29).

Let us bring our first study to an end just there. We have been taking a bird's eye view and thinking of the three simple but profound movements of thought that make up the Epistle to the Ephesians. In future sessions we shall get down to some of the detail and read it against that background.

Shall we pray.

Our Father, now humbly and gratefully we thank thee for thy holy word, and for the great vistas that there unroll themselves before our eyes and imaginations. In our hearts we are vividly conscious that our minds and concepts are so grievously small that it is difficult for us to comprehend what is the length and depth, height and breadth of thy great purposes for mankind.

Therefore, as by thy grace we have begun these studies, we pray that same grace to be upon us tonight and in the coming days. Grant us a spirit of revelation and wisdom in the knowledge of thee, that the eyes of our hearts may be illumined so that we may know what the hope of thy calling is, what the riches of thine inheritance in the saints are, and what is the exceeding greatness of thy power towards us who believe. Thus, we pray for thy Spirit's illumination, that thy word, living and creative in our hearts, may bring us steadily nearer the great reality that thou art performing—to the end he has designed.

This all we ask in the name and for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Movement One: The Purpose of God in Creation (1:1–2:10)

1A. God's Plan for Us and for the Universe

Reading: Ephesians 1:1–14

Let us read again the verses that we read last evening, so that the repetition may engage them on our memories and help us to grasp their meaning. Let us also remind ourselves that there are three major movements of thought in the Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians: The Purpose of God in Creation; The Role of Christ in History (past, present and future); The New Man: Imitator of God and Christ (the role of this newly created man in God's new world).

Tonight it is our task to investigate the first of those major movements of thought: *The purpose of God in creation*. The verses that we have read will tell us of two of those purposes, which in the end combine into one.

In verse 4, for example, we are told that God 'chose us in him [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.' So then, the first of God's purposes was that we should be *before him*. To further embroider and explain what it means to be before God, the apostle adds to that a phrase in verse 5: 'he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will'. Being before God to his satisfaction will be made possible by our being made into *sons of God* through Jesus Christ our Lord. This is the purpose of God, therefore, as it pertains to us individually.

Subsequently we are told in verse 10 that it is God's good intention eventually to 'unite all things in him', both the things in the heavens and the things on the earth, of all ages and all times of creation. It is God's good intention finally to sum them all up in Jesus Christ our Lord.

So then, as far as the first fourteen verses go, these are God's good purposes. And one of the first things that we are told about them is that these purposes were made before the foundation of the world. We were 'chosen in him before the foundation of the world', and we must stop to enquire why it is that God tells us that his choice was made before the foundation of the world.

God always had a plan

If we weren't to think very carefully, but merely read these things superficially, we might suppose that God chose in this remark simply to communicate the fact that he chose us rather a long time ago. Not yesterday, nor last century, nor in times BC, but a long, long time ago—why, even before the foundation of the world! And then, having chosen us, for some reason

or other he went on to do other interesting things, like making a few galaxies, or making our planet.

We might fall into the mistake of thinking that these two things were unrelated. Of course, they are not unrelated. We are told that he chose us before the foundation of the world because that very fact and plan will explain to us why the world was ever founded; why the galaxies were made; why the moon, the stars, and our planet were made. Before he made them he had a plan: the plan and purpose was such that inevitably it involved God in making our world and our universe as a stepping stone towards the achievement of that entire intention and purpose.

An illustration of 'why' something was done

Let me descend for a moment from those great things of God to simpler levels, so that I might illustrate the principle that is at stake in this matter of time: one thing is planned first and then it leads inevitably to other things.

Bear with me, and come with me into the kitchen. Not some old fashioned kitchen, but a modern super-duper kitchen. The oven is no ordinary oven; only an expert would know how to deal with the thing. Over here is a mixer, the very latest that goes at all sorts of variable speeds, and sometimes at no speed at all! And an automatic, pre-programmed, pre-timed dishwasher, and other such devices. In the middle of the kitchen mother is standing at a bowl and she has flour, sugar, sultanas and figs and a whole array of things, and she is guiding this bowl below the rotating arm of the mixer.

You come in and say, 'What on earth is going on here? All this mixture and all this movement: the lights are going and the bells are ringing and the mixer is moving, and mother, obviously very efficient, is moving too.'

Some kind friend comes to explain, and says, 'Well, it may look a muddle to you, but this is a process that is going on and developing. When it is all finished, if you want to know what it's all about . . .' and she picks up a cookery book and shows you a picture.

You say, 'Is this what it's all going to come to?'

It's no ordinary cake—you wouldn't need this oven for an ordinary cake! It's a glorious cake, decorated as you've never seen a cake before.

'Oh, now I know what it's all about,' you say.

'No, you don't!' says your friend.

'Yes, I do. I can foresee what it's going to be.'

Perhaps you can, but that won't tell you what it's all about. You can foresee that it's going to be a cake, but let me ask you a question: Why do you want a cake anyway? What is the purpose in having a cake? You may think you know, but you will only know if you let mother stop her work for a minute and tell you why she wants a cake.

If mother wants to tell you why she wants a cake, she will have to go back in time before there was this modern oven and mixer. She will tell you that it all started about seven months ago, when she suddenly realized that in nine months' time her eldest daughter would reach the significant age of twenty-one. She decided that something would have to be done to mark this exceedingly significant epoch in her daughter's life. So mother sat down and decided, before it all happened, that she would mark the occasion by making a magnificent cake.

Now see what's happening. Even before the cake was made, even before the sultanas were bought, she first chose and planned that the purpose was to honour her daughter's twenty-first birthday. That was seven months ago. I'll tell you what happened next, because I'm in the know of this particular story—I made it up! Mother had decided, foreordained, predetermined—elected, if you like—what was going to happen. But then she also decided that, if ever she was going to reach her goal, certain other things would have to happen.

First of all she went to father, and said, 'We've got to mark the occasion and it's got to be special. We've had this old oven for twenty-five years and it's no good; we've got to have a new oven.'

Father, not altogether willingly perhaps, was persuaded, as usual, that for this special cake it would need no less than the very latest oven, and the oven was bought. He thought that was the end, but it wasn't!

'We need a new mixer; I've given the old one away to charity.' So they got a new mixer. Then she went to the grocer, and said, 'We need the very best sultanas, sugar, and all the rest of it.' Why? Because the original plan demanded that all these things should follow in order to make the realization of the plan possible.

I hope you will begin to see in my illustration why all this process was necessary to fulfil the ultimate 'why?' To find out the why, I shall have to go back in time to the point where mother first conceived her plan to honour the birthday party.

In passing, may I point out to you that it wouldn't be any good bringing in the scientists, even though they are admirable people with fascinating ideas. You could bring them into the kitchen, if you like, with the engineers, and say, 'This oven here—it's ringing its bells and getting hot—what on earth is it?' The engineer might get to work with his electrical skills and diagnose the thing, and come up with the idea that it's an oven! He might also tell you about electricity, about neutrons and protons and things. And when he's finished he might say, 'I never knew ovens were like this; that's why they cost so much, I suppose—they've all got neutrons in them!'

Or you might bring in the chemist and say, 'What's all this bowl of stuff?' She might analyse it and say, 'There's acid and alkaline and it's fermenting a little bit'—and this, that and the other.

And when they've all finished, how fascinating it all is at its own level. I rejoice in the scientists and what they can tell us. But all of them combined couldn't tell you why it was being done. Only mother could tell you that, and, I repeat, you'll have to go back in time to the point where she first conceived the idea and determined to honour that birthday.

Everything in the universe is on the move

So it is with these greater things. We find ourselves in a marvellously breathtaking universe, and the more we study it the more it becomes obvious that everything in our universe is on the move. The physical universe around us is on the move—it's lights *really* flash! Even our old planet is on the move physically. It's going somewhere. Every one of you, who was at the last series of meetings I was privileged to take in this place four or five years ago, has travelled millions of miles. You have been given a ride on our planet earth, and you've not merely been going round the sun and coming back where you were before—and that would be millions of

miles—but the sun has been moving too. And so, stuck on your planet going round the sun, you have been corkscrewing through space and are now millions of miles from where you were originally. And the great *fixed stars*, as they used to be called—they seem to be fixed in the sky and for generations seemed to hold their place, only seem to do it because they are at colossal distances—are actually on the move. There is nothing that stays still.

That isn't only true physically of the universe; it's true of you too. You are on the move as well and some of us have been on the move for rather a long time. Where are we going? What is going to become of us, and what is our universe moving to?

We may get the scientists in again, and I'm not dishonouring what scientists tell us. What fascinating people they are, to be able to study God's glorious handiwork—I wish I were a scientist myself. They might hazard a guess to tell us where this universe might end up if it keeps on moving as it does. Or will it all take a turn and move somewhere else? But if you want to know why it's on the move, why it ever existed anyway, and why we were put on it, there's no good asking the scientists. That's outside their realm: they can tell you *how* it goes, but they can't tell you *why* it goes.

God knows why

As to why it's there at all, you'll have to go back before the foundation of the world and allow God to let you into the secret of his plans and purposes. Why did he have the whole thing? He had it because of his prior intention: 'He was pleased to determine that he wanted us before him in love, as sons of God.' That was the plan. Because God set his sights on such an elevated plan it then demanded that God create a vast universe, such as we see around us, in order to be the means for the staging by which he would see the fulfilment of his plan. That was the order of events.

An analogy

Sometimes we are inclined to think and talk of our world as though it was some kind of a glorified Sunday School trip that went wrong—as very often they do. You plan to go to Bangor, and the sun will shine and all will be well. But the day comes and Bangor is doing what Bangor often does: it's pouring with rain. You stick it out as long as you can, until four thirty in the afternoon.

Having visited Woolworths and any other shops that you can find in Bangor, you then say, 'It's too bad; we shall have to think of something else. We can't go on with this. The whole scheme has broken down: what shall we do now? Shall we take the children home and give them a slide show or something?' And you try and think of another *scheme* to fill in the time because the first thing went wrong.

God's scheme didn't go wrong. Sometimes people speak of God's great purposes of redemption as though it was like that. First of all, he created the world and man on it, and then alas the whole scheme went wrong and God Almighty had to sit down and lament the fact, and say, 'Now, what shall I do? The whole thing has gone amiss and astray. What shall I do with this world of sinners? I know: what about inventing a heaven?'

No, no! Not only was it before the fall, but before there was a world anyway, God had his purpose that we should come to be; that we should eventually be *before him*, and before him

as sons. To that purpose, God made the universe and put mankind in it and, in spite of the fall, God has been steadily fulfilling that purpose and it will be achieved.

Something new happened to take God's plan forward

Indeed, I might tell you something. When Paul sat down to compose this letter (I doubt if he sat down—who could read or write of such things and remain ice cool?), as he dictated it all those years ago, something had dawned on him that filled his soul with a tremendous glow and glory. It was this. Just as before the world God had had this plan, now, only recently, something had happened that took that plan an infinite distance forward. Even as he chose us, God has now at this stage 'blessed us *in Christ* with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places' (v. 3).

Do you see the sequence? He chose us; we were going to be before him; the universe was made and our planet and us upon it, and we fell into sin. But presently, through God's gracious persistence, Jesus Christ came and he died for our sins, was buried, and rose again. Think of it with wonder. He has been raised to the heavenly places and at this moment he sits before God; and you, if you are a believer, are in him. The plan has already taken shape—it is so far advanced along the road, even though there are yet more phases of it to be developed.

The meaning of these terms

1. 'He chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blemish before him in love' (v. 4 KJV).
2. 'Having foreordained us unto the adoption as sons' (v. 5).

These basic terms define God's ultimate purpose for us—the reason why he made the world. What does that mean?

If we were reading these verses superficially we might decide that God's ultimate purpose was that we should be *holy and without blemish*, and certainly that is true. And we might decide that, when Paul adds, 'that we should be holy and without blemish before him,' Paul is simply saying, "'holy and without blemish"—by whose judgment, in whose estimation?' Well, it is God's estimation, of course. It was in God's estimation that we should be holy and without blemish.

But then we should only conclude that if we were reading it superficially, for it wouldn't be saying much to say God's intention was that we should be holy. By whose standards? By his standards, of course. By whose else's standards would it be? Obviously, if God intends that we should be holy and without blemish, it will be *in his sight* (Col 1:22 KJV). Why did he want it anyway? Because it was God's ultimate purpose that we should be before him, and it stands to reason that we have got, somehow or other, to be made holy and without blemish.

An illustration of having something 'before you'

If you have a china cabinet at home, you enjoy what you've got in it. You sit in your chair in the lounge and enjoy the cabinet before you. What do you have in it? Is there an old colander in which you strained the beans, or a few old cracked mugs? Of course not! That will do for the kitchen, but when you're sitting there and the china cabinet is before you, every bit in it

has got to be without blemish. Not one of these seconds, where the gold leaf has run down the side and smudged the pattern; it's got to be without blemish. It's got to be holy as well—it can't be mixed up with the vegetables that are all dirty and filthy. Why? Because it's going to be *before you*: that's what you got the cabinet for.

AN ILLUSTRATION FROM LEVITICUS OF WHAT IT MEANS TO BE 'BEFORE THE LORD'

It was God's ultimate purpose that we should be before him. But perhaps, put like that, the thing is a little bit thin. Let me therefore suggest that we go back to the Old Testament for an illustration in Israel's ritual of the meaning of this term, to be before him.

Leviticus 24:1–9 contains frequent references to 'before the Lord'. As you listen to me reading, notice how many times that little phrase occurs. You should notice it, because it is the very same idea: certain things will be said to be 'before the Lord'.

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 'Command the people of Israel to bring you pure oil from beaten olives for the lamp, that a light may be kept burning regularly. Outside the veil of the testimony, in the tent of meeting, Aaron shall arrange it from evening to morning before the LORD regularly. It shall be a statute for ever throughout your generations. He shall arrange the lamps on the lampstand of pure gold before the LORD regularly. You shall take fine flour and bake twelve loaves from it; two tenths of an ephah shall be in each loaf. And you shall set them in two piles, six in a pile, on the table of pure gold before the LORD. And you shall put pure frankincense on each pile, that it may go with the bread as a memorial portion as a food offering to the LORD. Every Sabbath day Aaron shall arrange it before the LORD regularly; it is from the people of Israel as a covenant for ever. And it shall be for Aaron and his sons, and they shall eat it in a holy place, since it is for him a most holy portion out of the LORD'S food offerings, a perpetual due.'

God's Holy Spirit has recorded for us the detail of how God ordained the tabernacle in Israel's worship. There, in the Holy Place, had you been privileged to enter it, you would have seen on one side a table and on the other a lampstand. The table was there to present twelve loaves of bread 'before the Lord'. The loaves were put upon the table and left there for one whole week. Nobody touched them: they were there before the Lord. It is true that at the end of the week the priests came and took the loaves off to a holy place where they ate them in the presence of God. But, even before they ate those loaves, they placed twelve fresh loaves on the table. This second batch was there before the Lord. The loaves did eventually feed the priests, but their prime purpose was to be before the Lord.

With regard to the lampstand, you could have seen an aspect of its purpose, for it was there to hold up certain lamps. You might have thought that the purpose of the lamps was so that anybody coming in could see their way around. You would be wrong! They did serve that purpose incidentally, but Scripture makes it clear that their prime purpose was that they should shine before the Lord. They shone when people were there, and they shone when people were not there, because their task was to shine before the Lord.

The table

It was only a symbol, was it not? And indeed, a symbol that perplexed some of the Jewish theologians. They considered that table and the bread upon it, and pondered why God should ask them to put loaves of bread upon the table in his presence all week long. Surely God doesn't need bread to eat? God himself is the giver of bread, who gives to us the bread we need to sustain our lives. Why did God ask them to put bread on the table before him?

They were all the more perplexed because they had to stand out against the old idolatries of the pagan world. In many a pagan temple you would have seen the priest put bread upon a table in the presence of an idol, in the curious notion that somehow the idol would come and eat the bread. And of course that was absolute nonsense since there was nothing in the idol, and the idol couldn't eat the bread anyway. But the theologians were left with the problem, 'Why does the true and the living God ask us to put bread on the table and leave it before him for a whole week?'

The theologians could see the second bit, that at the end of the week the loaves were given to feed the priests. They understood that God in his kindness was satisfying their desires. But what were the loaves doing there all the week just before God? Their problem was that God does not need food. Is that true? The answer is both yes, and no! God does not need loaves of bread, but you would be rash to conclude that God does not need food.

God desires our fellowship

Let us remind ourselves of the words of the Lord Jesus in the New Testament. Again you will see that they are metaphorical, not to be taken literally. These are the words of God incarnate, as he addresses himself to the church at Laodicea. He says, 'Behold I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him' (Rev 3:20). Whatever did the Saviour mean? He knocks on the door of the church, as he knocks on the door of the hearts of his people, and seeks admittance, explaining that he desires to come in because he wants to dine with them. What does it mean? Literal material food is not the only kind of food there is. In Christ, God has revealed to us this astounding fact, that he desires from us the food of our fellowship.

How privileged those women at Bethany were, of whom we read that they made him a supper. And how wonderful the condescending grace of God incarnate that he should allow, ask, need, and accept ordinary food. And the greater wonder: that God, way back before the foundation of the world, though he needed nothing and was the source of all, decided to need us; to long for our fellowship; to have creatures that could minister to his heart and bring satisfaction to him; to be *the very food of God*. This is the ultimate purpose of creation and we need to get it right.

You say, 'I have always thought of that bread on the table as a picture of the Lord Jesus, the Bread of Life who came into the world to give spiritual food, eternal life, to us.'

That is a very good way of looking at it. Yes, of course, it is a picture of Jesus Christ, the Bread of Life. What sustenance is to be found in him, who said 'whoever comes to me shall not hunger' (John 6:35). As you have come to the Lord Jesus and found him to be the bread of

life, you have *eaten* him. And, like your daily food has gone into you physically, you have eaten Christ and spiritually Christ has entered you: he is in you and you are in him.

You say, 'That's how I've always understood it: Christ, the bread of God, for me.'

That is excellent. Just tell me a little thing. What was Christ doing before he came down from heaven as the Bread of Life to feed you? Before the world was made, before the very beginning—what was Jesus Christ doing then?

The answer is found in John 1:1: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God [as though facing God], and the Word was God.' He is the eternal Word, the eternal life that was with the Father. That was what he was doing then. Long before he came to feed you and me he was there before the Father, gratifying the Father's heart, filling him with the satisfaction that only a divine person himself could possibly give.

The wonder of that Trinity: the Father expressing himself, and the very Word he used to express himself being a person, being God. That Word, that person, coming back to the Father and always before the Father, filling his heart with delight and pleasure. That's what he was doing before he came down to be food for you and me.

Let John tell us of that eternal life that was with the Father, and was manifested:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. (1 John 1:1–3)

As God has enjoyed Christ, now you may enjoy Christ. That would be a wonderful story even if it were to end there. But it does not end there; for you have come to Christ, the great Bread of Life that eternally satisfies God, and you have received him. He is in you and you are in him.

What does it mean to be 'in Christ'?

Let's pause a minute. I know you may tell me afterwards that this is very fanciful talk. But it's in the Bible! You don't quite understand it yet? Well, believe it first and then you will understand it. If the Bible says that the believer is in Christ, you should believe it. Then be honest and admit that you don't understand it.

Christ is in you—has he satisfied you? And you are in him—tell me, where is he now?

You say, 'He's gone back again: he's in *the heavenlies*.'

But if you are in him and he this moment is before the Father, then something has been added and something has happened that never was before. One trembles to use the word, yet it is true. The very Godhead has been *changed*, because now the second person of the Trinity has become human and you have been united to him in spirit and he has gone back before the Father. There he is—and you are in him, just as those loaves on that table were there, all twelve of them, before the Lord.

They were but pictures and symbols of what Israel should have been, but never were because they failed. In Christ it has now become possible that God should have us before him for his satisfaction. That was God's eternal purpose.

The lampstand

Now let us look briefly at the other object which was before the Lord: the lampstand, the lights of which burned continually. The Israelites had a problem with them too. They found it odd that the lamps had to burn even when no one was there. Why would God need lamps in the Holy Place? We need light, so that we can see; but God doesn't need us to give him light, because he is the author of light. Why would he need human beings to give him light? The lamps were burning before the Lord.

And now we know the features of it, don't we? It was an emblem, a prototype of what has become the great reality. He who is the light of God has shone into this world. When you come to Christ, he shines upon you, exposes your sin, shows you the way of forgiveness and eternal life.

But there is more. The very Light of the World by his Spirit is now in you. Why and for what reason? *So that you might shine.*

You say, 'So that I might take the gospel to the next door neighbour.'

Yes, that is so, and I hope you do. But it's more than that.

'So that I can be a missionary?'

I hope you will, but it's more than that.

The very Light of the World is in you by his Spirit, so that you might shine before the Lord.

'I don't get that,' says someone. 'How could I shine before the Lord?'

An illustration of enjoying the fulfilment of a purpose

Let me use a similar illustration to the one I used last night. An artist tries to express the ideas that have been burning in his head for the past twenty years and he paints an enormous great oil painting. It's his idea and he paints it. When it's all done, it's hung and the crowd comes in. Some think it's wonderful, some think it's hopeless, some can't make head nor tail of it, and some want to slash it with a knife.

But there are nights, when the museum is closed and nobody else is about except one person. It is the artist, and he sits and looks at it. He hopes that the crowd enjoys it, but he doesn't care all that much because he does. It was his idea and he expressed himself, but now his ideas keep coming back to him and he sits there, looking at it.

I've known husbands and others who've just done a bit of decorating in their homes. They've just finished the lounge and as their wife goes to make a cup of coffee and sandwiches, they are to be found sitting down, feet up on the other chair and looking at it! The room is shining before its owner. They hope that you will enjoy the colour scheme when you come to visit, but if you don't it still pleases them.

God made us for his eternal enjoyment

May God help us not to obscure the issue. God had those lamps burning before him. We are talking now of the transcendent Lord of time and space, who needed nothing. Yet he decided to have the likes of you and me to feed him and to shine before him, that he might sit eternally and look and listen and enjoy us. Oh, the sublime wonder of it! Have you caught the idea? If you have, it will so shine a lustre on your life that will steadily increase until it bursts into glory in the immediate presence of God. That is your significance.

God might have made us as tools, as a man uses tools to do a job and when the job is done he throws away the tools. The great philosopher Aristotle, when he considered some of his fellow human beings, described them as slaves, and defined slaves as *human tools*. There could be no fellowship between a philosopher, a wise man and a slave, for a slave was merely a tool that happened to be human. Poor little Aristotle!

God, the transcendent Lord of time and space, made that very man whom Aristotle called a human tool so that, by the redemption that is in Christ, he could be before God for ever to minister to God's satisfaction and enjoyment. Is that a big enough goal for you?

You say, 'But I would have preferred salvation to lead to my becoming Managing Director of a galaxy or two. That would be fun!'

I hope when you get there you will have quite a number of galaxies to organize. But organizing galaxies could not possibly be the final purpose for your existence, because, when you have organized the galaxy, you will have to sit down and ask yourself why you wanted it anyway. A galaxy is vast, but it is smaller than you. It is made up of a lot of gas and rocks, but you are infinitely more complex because you have a highly developed form of life. You have a brain and, what's more, a self-consciousness and an awareness of the very Creator of the galaxies. You can do what a galaxy cannot: you can actually talk to your Creator.

There isn't a goal big enough for you, save the God who made you, and *being for his pleasure will fulfil your God-given purpose*. It puts you beyond the will-o'-the-wisp of circumstances. It does not matter if the person beside you is far more gifted than you. Do you feel yourself worthless? My friend in Christ, God invented a whole universe so that he could put you on it, to give you the chance of meeting Jesus Christ our Lord and finding redemption, so that you might be before God eternally for his pleasure.

You say, 'How can it be, and what kind of pleasure?'

Our studies in Ephesians will go on to define it. It will tell us that we are to be before him and to serve the purpose inherent in that intention. God ordained before it all started that we should be turned into sons, thus the better to fulfil his desire. We shall have to ask ourselves, what does it mean to be sons of God? We shall not take its superficial, apparent, meaning, but probe its actual meaning. We cannot do that now, but tomorrow, God willing.

Christ shall present the redeemed to his Father

But let us conclude this session with that brilliant and God given illustration. Those loaves of bread in that ancient tabernacle were there for God's pleasure. How were they placed there? Just thrown on to the floor? No! They were placed on a golden table that presented them before the Lord.

How could I, who am but a creature of dust and ashes, ever hope to stand before God and bring pleasure and satisfaction to him eternally? I could not do it of myself. Just as the loaves were upheld by a table and thus presented, so our Lord Jesus Christ takes the pardoned sinner and upholds him in the presence of God. What a wonderful thing it shall be when God's purpose is complete and the still incarnate Christ takes the vast throng of all believers and the redeemed of all the ages, and says with evident divine and sinless pride to his Father: 'Behold, I and the children you have given me' (Heb 2:13). What a glorious finale to creation. This is why it was first made; then it shall be fully achieved.

Until then, dear fellow Christian, in spite of your failings and weakness, your sins and shortcomings, this very day you can find forgiveness for them through the blood of Christ. As you kneel before God, you may know that, even if there was no one else in the whole universe, you are seated in Christ and he presents you to the Father. And, in Christ, God is pleased with you. Don't ask me how he possibly could be—I can't answer that question. But I can tell you that he is pleased. He thinks that the trouble of inventing a universe and the extent that he paid in the death of Christ in order to get you were worthwhile. You may this very day begin to realize that the purpose of your very existence is the reason why God made this universe.

May the Lord illumine our hearts so that we may know it not only with our minds but with our hearts as well, how better to fulfil the purpose for which God made us.

Shall we pray.

We thank thee for these holy words: the mere recital of them shows us words shimmering with eternal life and profound significance. In part we understand it, and for all we have understood we bless thy name; for here are schemes that go beyond any human devising. Here is the heart and purpose of God told out.

There is much in it that we do not understand; we confess in part that these words remain words. But we thank thee that we can believe them and we thank thee that thy purpose in us is already being realized in Jesus Christ, thy Son, and we know that the Son of God has come and we know that we are in him.

We thank thee that he sits accepted before thee at this very moment, and we in him. We believe thy word that tells us that we are for thy good pleasure, and we praise thee. Open our eyes to understand it more deeply and to see it more clearly, so that thy purpose even now may hasten to its full fruition.

We bless thy name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Movement One: The Purpose of God in Creation (1:1–2:10)

1B. God's Plan for Us and for the Universe

Reading: Ephesians 1:3–14; Deuteronomy 32:8–9; 2 Samuel 7:18–25

Last night we began to study in detail the first major movement of thought in this Epistle to the Ephesians, and we found that it concerns itself with the purpose of God in creation. To find out what that purpose was, we discovered that we had to go backwards in time, before there was a creation, to think of that initial plan and purpose that God conceived in his divine mind: the purpose that eventually led to the founding of this world. That purpose, again, we discovered to be this: that God originally planned and desired and determined that he would have us 'before him in love', to satisfy his heart and to gratify his pleasure; and because he determined to have us 'before him', that in turn involved him in the making of this vast creation.

It may have subsequently occurred to you to think, 'But I don't quite follow this! Granted that it was God's plan to have us before him, but how did that plan inevitably involve the creation of our little planet? God is almighty and can do as he pleases, so if he is determined to have us before him, why did he not proceed to do it at once? Why did he not call us into being, and forthwith and immediately place us in the heavenlies before him? Why did he first make a planet and put us into this pokey little corner of the universe, so distant, we might think, from his glorious heaven?'

The answer to that question is to be found in 1:5. Not only did God determine to have us before him, but he determined to have us before him *as his sons*: 'He predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will'. That is to say, while he determined to have us before him, he was not content to have us before him any old how.

If he should so choose, God could have the flowers of the field before him. Our blessed Lord, as he walked through the fields and saw the lovely flowers, said: 'Consider the lilies of the field' (Matt 6:28). And in that moment, I think I see the sparkle in his eyes, the pride and joy and gladness of the Creator that had thought of a lily and had made it. 'Look at it,' he said. 'You have heard of Solomon and all his regal magnificence. I tell you that Solomon himself could not compete with a lily.' For a moment it gladdened his heart, and was the springboard of a bigger lesson that he passed on to his apostles. For, glorious as lilies are, God wanted something more than lilies before him.

Therefore, our verse is telling us the status, the quality of the fellowship that God desires in having us before him. Nothing less than veritable tiny gods would do! Sons of God; beings

with the very nature of God. Beings that have feelings like God, think like God and answer to God; who can understand God because they are his children: sons of God with the very life of God in them.

When the New Testament talks of *sons of God* it is using that term in a precise and technical sense. In popular theology the term is frequently used by those who apparently do not know its precise meaning, and they tell us, 'All men are children of God, and we ought to treat ourselves as though we were all one—members of one great family of God.' And they mean well, and what they are trying to say is that God created us all; and since God created us all, and loves us all, and cares for his creatures as a father might care for his children, they are pleased to apply it to themselves in this fashion: 'all human beings are children of God'.

We are not all children of God

All men are not sons of God, in the biblical sense that confronts us here in verse 5. We shall miss the whole glory of the thing if we imagine that men and women as born into this world are automatically children of God—they are not. They are creatures of God. If ever they are going to be sons of God, then, in the words of the fourth Gospel, they will have to *become* children of God: 'But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God' (John 1:12).

It is evident that you cannot become something you already are. I cannot at this late stage in my life become a human being, for the simple reason that I *am* one. I could conceivably become a goose or a donkey, because here is hoping that I am not one! You can become something you are not, but you cannot become something that you already are.

So, when holy Scripture tells us that if we want to be a child of God we have to become a child of God, it is reminding us that we do not start off as children or sons of God. To emphasize that lesson, the Apostle Paul chooses a word that reminds us that we do not start life as sons of God. We have had to be *adopted* as his sons. But this, and nothing less than this, was God's original purpose.

Therein begins to be the answer to the question we raised at the beginning: if it was God's pleasure to have us before him, why did that first of all involve him in creating this planet of ours? Well, for the reason that you cannot create a son of God in one go. A son of God is one of those things that cannot be born physically.

Let me take a faint analogy

You cannot be born married. If you could, then marriage would be something else from what we normally mean by *marriage*. You can be born a man; you can be born a woman; you can be born beautiful, and you can be born otherwise; but you cannot be born married. Why not? First of all, you have to be born, then you have to grow up. You are a child under your parents, dependent on them, and not yet quite a complete personality. Then you grow up into a full personality with independence. You meet some other independent personality, the one accepts the other, and by their free will and deliberate choice this new relationship is formed and it is called marriage. You cannot be born that way.

To become a child of God demands your choice. So you cannot be born or created instantaneously as a son of God to start with. First you have to become a creature of God, and

then be given the offer of becoming a child of God, a son of God. Notice the difference. God can make a human being, a creature (and does so all the time), without asking for permission or cooperation. You cannot make a child of God that way because, to become a child of God, it demands your choice.

In this passage that discusses the matter of becoming a child of God, it says of our Lord Jesus, the Creator of the universe:

He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. (John 1:10–12)

And therein is the choice. Some did receive him, and some did not. Becoming a child of God depended on that choice; on the voluntary receiving of the Son of God. We begin to perceive perhaps what a difference of category there is between being a creature of God and becoming a child of God.

Therefore, when God determined to have us ‘before him’, and then added to that plan that he determined to have us ‘as sons before him’, he was first of all obliged to create our little planet. For this he did not have to ask our permission. Then he designed us and put us on it, and for that he did not have to ask our permission. He gave us artistic sense and a moral conscience and a free will, and for that he did not ask our permission either. He could do that of his own will. So, as we grew up and discovered what he had done, we could be made the offer of rising in God’s universe to an infinitely higher category: not now merely a creature of God, but being born again as a child of God. That is why this little planet is here at all; and why the whole thing did not start in God’s heaven, but a long distance from God’s heaven—*that our choice might be free.*

This life is a preliminary to something else

That is why in every man’s heart there is a feeling that this little planet is not eternal; his seventy years is not all there is. Indelibly etched into the heart of every person is the feeling that this life is but a temporary stay, a preliminary to something. Comfortable as we can be in this world, it is but a temporary phase of existence. That is how it was meant to be: the necessary first step that would make it possible to become a child of God, and thus to be before God in his heavenly places.

Let us pause for a moment to let the wonder of it sink in. We know it as a commonplace truth; we have preached it to others a thousand times and more. Let us call to mind the Saviour’s words on the topic, so that we might again perceive with our hearts the wonder of it: ‘That which is born of the flesh is flesh’ (John 3:6). Apart from God’s miraculous working it would remain flesh eternally, for there is no crossing of the categories in God’s universe by our own unaided effort: ‘. . . that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be surprised when I tell you, “You must be born again”’ (vv. 6–7).

For a cabbage to become a butterfly—that would be an extraordinary affair! Haven’t you observed how basic cabbages are to butterflies? However, a cabbage will never become a

butterfly. Weed it, water it and fertilize it—forever and forever they are two different categories.

Consider a lovely dog, trained to his master's will and delighting to do what his master bids him. He already senses in his canine mind that he is pleasing his master, and this in turn pleases him. He is having a great deal of fellowship with his master, but the dog will never be the master's son because it is not human. Forever the category distinction remains.

God always had bigger plans for us. We began life as creatures, powerless infants; the crown of God's creation, but creatures still. The gap between a creature of God and a child of God is vast. For us, it was utterly impossible and unthinkable. It was God's idea that the categories would be crossed: that which had been born flesh should be born again and transcend the category, and become a child of God. If you cannot conceive of the vastness of it and the wonder of becoming a child of God, think of the immensity of space and go and consult an astronomer. Consider the vast mechanism of our planet and all the other mechanisms of the heavens that are involved in keeping our planet, then ask yourself, 'What is it all for?' Let God tell you that it was the only way he knew of getting children of God.

King David's reaction to God

If it then has dawned upon our hearts what a wonderful thing this is, we shall, I suspect, find ourselves reacting like King David did. He had been appointed king of Israel, a great honour for David, as he had begun life as a mere little shepherd boy. But God had given him the position with the position's strength, and now at length he felt established in his kingdom and he proposed to build God a temple.

God sent a message back by Nathan: 'Thank you, David. It is a very good suggestion, but it is not my desire that you should build a temple. Let me tell you what I am going to do for you. I am going to build you a house and you shall have a son, and I will be a father to that son. He shall be my son, and I shall establish your dynasty, which shall never finally be destroyed. As David heard it, he went and sat (2 Sam 7:18). There are some truths that you apprehend better when you are sitting down than when you are standing up.

He said, 'Half a minute; I've got to take this in. I thought it was a wonderful thing when you appointed me, who began life as a mere shepherd boy, as king. I thought it was wonderful when I was cutting Goliath's head off and all the young girls congratulated me for it. But what is this? You are going to establish my dynasty: you are going to be a father to my son. You have spoken of my house being for a great while yet to come. O, Lord God, it is so immense. Why did you do it?'

That was his first reaction. David searched his heart to think up a reason why God should do this, and soon came to the conclusion that he did it for his own heart's sake—because of the purpose of his heart. Nobody suggested it to God, and not least David. He had not got a notion in his head of any such thing. God did it! In that moment David discovered something about God, and the character of God, and the wonder of God, and the glory of his plans and purposes, even for little David.

David did not fully realize what God meant. He thought of God being a father to his son, Solomon, and shepherding him through life. That was wonderful. But God meant nothing less than one day the Messiah himself would be born of David's line and he should occupy

the throne of David and the throne of the whole universe. What would David have said, if he had known that? He knows it now!—Why did God do it?

God's will

And you sit here, already as a child of God, did it ever occur to you to ask, 'Why ever did God do it?' The answer in Ephesians is like David's answer: 'He did it according to the purpose of his will' (1:5). The whole thing originated with him, and that is the kind of God he is. You didn't have to suggest it to him. It wasn't your idea, was it?

What raised the wondrous thought,
Or who did it suggest,
That blood-bought saints to glory brought,
Should with the Son be blest?

Father, the thought was Thine,
And only Thine could be—
Fruit of the wisdom, love divine,
Peculiar unto Thee.⁴

What will He not bestow?
Who freely gave this mighty gift, unbought,
Unmerited, unheeded, and unsought,
What will He not bestow?⁵

It is a lovely pillow at night, my brother and sister. When the waves of life have been dark and trying, and looking at your circumstances you find it hard to believe that God loves you, it is a marvellous comfort to be able to look off to this great plan that God has conceived for you out of his own heart, and say, 'Well, if God would do that without my suggestion—left to himself he would do that for me—then all shall be well. It originated with God, and what was the end in view? It originated in God's heart; not my heart. He will always do better for me than I would have done for myself.'

But what was the goal of it?

Ask Paul, and he will reply, 'to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved' (1:6). He did it as an advertisement; as an exhibition of the riches of his grace.

Just recently there were two weddings. The one was of friends of mine in Seville in Spain. Delightful folk! Life has not always been easy for them. Their little hall where they meet for their Christian worship is a tiny place, and they can only get about fifty folks into it. One of the young men was going to get married and since a lot of people wanted to come they didn't know what else to do, so they had the wedding in the street. Just imagine sitting out there in

⁴ George V. Wigram (1805-1879), 'What raised the wondrous thought.'

⁵ Horatius Bonar (1808-1889), 'Blessed be God, our God!'

the street having your wedding, my sister. Well, that's what they did, and it was a lovely occasion. Of course the bride, as always, was beautiful, and that was the main thing! But it was held in the street.

Then there was another wedding, of a man called Charles. That did not take place in the street, though they went through a lot of streets. But what was all the fuss and the bother, and the blue and the purple and the white and the green, and 'all the king's horses and all the king's men'? What were they doing; what was the point of it? Wouldn't Charles and Diana have been content with a little private wedding somewhere? No, Charles cannot have a private wedding. Why not? Because he happens to be the queen's son, and when it comes to the wedding of the queen's son, it is the queen's honour that is at stake and she has to show the world what the British sovereign can do for her beloved son. The wealth of the queen is in question, and the wealth of the queen's country, and the queen's *face*, and the queen's imagination, and the queen's glory. That wedding sparkled, because it was not just an occasion to get the two married—they could have done that in the registry office; it was to do it to the praise and glory of the queen's riches.

God's grace

Yes, my brother, my sister. God has got a salvation for you that you are going to enjoy right well. I can tell you that, and I will tell you why God has done it. It is so that heaven, earth and hell can look on when it is complete. It is not just that you are saved, but it is an exhibition of the riches of the grace of God, and every last ounce of the divine ingenuity has gone into such a salvation that will do his grace justice.

As we think of his grace, it leads us to think of the very next thing that Paul mentions. 'In him [the Beloved] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our *trespasses*' (v. 7). If you like you can translate that word as a *blunder*, meaning, an unintentional offence. Or you can translate it as 'a deliberate trespassing against a known command or plan or purpose'. You can combine the two meanings, for both are true of us.

Here comes a fearful thing; at least it looks fearful to us now—it didn't once. When we think of that immense plan that God had—his purpose for us even before the foundation of the world, and the immense trouble he went to, to have an earth—and we had the impertinence to stand up and go counter to the purpose of the Creator. We did it in part unknowingly, blundering along in life in our ignorance. But some of us did a good deal of it intentionally as well. We were not having that gospel; we wanted nothing for the moment to do with Jesus Christ. We wanted (how pathetic it sounds now) to enjoy ourselves. A lamentable pathos. We had the impertinence, six feet of humble clay, to stand up against almighty God in the very world he had made, and to tell him that we were not interested in his plan and were going our own way.

What would you have done if you had been the Creator? The magnificence of God is this: when we had the impertinence to go against him, he found it in his heart to forgive us and give us a redemption in Christ. So now it did not just cost a word of command, such as brought our universe into being: it cost the blood of God's Son. How would we put a price on it, when you think that it was not only a glorious plan, but that it was a glorious plan rejected and

opposed, and then a plan brought finally to fulfilment through a redemption that cost the blood of God's Son?

God's revelation of his will and purpose

You will observe that, when Paul reminds us of the great forgiveness we have, he tells us specifically that, in granting us this, God 'lavished [it] upon us, in all wisdom and insight' — that is, practical common sense (Eph 1:8). I take it, though some would differ, that what Paul is talking about is not God's wisdom but the wisdom that God imparts to those whom he forgives. He made the forgiveness abound, but along with the forgiveness he abounded to us also in wisdom and practical sense. In what in particular? 'Having made known unto us the mystery of his will' (v. 9 KJV).

Do you see the connection of thought? It is God giving me the chance to repent, buying me back and giving me forgiveness and granting me release from that stupid position that I had got myself into, as a creature of God on God's planet going against God. *God buying me back.*

But God knows that, left to myself, I am a little senseless, and if you just forgive my sins like that I am liable to get it into my head that it didn't really matter after all, so let's have another go! 'Let me live as I please. I am saved from the wrath of God; I am only twenty-eight—I don't have to bother too much about living for the Lord. I am going to heaven.' I might get silly notions in my head like that, and, as a believer, not be too careful about cooperating in the purpose of God. Have you ever met any believers like that?

Therefore, God in his wisdom saw to it that, in granting us forgiveness, along with it he gave us wisdom and practical sense to see at once, if we care to think, that that cannot be the idea—that we are set free and forgiven, so that we shall never perish; but free to do just as we please and still ignore God's purpose. So he makes known his purpose at the same time as he gives us the forgiveness, in order that we might see the necessity and the wisdom, as forgiven men and women, of cooperating with God in his holy purpose.

Making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In him we have obtained an inheritance. (vv. 9–11)

That purpose is to sum up all things in Christ. That is a vast purpose, and considering exactly what it means would take us quite a time and we must bring our present study to its conclusion by noticing this train of thought. We have considered something of the wonder of the purpose and why it involved creation. It was to come to this infinitely higher category than mere creaturehood and enable us to become sons of God. The plan was according to God's own heart, not something we devised. It tells me that God, left to himself, would do infinitely better for us than ever we could have done for ourselves.

What an answer to Satan's slander of God! He came to Eve in the garden and whispered into her ear, and then into Adam's ear: 'Yes, it may be a lovely garden, it may be a lovely planet, but God could do infinitely better for you if he had wanted to. But he does not want

to. In fact, he wants to keep you down: he has no intention of letting you rise to be as God. That is why he has forbidden you this fruit.'

What a horrid lie, for it had been the original purpose of God that humans as they were created should eventually have the opportunity precisely of rising and becoming children of God. Not in rebellious independence of God, but by God's own grace and regeneration.

We are expected to cooperate with God's plan

His plan came from the heart of God, and will inevitably be unspeakably glorious because its final intention is to display the riches of God's grace. We offended against it by our sin; but now God has released us and forgiven us at the cost of the blood of his Son. Having simultaneously by his Spirit put within each believer's heart a wisdom and a practical sense that tells us instinctively that salvation by grace does not mean that we can live as we like, neglect God's plans and purposes, and fritter away our lives on empty and sometimes sinful things; we are expected to cooperate with God's plan. Therefore, we must come to know intelligently what that plan is.

It will all make sense when God sums it up

God's organizational plan is, finally, when the fullness of time is come, to sum up all that God has done so far (v. 10). It is like an orator would do—for that is what the Greek word means, *to sum up*. It can also be used, of course, of a mathematician adding up the grocery bill, or a few atoms and things. That meaning would not make a lot of sense here—one star plus two stars make three stars. Its more common use is of an orator.

If you have observed orators, they have got a theme. They start, and there is an introduction; then there is a paragraph number one in which the orator proceeds to make a certain point. When he has made that point he turns to paragraph number two and he makes a somewhat different point. Having made that second point, he makes a third point, fourth, fifth, and so on—and the danger is that by the time you have come to point six you have forgotten point one. You might be forgiven sometimes for scratching your head and saying, 'I do not quite see where this is all going. Now what is he saying? That seems to be a little different to what he was saying three paragraphs ago.'

Ah, but the orator knows what he is doing. So when he gets to the end and he has had twelve points or so, then comes the great finale, 'the fullness of the times', and he sums it up. He takes all his points and briefly recapitulates and puts them together. 'Oh!' you say, 'I know what he was getting at and I see the relevance of those paragraphs to the whole bit. I see the point now!'

God is going to do that one day in Christ. What was he doing when he spoke and the great gas clouds erupted and the galaxies were formed? What was he saying? Creation is God's statement, and what a marvellous statement it is. When we make statements generally that's the end of it. We distinguish between our statements and our actions, but *when God speaks it is an action*. The vast creation around us is God's statement. It was made through the word of God.

I wonder whether Michael the archangel stood on the first day of creation and saw it happen: 'Interesting statement, God, but I don't quite see what you are saying.' Then day two came and day three and here come the giraffes! 'Well, they are an interesting statement—very

interesting indeed, but I cannot quite see the point of it.' Then follow the ages of history. What was God saying? Here comes the dispensation of Noah and the flood, and then the patriarchs. What was God saying?

If it was part of a great speech, what was the speech going to be about? What was the Leviticus part saying? What has it got to do with me now? Has it just been forgotten?

'No!' says Paul. 'All God's great statements in his creative work in the vast universe, and all the statements that he made through the prophets in the successive ages, differing as some of them seem to be, one day, in Christ, the whole thing is going to be recapitulated. God will bring out what he meant then, put the whole thing together, and it will make sense.'

The whole thing—from the tiniest atom to the vast hosts of the redeemed. You will then see what the whole speech has been about, as he recapitulates the whole. What a lovely statement it shall be when at last we see the meaning of all things. The meaning of history; the meaning of the universe; the meaning of my life. Shall I make my departure with a statement? Thank God, when it comes to my little life (it may be a comma compared to your semi-colon), it shall be part of God's great statement that he made when he created and when he redeemed the world.

Let us now just bow and thank God for his wonderful purposes.

Our Father, we praise thee from our hearts that thou hast spoken, and not kept silent. Thou hast not kept thy holy conversation privy to the members of the Trinity. Thou hast spoken and the worlds were framed, thou hast spoken and we came to be.

Having made us by thy word, we praise thee that thou hast subsequently deigned to speak to us through thy word, and shown us thy ways and plans and what we desperately needed—our redemption. As men and women who have often puzzled over the significance of life and of the universe around us, now we praise God for the promise that one day Christ shall take it all and, summing it up, make sense of the great statement of the mind and heart of God. We who were sinners, who deserved nothing more than to be blotted out of the whole record for our contradictory way of behaving, we bless thee for a redemption that has blotted out our transgressions and made us anew. We too shall be part of the statement, when God tells all who care to hear what kind of a God he is and what is the majesty of his grace.

Thus, with our thanksgivings, we ask thine evening blessing through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Movement One: The Purpose of God in Creation (1:1–2:10)

2. *Prayer for Revelation and Illumination*

Reading: Ephesians 1:15–2:10

May God fulfil the prayer of the apostle and illumine the eyes of our hearts. Our task this evening is very clear: if we are to have any hope of covering Movements Two and Three of the thought pattern of this epistle in the days that remain to us in the will of God, then we must make a valiant effort to complete our survey of Movement One.

Let us remind ourselves that Movement One concerns itself with the purpose of God in creation, and divides itself into three parts. In the first part, 1:1–14 deals specifically with the major topic, the plan and purpose of God in creation. In the second part, 1:15–23 concerns Paul's prayer that God would give us a spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that we might apprehend, as a reality in our hearts, the glorious plan and purpose that God has for us in relation to creation. Finally, in the third part, 2:1–10, we shall be considering the great opposition and the huge obstacles that lay in the path of the fulfilment of God's purpose, how God has overcome them, by what principle and to what end.

It is primarily with the second and third parts that we must concern ourselves in this session. However, I am sure there are things still niggling in your mind from the first part.

Chapter 1 verses 9–14 tell us what *God's good plan and purpose* is in Christ for the fullness of times, and I suggested that God's purpose is this: that Christ is going to play the part of a great orator in God's universe and he has already begun his speech. Jesus Christ our Lord is the Word of God, through whom God has made all his statements. The glorious statement of God in creation was made by the word of God, for God's statements are God's works, and God's works are God's statements.

Secondly, as we survey God's handiwork in creation, we are hearing him saying things. It is *God's good pleasure* that when the fullness of the times comes, Christ shall recapitulate the whole story and, taking the great statements that God has made from time to time in creation and in history, Christ will sum them all up and show how together they make sense as God's tremendous statement of his own character and purpose.

In so hastily attempting to cover those verses, I left a lot of major things without any comment, so for a moment I must recur to them, lest I fail to carry you with me in my particular interpretation of those passages.

God's good plan and purpose (1:9–14)

So let us just go back a moment and remember the immediate context that lies behind these verses. God has abounded towards us, not only in forgiveness, but even as he abounded in his grace towards us in forgiveness, he has also given us wisdom and practical common sense, so that instinctively we see that forgiveness is not going to mean we are now free from the wrath of God and may still go our own way. We have been forgiven and delivered from the wrath of God that we might now be persuaded to cooperate with God in his great plan and purpose. What is God's plan, his organization, his scheme of things? It is described in verse 10, that when 'the fullness of times' (KJV) comes he will sum up all things in Christ.

So then, our first task is to consider briefly what that phrase means: *the fullness of times*. We could start our thinking by contrasting the phrase with a very similar one that we find in Paul's letter to the Galatians, where Paul says that 'when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son' (4:4). There we notice the same word *fullness*, but we notice that the word *time* is there in the singular, whereas in Ephesians it is in the plural.

Galatians 4:4 is telling us nonetheless a very interesting thing. It tells us that Christ's coming into our world was carefully timed. That in itself is exceedingly significant. You will have observed that God did not send our Saviour into the world the moment Adam sinned. Why not? Long centuries were to pass before God decided it was the fitting time to send the Lord Jesus into our world. It was carefully timed. Sin is a matter of a moment: Eve had sinned before scarce she knew what she was doing. Adam had followed deliberately, but his act of taking the fruit and eating of it was an act of the moment.

Not so easily is sin put right. Before the appropriate time should come for God to send his Son to save us, long centuries must follow, while the terrible harvest of that one sin grew to its height and men and women learned what a fearful thing sin is: how one little seed of it is enough to destroy a whole world. They had to be taught likewise what God's salvation would be like when it came, and what his principles of saving would be, so that when the Saviour came they might at least be prepared for his coming. Only after those centuries of preparation did the fullness of time come, and at that precise moment Christ entered our history.

You will notice the same thing of our Lord's life upon earth. More than once the evangelists tell us that certain people tried to destroy him, but his time was not come. And Mary suggested a certain course of action, but he said 'Woman . . . my [time] has not yet come' (John 2:4). Our salvation was not a thing to be rushed at, to be initiated by some will-o'-the-wisp thought that happened to have occurred in somebody's head. But, with measured step and deliberate pace, according to God's foreordained timetable, did Christ walk our world and come to his death as an act precisely timed. 'You know', said our Lord, 'that after two days is the Feast of the Passover' (Matt 26:2)—when the sacrifice must be killed—'And when the hour was come, he sat down . . .' (Luke 22:14 KJV).

So Galatians is telling us that there was a precise time for his coming. Ephesians 1 is adding to that a very interesting idea, that there have been many *times* in the course of history, and will be yet more. That is to say, there have been many different *ages*—many different periods of time, when God was doing different things in those different *epochs*.

Here is a young gentleman, and the school authorities are doing their level best to educate him. But it will be a process; you wouldn't expect him to pass through school in one morning!

We see him as a four year old, patiently threading blue coloured string through cardboard with holes in it. You say, 'What on earth has this got to do with education?' Wait and see! Now he is playing with a few beans, but the schoolteacher knows what she is doing. Here is our pupil, now in the sixth form, with his calculus, and who knows what else. The one was designed to prepare the way for the other. It was all scheduled before he started, and right to the very end, when he comes out as Professor of Applied Mathematics, the whole thing was planned. You would be unwise to suppose that at each stage the teacher was doing the very same thing.

So it is with God. Even when it came to creating our planet, God took his time about it. The interesting thing about Genesis 1 is that it tells us, against all our expectations, that God did not do it all at once. He did different things on different days. Michael may have been expecting God to do it all in a split second, and he may have been a little confused. On day two he was not making man, on day three he was not attempting to make the animals: he did his different things on different days. Perhaps Michael didn't make any sense of all the different days' activities until the crown of it all came. On the sixth day, finally God made man and put him over all the works of his hands, and summed up the whole lot in Adam. When you see Adam, now you see why there had to be life, and why there had to be a firmament. Now it begins to make sense why our planet was put in relation to the revolving constellations: humans would need the evidence that these could be used to supply. So, even in creation, God was doing things in different times.

What is true of our planet is obviously true of the things in the heavens. When did God make the angels? Certainly not on the same day that he was making man. How does the making of man then fit into that other epoch when he was making angels? However it fits, our verse is telling us that there have been distinct times, and not only in creation, but in history too.

From Adam until the flood, man was learning something about where unrestricted freedom will lead. Learning too, in Noah and his ark, something of God's salvation, and a dim prototype of a salvation that God was one day going to provide, and a completely new world. In Abraham and his succeeding race God was doing something very special. He was in that period fighting against the perversion of religion and the terrible scourge of old-fashioned idolatry. He was not all the time preaching the gospel in the terms that we now preach it, but he was hammering away at certain basic misconceptions about the very nature of God. God spent centuries doing it. How would men and women come to the service of the true God, if their whole concept of what he was like was simply that of a pagan?

Just as there have been different times in the past—and we now live in another one, when God is doing something the like of which he hasn't done before—so there will be times in the future. But one day all those different times and all God's diverse workings in different parts and in different ways will be summed up by the great word of God (vv. 9–10).

I am looking forward to being there and hearing the speech! I have been doing my best to listen in. I have scratched my head over Genesis. What on earth was God really saying then? And I have thought of the period of the Judges and wondered about some of the strange stories. What was God trying to say then and how does it fit in to now? As for Amos, Joel and

the rest of the Prophets, they are a bit difficult, and in consequence get left out of many sermons. I have tried to fit it all together and make sense of it.

Doubtless you have said, as I have, 'What about the heathen that have never heard?' What a big problem; I hope it doesn't meet an unfeeling concrete heart in your breast. How could I believe in a God who could let generations of men be lost, and never care about them? How will it all fit in? One day it is God's purpose—this is his plan, his organizing scheme, his dispensation—that at the fullness of the times God shall gather the message and statement, and his activities in each of the particular ages, and put them all together, and he will speak it all and show how the combined thing makes sense. What a story it will be!

It will not be merely the story of God's ways with our little planet—who knows how many chapters of the story there had been before our planet became? He shall sum up all things in heaven and upon earth and show how they fit together, and what God has been saying.

Will you be part of the statement? Shall the divine orator be able to seize upon this Christian age and, amidst all its interesting sections, say, 'There is "Bob McFarland"! Let me tell you how he fitted into the scheme: what I was saying by making Bob McFarland and creating that unique personality at that particular time in history, and by redeeming him and leading him to Christ.' This what God was saying in that man; I can scarcely wait to see what he is going to do.

It is a marvellous thing to listen to somebody testifying to the way God has found them and sought them and brought them back to the Saviour; what he has been doing by his grace, and to find that, through multitudes of trials, at the end of it they can still look heavenward and say, 'I believe God'. When the story of every redeemed man and woman is told by the divine orator and all is fitted into place, what a God will appear. What an honour it will be to be a part of God's self-revelation of himself, to be a part of God's great statement.

Jews and Gentiles

Paul confirms and assures us that when all is summed up in Christ we too will have a part in it, and he points out that there are two major groups in the church. In verses 11–12 he talks about the Jewish believers (we), and in verse 13 he talks about the Gentile believers (you). Finally, in verse 14, he says things that are true of both groups (our). He draws together God's statements in the two ages.

There was the Jewish age, and he describes the people then as people who were 'the first to hope in Christ'. He is not just saying that these people happened to trust Christ before we (Gentiles) trusted him—though thousands have done that. He is saying that, before the Gentiles came to hope in the Messiah, Israel had for centuries been expecting the Messiah. During centuries when the Gentiles were without any hope and had no future to look forward to, Israel had this God-given hope that one day the Messiah would come. It was a tremendous message: it told them, as distinct from so many manmade religions, that history was not going round in circles. History was moving; God had a purpose in it, and one day history would come to the time when Messiah would come. It was a veritable gospel message, and still, as we read about it in the Old Testament and compare it with other religions and pagan philosophies, it stands out like a beacon light. It told that the Messiah was coming, who should

bring in the restoration of all things. All down the centuries before Jesus came, before we Gentiles were interested, the Jews were hoping in the coming of Messiah.

Indeed, verses 11–12 are not ashamed to tell us that in the Messiah the Jewish people obtained an inheritance. But here I must stop and explain. The Greek word used in verse 11 differs from one translation to another. Some versions say ‘in whom we have obtained [received] an inheritance’ (ESV, KJV), and others say ‘in whom we were made an inheritance’ (RV). The difficulty in deciding which is which, and which is the intended meaning, is that each in its way is true. In Christ, the believing Jew has and will receive a vast inheritance, and in Christ the believing Gentile will receive a vast inheritance.

I think what Paul is saying here is not so much that, in Christ, the Jews *received* an inheritance, as, they were *made* an inheritance. Deuteronomy 32 tells us that, whereas God gave Israel the inheritance of the Promised Land, Israel in her turn was *God’s inheritance*. And when God gave to the other Gentiles their inheritance he fixed their number, according to the number of Israel, because Israel was his specially chosen people. Israel was God’s special portion: ‘But the LORD’S portion is his people’ (Deut 32:9).

Why should the Jews be a special people?

Hasn’t God a right to do as he pleases? He works all things after the counsel of his own will. If he decides he wants a special nation and he wants to give them a special role in history, he gives them a special role, and that is the end of the matter. We are dealing with God, not the grocer down the street. It is not to say that, because they had a special role given them of God, they were sinlessly perfect—far from it. It is not to say that they were better than anybody else—they never were. Generally speaking, they were worse. God gave them the inheritance of the promised land, yet they sinned so grievously that he had to throw them out of their inheritance. Bad lot that they proved to be, they were his portion, chosen by God to play a special role in history in his interest, to say something about him in this world that needed to be said: a great protest against idolatry.

It still needs to be said; for our modern world gets sunk in its new modern idolatries, every bit as much as the old pagan world was full of idolatry. Still we need Isaiah’s message, and still we need Moses’ tabernacle and its ritual to make their divine protest in the name of God and for him against every kind of idolatry, even in our modern world. Thus did he choose them and give them a role. They were his special portion.

DOES THAT MEAN THAT GENTILES DID NOT GET ANY PORTION AT ALL?

No, it does not mean that whatsoever. Deuteronomy 32 also tells us that God gave the Gentiles their inheritance (v. 8). Just because he had a special role for the Jews, that does not mean he did not have any role at all for the Gentiles. He gave the Gentiles their inheritance—so much land. They cannot complain; they always did have the bigger share of the world anyway! He gave them natural gifts, sometimes far beyond what he gave the Israelites. Israel was for God’s revelation of himself. You would scarce go to them for science. You would read the Greeks and go to the classical departments for that—of course you would! If you wanted to think about science, how to think logically, and see all the tremendous benefits of art and literature, you would be inclined to go to the Greeks. If it was a question of administration, learning how to control and administer the world, you would scarcely go to the Jews; you would go to the

Romans. Yes, God gave the nations their inheritance and it is not all lost. Even though what God was saying has been marred by sin, there was something of the Creator in it. Christ our blessed Lord will take it and restate it. What a sublime contribution it shall make to the eternal message.

Have we got an inheritance?

Let us not now think simply of the inheritance of the Gentile nations as nations. Let's think of the Gentiles who sit around me, and the one Gentile on this platform: has God given you an inheritance in this world? Yes, surely he has! What are you anyway? Forget the Bible for a moment and ask the scientist. He talks about us as the end product of some initial genes and chromosomes somewhere, long since forgotten. All down the generations they've come, with all sorts of mixings and permutations, that marvellous system of heredity that had coded on it enough information to make a human being. And here you are this evening!

I know they were bits of stuff; but they were no ordinary bits of stuff, because you could put two bits of stuff together and not make anything. They were bits of stuff coded with information that, with many permutations down the centuries, have made you. Who coded the stuff? What was God trying to say when he coded the stuff that eventually made you your inheritance? You are different from anybody else. If you don't get to heaven there will be one statement missing: your gifts, your personality, your circumstances.

What about all the suffering in the world?

You say, 'Mr. Preacher, you are trying to be kind, but you touch a very deep wound. My genes went wrong and I am impaired and broken. How can I believe God was trying to say anything?'

There is so much suffering in the world: imperfect nature producing sad illnesses and disabilities and heart-breaking circumstances. How could you believe God was in it? But wait a minute! How would you like the other alternative—that there wasn't anybody saying anything? That's the only other alternative—that there was no plan. If you are suffering and heartbroken, what did you expect? If you are going to take so much stuff and mix it all together without any plan, and it's all one colossal accident, what did you expect but that people would be broken and everything meaningless?

If that's true you will have to convince me, but I'll go for the other option any day. You can tell me that the sentences in the genetic code have gone a bit astray, and a missing bit of code here has led to leukaemia or something. The whole planet has become disturbed by sin, but there was an original purpose and intention. In Christ the whole thing shall be taken and restated, and God will make sense of it all in the end—the good bits and the bad bits.

In Christ, God shows us the truth

It is difficult enough to invent a speech yourself, isn't it? Try inventing a speech that involves somebody else speaking it for you, and he determines to speak his own ideas instead of yours. God invented humanity as his great statement, and we joined the rebel hosts of demons and

were determined to seek our own way, not his way. It led to a colossal confusion, yet God in Christ shows us the truth of the matter.

Says Paul, talking to these Gentiles, 'You heard the word of truth' (1:13). What is the truth about our universe? Is there a message, and is it true? Indeed it is; for the marvellous thing has happened and the longed for Messiah has come. And though we never hoped in him as Gentiles, we heard the truth. The truth about our universe—that it is not a chaotic accident. There was a mind and a plan behind it. There was a God behind it. There was more than a plan; there was a heart. This is what the God that stands behind your inheritance is like. Broken as it may now be, this is the God that stands behind it ultimately. We have heard the truth in Jesus Christ and his cross, and, hearing the message and the truth, have believed it.

THE GENTILES ALSO RECEIVED THE PROMISED HOLY SPIRIT

Now a marvellous thing has happened. Why did God spend all those ages doing curious things? Well, I will tell you one of the things he spent his time at. As the Jewish age proceeded, God announced through prophets like Isaiah and Joel and Ezekiel that one day he would pour out his Spirit; not only on Jews, but he would pour out his Spirit on all flesh, and the Gentiles would come (see, for example, Isa 60:3, 5). It seemed a pretty remote notion when Isaiah prophesied it, and also when Joel prophesied. But there it stood, generation after generation, God's promise that the Spirit would come even upon Gentiles.

The Jews largely forgot that bit. So much so that when James heard that the Spirit had fallen on Gentiles, he was flabbergasted!

'Peter, what strange things do I hear? You have taken hospitality from a Gentile?'

'It was not my fault,' says Peter. 'All I did was to preach the truth and God gave the Gentiles the Holy Spirit.'

That had sent Peter ferociously studying his Old Testament. 'That is what the Old Testament said that God was going to do. This authenticates it! God has sealed the Gentiles as the genuine thing, by giving them that promised Holy Spirit.'⁶

So Paul says: 'In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit' (Eph 1:13). The genuine thing!

You have not followed some will-o'-the-wisp, my brothers and sisters—at least I hope you have not. You have followed this message of Jesus Christ that comes to us stamped with the imprimatur of God and the watermark of his Holy Spirit: a thing that has been in preparation all down these centuries, and now you have got it. You can see the blueprint and say, 'Yes, it was promised, and so, thank God, it has happened'.

Meanwhile the Holy Spirit is an earnest of what shall yet be, the *earnest* of the inheritance you shall have in that coming day (v. 14). It is God's seal now until he pleases to come and take you, the possession that he has now by redemption, home to glory to be for his eternal praise. With that Holy Spirit within you, already communicating the secret, how fortunate you are!

It has been hard sometimes in the centuries to read God's intention in our universe. Indeed, for us it is a little bit difficult to read the secret of God's ways in the tiny details. But

⁶ See Galatians 2 and Acts 11.

the plan has been made known, and we are now so far advanced on it that, with the coming of the Holy Spirit, you can begin to see and feel and live that great final statement. What even perhaps Noah did not see, nor Abraham fully comprehend, nor David enter into completely, in our age now you are miles ahead of them. Already the Holy Spirit is within you, the part payment, the anticipatory experience of what the final inheritance will be.

Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it. (Luke 10:23–24)

Why did Paul pray for these Ephesian believers? (1:15–23)

Two parts, therefore, remain to us, and they may be summed up fairly simply. If this is God's plan, then before Paul proceeds he will pause to tell us that he constantly prays for the Ephesians. Why? Because the danger is that, though this is truth and it is God's plan, it will in the end seem merely words to them.

I remember on one occasion having been asked to speak to some students on Ephesians, and as I fell to talking of believers being in the Body of Christ and being fellow citizens, I let my imagination run loose, under the control of God's word, and thought of that great city that shall be the centre of God's administration for all eternity. Afterwards a very polite student came and said, 'That was bombastic, wasn't it? It was all rather fanciful: it didn't mean anything.' Very brave of her to be honest, wasn't it? We would make a lot more progress in our spiritual life if we were as honest as she was. What is the good of high sounding words if in the end their reality does not grip us?

Therefore, Paul prays; and mark that he is praying for *believers*—he is praying for the Holy Spirit for believers.

'Oh!' you say, 'he mustn't do that, because he would be a heretic if he does that. We believers do not have to pray for the Holy Spirit: we have got the Holy Spirit!'

Be that as it may, Paul prays for those who have already been sealed with the Holy Spirit. He prays that God would give them a spirit of wisdom and revelation (1:17). That must be the Holy Spirit, for only the Holy Spirit can reveal anything. He is praying that God by his Spirit will open the eyes of believers and give them a revelation, so that the things of which he has been speaking may become real.

Three things in particular. 'Having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know': (1) 'what is the hope to which he has called you'; (2) 'what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints,' and (3) 'what is the immeasurable greatness of his power towards us who believe, according to the working of his great might' (vv. 18–19).

1. 'What is the hope to which he has called you'

Why are you saved? What is the point in being saved? Do I hear you say, 'To escape the lake of fire'? Well done my brother! What next? If one may speak for another, I find it very easy to have a tiny little view of the hope of my calling, and prefer to relate the hope of my calling to the universe around me.

It's easy, you know, to go along in your youth to Sunday School. Those nice folks will tell you about Jacob and Joseph and Samuel. It is all very good, and that is what you do in Sunday School. Then on weekdays you go to school, and it's there that you learn the *real* things in life: mathematics, cookery, architecture, etc. They are the real things of life. In that part of the world they are not much concerned about Jacob and Joseph and Samuel. Then on Sunday, for a rest, you come away from all that real world into a warm, friendly cocoon. It's a little bit like *Little Red Riding Hood* and it's sort of comfortable, whether or not it is real; and who knows what it's got to do with this world, or physics or atomic science?

What's happening? The eyes of their hearts have not yet been enlightened. They are saved from the wrath to come, but they have not yet grasped the hope to which they have been called. They have been saved so that they might fulfil God's plan for this vast creation around them. One day as the sons of God they will take over the running of it with Christ, which is more real than any career you could possibly imagine; for the real and final answer that your physics book cannot give you, nor cosmology either, is why it was ever started and what is the end of it. In Christ, you have got the end of it, and the purpose of it; and you are called to share in that purpose.

2. 'What are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints'

Then he prays, 'having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints' (v. 18). Once more the term is perhaps ambiguous, as frequently in Scripture it can mean what we inherit in Christ, or it can mean what God inherits in us; for the Lord's inheritance is his people still.

Do I need the eyes of my understanding opened to see what are the riches of God's inheritance? I fancy I do, if my behaviour is any guide to it. What is this inheritance? It is the woman sitting next to you!

You say, 'I thought you were going to tell me something about heaven.'

What do you think God's inheritance in eternity is going to be? A few marble columns or a few Corinthian pillars in front of a big stone temple? Would that be glorious? Open your eyes! That man or that woman sitting next to you, if they are the Lord's they are something that God himself designed the whole universe for, and he spent the blood of Christ on getting them. All these long years he has been toiling patiently with them to perfect their redeemed character. They are his inheritance eternally; he thinks they are wonderful. If you could see that man or woman as they will be when God has finished with them, you would be down on your knees in front of them. How do I know that? Well, when John saw an angel he fell down at his feet, and angels shall be infinitely below the redeemed of the Lord.

If you think this is excited imaginary talk, then your eyes have not been opened. We can recite the words and say that my brothers and my sisters are veritable children of God, destined to be a being, the glory of which will delight the very heart of the transcendent Lord of the universe. And next Monday I could cut them dead and put a metaphorical knife in their character. Why? Because the idea that they are God's inheritance is still only words. It has not percolated through and become a reality. If we could see the quarrels and squabbles and shameful treatment of fellow Christians, we would begin to pray that God would open the

eyes of our understanding to see what is the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints, until it became a reality and we were afraid to do anything to injure any child of God.

3. 'What is the immeasurable greatness of his power towards us who believe'

'The immeasurable greatness of his power . . . that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead' (vv. 19–20). Yes, but the point is, what is the implication for us? The immeasurable greatness of his power towards *you* that he worked when he raised Christ from the dead.

What implications has it for me? Ponder a moment what God has done with the Lord Jesus. He has raised him up from the grave and set him above every conceivable type of authority that you could think of in this vast universe, so that today he sits as the supreme Lord of every force, be it physical or spiritual. And not only now, but in the ages to come Christ will remain the supreme head. What has it got to do with me? God has taken Christ, the head over all things, and given him to the church, for the church to be his body: the thing that makes him complete, as a body makes its head complete, or as a wife makes her husband complete. We, the church, shall be the Eve to Adam (Christ); the Rebekah to Isaac (the father's son who has all things in his hands); the Asenath to Joseph (the supreme administrator of the universe with his largely Gentile bride).

Oh that God would open my eyes to take it in as literal fact, but it remains so easily at the level of my mere emotions and imagination. You can see that, when I get irritated as the carrots get burned. You wouldn't guess, when you see what little things will put me out, that I really believe I have such a wonderful destiny. How about you?

A curious thing strikes me as I think of these things. I suppose in my little life I have been to hundreds, if not thousands of prayer meetings. I cannot recall anyone praying all these things at once. I have to confess that it is a rare thing in the church for anyone to get up and pray, 'Open the eyes of our understanding; illumine us by your Spirit; reveal to us so that it becomes real in our church what is the hope of our calling, what are the riches of your inheritance in the saints; what the significance is for us of the power that you have exerted in raising Christ from the dead and putting him at your own right hand.'

I tell you an even more curious thing: I confess I have rarely prayed it myself either. You see, we talk about it, but it has not really become a reality. We need to pray; for this is the truth, this is the real situation. Less than this is but the mists and confusions of untruth, or truth only partially perceived.

As we ponder these things, let us make our response to God by allowing me to read the verses from a well-known and a lovely hymn:

O blessed God! how kind
 Are all Thy ways to me,
 Whose dark benighted mind
 Was enmity with Thee.
 Yet now, subdued by sovereign grace,
 My spirit longs for Thine embrace.

How precious are Thy thoughts
That o'er my spirit roll!
They swell beyond my faults,
And captivate my soul:
How great their sum, how high they rise,
Can ne'er be known beneath the skies.

Preserved by Jesus, when
My feet made haste to hell!
And there should I have gone,
But Thou dost all things well:
Thy love was great, Thy mercy free,
Which from the pit delivered me.

Before Thy hands had made
The sun to rule the day,
Or earth's foundation laid,
Or fashioned Adam clay,
What thoughts of peace and mercy flowed
In Thy great heart of love, O God.

A monument of grace,
A sinner saved by blood,
The streams of love I trace
Up to the fountain, God;
And in His sovereign counsels see
Eternal thoughts of love to me.⁷

⁷ John Kent (1766-1843).

Movement One: The Purpose of God in Creation

3. *Triumph Over the Opposition*

Reading: Ephesians 2:1–22

Survey of Ephesians chapter two

Ephesians chapter 2 is formed of two major parts. The first goes from verse 1 and finishes in verse 10, where it reaches its glorious climax with a reminder of God's new creation: 'For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.' The second part runs from verse 11 to the end, and likewise announces one of God's great purposes: the building of an eternal temple for God's dwelling place (v. 22).

On the surface at least, when you look at these two parts of chapter two, you might decide that they have a great deal in common. They both seem concerned to stress the situation we were in before we got converted, and the sad, dangerous and solemn state we were in before we found the Saviour. And that of course in its way is true, and is a valid observation. When we look a little bit more deeply, however, we shall find that perhaps the differences between these two parts are even more significant than their similarities.

For instance, in part one it is perfectly true, without reserve, to say that up to verse 10 it is concerned with the former state of the early Christians before they got converted. And what was true of them in their unconverted days was equally true of us.

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. (2:1–3)

When you look at the second part, while it does call on us to remember what we once were, it's not so much talking about our unconverted days. It is telling us to remember what the situation of the Gentiles was before the coming of Jesus Christ our Lord into the world. Some of it is true of what we were before we got converted, but even in your unconverted days you weren't quite in that situation, were you? Jesus Christ had long since come into the world when you were born. But some of these early Christians had lived in the days before he came into the world, and Paul is calling on these Christians to remember the awful situation they were in as Gentiles before Christ ever came.

Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called 'the uncircumcision' by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. (vv. 11–12)

So, there is a difference between these two parts that make up chapter two: what we were before we were converted; and what all Gentiles were before Christ came into the world.

Then there's another difference, if you look at the verses carefully. If we are thinking about the past and our perilous condition, or the past and the condition of the Gentiles before Jesus Christ came, and ask ourselves what made the difference, then part one will answer that it was God who made the difference.

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. (vv. 4–6)

Now ask that same question of part two. This is how the Gentiles used to be: without Christ, without hope, without God in the world (v. 12). What has made the difference? The answer is not that it was God who made the difference; the answer is that the difference has been made by the astounding fact that the long hoped-for Messiah has actually come. God has invaded our planet and history can never be the same again.

There is a third major difference, consistent with these two. The first part (2:1–10) is the climax, the last paragraph in the first great movement of the epistle; whereas verses 2:11–22 are the opening paragraphs of the second great movement, dealing with *the role of Christ in history*. These two movements, though they have much in common, have significant differences. The first movement has been concerned with *the purpose of God in creation*: a purpose which has been sadly thwarted through the rebellion of mankind and the rebellion of greater and more powerful forces in heavenly places. Part one of chapter 2 brings that great movement of thought to its glorious conclusion.

God has a purpose in creation and that great purpose was for a time thwarted through the enmity of spirit powers and the disobedience of mankind. But in spite of it the Creator has found the answer to the opposition: he has thwarted Satan and his hosts. See the triumph of his creative plan at last when, in spite of the earlier plan being deflected and going wrong, the great Creator had another plan, and to his first creation he has added a second creative power. The creatures he had made were lost and dead to him in their sins, but the Creator has reserves of creation at his disposal and has created again: he has created life out of death. He has made his creatures alive in Christ and raised them and set them at his own right hand (vv. 5–6). And with that deliberate and lovely mention of creation in verse 10, the first great movement of thought, concerned with God's purpose in creation, comes to fulfilment.

God's purpose in history

The second great movement in the epistle is, of course, likewise concerned with the purpose of God. This time a different purpose. The purpose of God in creation in chapter 1 is that God should have us 'before him' (v. 4). Therefore, we read of salvation affecting us; in that, when we were saved, God raised us and placed us in the heavenly places that we should be 'before him'.

We have not gone many verses before we find that the great purpose of God now is, not so much that we should be 'before him', but (staggering in its concept) that God himself should enter his own creation, make himself room to dwell there, and set himself the task of building a temple within time and space. Did you ever hear such a story? The transcendent Lord, who created time and space, decided not merely that we should be before him, but that he should come and enter time and space, and do it eternally, and make himself a temple in which to dwell (2:21–22).

Because that was a vast plan and purpose, Movement Two will remind us that God has gone about it in stages. He hasn't done it all at once. He got some prototypes and started in a humble way with Israel's literal tabernacle of wood and gold, and has proceeded in this present age to something more glorious. And, even so, it is not complete, nor will it be complete until the Saviour comes. Then the vast design that God has been erecting during these many centuries will be unveiled, as the great temple and tabernacle of God, the body and bride of Christ, comes down out of heaven and permanently dwells in time and space, to be God's location (Rev 21:2–3). It will be the place within time and space where God is pleased to localize his presence and make himself known.

Thus it is that the second great movement in Ephesians, though it is in ways concerned with God's purpose in creation, has now moved further and concentrates our attention on God's particular purpose of having a temple in time and space. It is the fulfilment of all those plans and purposes that God has been at in the course of history, in order to achieve that purpose.

So, the second part of chapter 2 is not just a continuation of the earlier verses. It marks a new movement of thought: it introduces the new purpose and concentrates our minds not so much on creation and its problems, but on history. The history of redemption and its particular problems.

Progress in history

When we have completed our study we shall find that not only does the first movement tell us that God has had a purpose in creation that he will yet achieve, but, even more wonderful, God has had a purpose within history. History is not just a muddle of things getting nowhere, going round in circles. There is a plan within history, real progress in history, and in the end God will bring that progress to its glorious fulfilment. What an encouraging thing that is!

If you ask me what evidence I have for it, my short answer would be 'you', and I will explain that to you later. You are a striking example, compared to the Jews of a former age, that there has been progress in history and that there will yet be further progress. The Christian has every right to smile. We are not pessimists, although I know that when you look at the history of the world at large you would be hard put to find any purpose in it.

To see purpose in history you mustn't stand merely within it. Like the shining man who appeared to Daniel (ch. 10), standing *above* the river of history, who could see its beginning and its end, so you too, if you would see purpose in history, should stand for a moment above and look at its beginning and then see its end. Then you will see that indeed there is purpose in history. As men and women who have been raised with Christ and seated in the heavenlies in Christ, from that position we may look down at history and see there has been, and shall yet be, progress, and praise God that we are a part in that progress of history.

So then, it is my thesis that these two halves of chapter two, while they are similar, they are, even more significantly, different. We shall try to read them in their true and proper context against the general background of which they form part.

Triumph over the opposition (2:1-10)

The first part deals with the purpose of God in creation, and in particular what God has done with the opposition to his purpose. When we come to the end of Movement Two, we shall find likewise a paragraph devoted to the opposition to God's ways in history. And when we come to the end of the final movement, we shall hear something about what God is presently doing, with your help, against the opposition to the new man seated at God's right hand in the heavenly places. For that too is not altogether undisputed, and God will call upon your help to deal with the opposition in those exalted spheres.

That purpose, remember, conceived even before the foundation of the world, was that we should be 'before him in love . . . as sons' (1:4-5). That was the great purpose that antedated creation, and that led to creation; for creation was a means of attaining that purpose. Now chapter 2 tells us of the opposition to it; and the first opposition is to be found in the fact that we were 'dead in trespasses and sins' (v. 1). What a sad and sorry situation this reminds us of. A God who had a plan that we should be before him, and for the sake of attaining that plan went and made a whole universe and put us in it. Then we rebelled against that plan and became dead to all that God had intended. Not physically dead, dead in trespasses and in sins. Not even morally dead, in the sense that we didn't any longer know the difference between right and wrong, because unregenerate people know perfectly well the difference between right and wrong in many things. Many are very decent people who would be ashamed of stealing or lying, and absolutely horrified at the idea of murder or any of the more lurid sins. In that sense they are morally alive, but *dead*, says Scripture. How 'dead'? Dead to the purpose for which God made them.

An illustration

Imagine a father who has sent his son abroad to act for him in the family business, with all sorts of instructions of what he is to do and how he is to go about the business of the family in that far distant part of the world. But the father hasn't heard anything from him for months and months, and wonders where the boy has got to and what he is doing. Has he been assassinated or something? So he writes letters and sends telegrams and gets no reply. He keeps pouring out the cash to maintain the boy and the only evidence that he is still alive is that he is still using the cash. At last he sends out a fellow businessman to see what's happening.

So he gets the son to the end of a telephone and the father says, 'Hello, how are you?'

'I'm very well,' says the son.

'How's the business doing?'

'Look, Father, I don't want to hear anything about your plans; I've got my own plans,' and he puts the telephone down.

In the parable, the prodigal son obtained from his father the goods due to him, went into the far country and was lost to his father. Eventually when he returned home, the father said so graphically to the elder brother 'This my son was *dead*, and is alive again; he was *lost*, and is found' (Luke 15:24).

Not taking God's purpose seriously

Ephesians 2 tells us a sorry story, how that the purpose of God in creation seemed to go utterly astray, for man went his own way regardless of the Creator's purpose.

That isn't the only thing that is said about it. Ponder the solemnity of it. Think of ourselves on a planet that we didn't make, a planet that we cannot ultimately control, and yet unconcerned about the God who put us there. Were it not the normal way that unconverted folks go on, you would think it was a kind of insanity, wouldn't you? But it is such the normal way of living that people come to look at it as ordinary and think that those who take God's purpose seriously are the insane ones.

Just imagine some astronauts circling around and they can't get out because it's lethal outside. They come to the view that no matter what Houston or anybody else down in Texas wants, that would be irrelevant. They take no notice of any signals coming up from below; they are doing their own thing. They have satisfied themselves that there is no Houston or anything else down there whatsoever. They can't get out of the capsule, but they have no ultimate plan of where they are going to end up.

You say, 'That's lunatic'.

But it isn't half so lunatic as behaving like that on planet earth. You didn't get yourself here, did you? And you can't get out because it's lethal. To be unconcerned about the One who made the planet and you, and why he put you there, and whether you are fulfilling his purpose and the goal of it—if we weren't used to that situation we should count it utter lunacy.

But there is worse. The opposition to God's plan did not begin in man's trespasses and sins, but further back:

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience. (2:1-2)

These are dark and solemn statements, so let us take them slowly and carefully. '. . . following the course of *this* world' (2:2). You will notice the emphasis on the word 'this'. Here are men and women living in this world as though this world were the only world. Maybe they've got it into their heads that when life is finished in this world, there could possibly be a life after. But the notion that there is another world *already*—another world with which they

ought to be in contact already—no. They live their lives as though this world were the only world there is, and from the beginning of one day to the next they never make contact with the other world. Moreover, says Paul, they live as though this world, in its present phase, were going on forever. They walk according to the *age*, ‘the present phase of’ this world.

It’s not only the folks that don’t think who go about life like that, is it? I remember attending a very learned seminar on philosophy, and it had a good deal of theology mixed in with it too. The purpose of the lecturer was to inform us that when the Bible tells us of creation, it doesn’t mean that creation happened once upon a time in the past and we have moved on in time from that. No, this world in its present form is eternal.

But it isn’t! To live as though this present phase, in which you have a rosy little world called Planet Earth, is a permanent and eternal thing, is to live under a grave misapprehension. Indeed, if you prefer to listen not to the theologians but the scientists, the evidence around us shows this world is but a temporary affair. It had a beginning and it will have an end. And the very phenomenon of human life as we now know it, on a planet where you have to have air to breathe and so to live, is only temporary. It won’t always be so. Yes, there will be a new heaven and a new earth, but that new earth will be different from this one. Physics and chemistry tell us that human life on this planet is only a temporary thing. There will come a time when human life exactly as we now know it will be no more. To shut one’s eyes to the combined testimony of holy Scripture and science and live as though this world were a permanent thing that has always gone on and always will go on, is to be foolhardy in the extreme.

Why has mankind come to such a sorry state of affairs?

‘Because’, says Paul, ‘they walked not only according to the present course of this world, [but] according to the prince of the power of the air’ (2:2 KJV). Why is he called *the prince of the power of the air*? I presume it is because, in humble language, God is indicating to us what the effect of Satan’s own rebellion is and his capture of our planet. He has become the prince of this world and the god of this world, and like some foreign invader who has come to a city and surrounded it, allowing no one to get in or out, so Satan has filled the air and placed him and his hosts between our planet and God. Doubtless these things were meant in spiritual terms, but even as metaphors these physical terms help us to understand. Satan has besieged our planet and, casting round it his power, has effectively stopped communication between God and men.

LET ME USE AN ILLUSTRATION

Pardon my so evidently homemade illustrations, won’t you? Here is a bus, with the driver and his colleague. It is a modern bus with airtight windows, air conditioning and all the rest. The bus has been sent by its owners on a journey from A to Z, and it has to go along a certain path. But when they get some way along the road they are both tempted to go round by a side road, which goes alongside a very deep lake. Presently an accident occurs and the bus leaves the road and plunges down into the deep lake and sinks. All around it is water and it’s sunk without trace. People are waiting for it at the appointed rendezvous and wonder where it’s gone. It’s disappeared and nobody knows where it is. Nothing is heard of it.

But think of it: it's a big bus and these two men are down in the water. The windows are airtight, so there will be enough air for an hour or two yet. They are alive and walking up and down the bus.

'But,' you say, 'this is terrible; don't they know what's going to happen?'

Yes, the very bus that should have been the vehicle to lead them to their destination has now become their prison house and presently will be their coffin. They are out of touch with the real world outside and surrounded by this foreign element.

Satan has surrounded this planet with his influence and power

Allow me to use it as a parable of our planet, and the people on it. The very planet that God created as the 'bus' that would take people to their destiny has, because of their disobedience and Satan's rebellion, been engulfed by satanic power and opposition to God, and now becomes mankind's prison house and coffin.

You say, 'But it's a modern bus! Haven't they got a radio? Why don't they use it to get in contact with their base and tell them that they are in the lake and ask them to come and get them?'

Perhaps they could have, but they're not going to.

'Why?'

Because the bus driver has read a little science and he's now arguing with his colleague that all that idea of a world outside was an illusion: there isn't any world outside! And the notion that they were meant to be progressing to some God-given destiny—that was an illusion too. They were always meant to be down here, and the limit of their life's experience is the length of the bus. So they are walking up and down the bus, playing the scientist and the engineer. Why should they come to the notion of where it came from? And certainly they've no idea of where it's going to. They've persuaded themselves that this is all there is. Sad, isn't it?

It's only a faint picture of unregenerate humans on this planet. Out of touch with God—the prince of the power of the air coming in between them and God and cutting them off.

As if that were not enough, notice what next Satan has done.

Satan stirs up opposition to God

If one can give full weight to the cases in Hellenistic Greek as we give to them in Classical Greek (and I don't know whether we can), then these verses are saying that the prince of this world has control of a spirit whose particular task it is to stir up within the human heart opposition to God and his purposes. It is not merely that the prince of this world has surrounded the planet with his influence and power, it is that the prince of this world has a spirit that actually works inside the individual, stirring up disobedience against God himself.

It is a sad and an exceedingly sorry and terrible thing to have to say about anybody, but how else would you explain it? Here is a delightful girl, a beautiful musician. Her fingers and her ears and her heart graced with the gifts of the Creator more than many. She delights in her music, and delights everybody who listens to her. And you try to talk to her about God and about the delights of the Creator, and ask her if she knows the Creator who invented music—the whole idea was his and he gave her the gift. She doesn't want to know; tells you

to mind you own business. She is not interested in God. She knows she did not invent music herself, so how do you account for such animosity? I suggest it can have all sorts of causes and this among them: charming girl though she is, the prince of this world has a spirit whose job it is to sow in that young heart enmity against God.

Or, see the same kind of thing in the scientist who is revelling in the fun of finding out how creation ticks. Talk to him about God and he is not even interested. Tell him that it would be all the more wonderful, because, if he realized that this marvellous cell he is studying came from the mind of a Creator, what other cells might he have 'up his sleeve'? He is not interested in God; he'll tell you that outright. Why is that?

Ultimately, it is because the prince of the power of the air has a spirit whose job it is specifically to work inside the human heart and mind and stir up disobedience and enmity to God. The prince has been at it ever since he invaded the garden of Eden and used the delightful fruit of the garden to draw mankind's heart away from God, and make him think that God was his enemy.

If mankind, therefore, is dead to God and God's plan and has come under the domination of Satan and his hosts, what actually moves him in life? Perhaps this is the saddest of all. Instead of being moved by some glorious divine plan of God that spans the whole ages of time and space—formed before the world was founded and has plans for eternity—mankind is moved merely by the desires of the flesh and the mind. Fallen nature moves him, and the habits of a lifetime that fallen nature in the world around has produced in his mind build up patterns of behaviour. They are his ultimate motivation. And worse even than his actions, is the sorry fact that his own very nature is fallen. By nature, he is a *child of wrath*.

God's wrath will come

That is, confessedly, a hard word: '*we* all once . . . were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind' (Eph 2:3). At this very juncture Paul includes himself. When one stops to consider it, how could it be otherwise? Would you have God content to create the vast universe on which he set his heart so that man could be before him, and for man to go astray and fall under the power of the enemy and be lost to God, ruined in his nature and become futile in his motivations and hopeless in his goal, and for God to say, 'I don't care'? Indeed not! The God who made man does not so easily surrender his purpose and say, 'After all, it doesn't matter what he does.' God's wrath rests upon it.

I met a bus driver in somebody's house the other week and he and I got talking. He wasn't a believer. He had all kinds of difficulties and he thought I was taking things far too seriously.

I said, 'Suppose you could make a motor car, and suppose it went five times where you wanted it to go, and five times it refused and went its own way, what would you do with it?'

Eventually he said, 'I'd scrap the thing'.

'My dear good man,' I said, 'the Bible tells us, "All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned every one to his own way." My friend, you had better be careful that God doesn't do with you what you purpose to do with the car, and put you on the scrap heap of eternity.'

God is under no obligation to maintain a planet for the benefit of those who don't want anything to do with him. And he is under no obligation to create a heaven, alternative to his own heaven: 'Anybody that doesn't like me, here's a heaven for you without me.' God is

under no such obligation. He who created the world for the purpose of his own plan has every creatorial right to be angry when that plan is thwarted.

In the book of Revelation, John was given to see the coming judgments that shall deluge our world and finally destroy it. John tells us that he listened to the reasons heaven itself gave why that judgment, which shall put an end to our present age, must first come. The first reason was this: 'Behold, a throne stood in heaven' (Rev 4:2). He heard the living creatures in all their pulsating life; life glorious and wonderful.

And round the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with the face of a man, and the fourth living creature like an eagle in flight. (vv. 6-7)

This was life at its highest point of intelligence, saying, 'Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created' (v. 11).

The solemn thing is not that all men murder each other, though some do. Nor that all men and women get swamped in the abyss and mire of immorality, though some do. The solemn thing is that we in our world were made to fulfil God's plan, and in our unconverted days we had all gone our own way, whatever that involved. Sooner or later God will not wait any more. Whether mankind is ready or not, God will proceed to the fulfilment of his plan. What shall the end be of those who would not co-operate? (See 1 Pet 4:17.)

A BETTER STORY

If that is what we were in our unconverted days, then hear the other side of the story.

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. (Eph 2:4-6)

Even when we were dead and hadn't a notion in our heads of how to get out of the difficulty, then God showed his magnificence. No contingency plan this, thought up in a hurry, but a master stroke that God has now revealed to defeat the purposes of the opposition. You are his creation; notice here the terms of your salvation. It does not say that, being terrible sinners, God forgave us. Even though that would be perfectly true, it's not enough.

Do you remember the bus that went down into the lake? It's down there at the bottom of the lake, and here comes the owner.

'You shouldn't have disobeyed and gone on the side road. You shouldn't have gone your own way. You've got yourself into this problem, but I forgive you!'

What good would that do? They're at the bottom of the lake and their desperate need is not merely of forgiveness but for something to be done to get them out. They are unconscious already and they will soon be dead. They need to be got out.

You needed new life—nothing short of it. That is what God has done. He has given us new life; he has raised us up and seated us in the heavenly places *in Christ Jesus*. Notice that it

is, '[God] made us alive *together with Christ*'. If we were given new life along with Christ, how did Christ become dead so that he could be made alive and we made alive in him?

It is the long story of God's great hidden plan. How his own incarnate Son pierced the gloom that surrounded our planet and actually came right through the enemy's ranks into our planet and lived here, in the pestilential atmosphere of our world, utterly holy. Watch Satan in his great temptation of our Lord, coming at him to see if he could drive a wedge between him and God. The Saviour defeated him at every turn. 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God; You shall not put the Lord your God to the test; You shall worship the Lord your God' (see Matt 4:1–11). Satan was powerless to drive the wedge between him and his God, and the way opened up. What a lovely breath of heavenly fresh air came down, right to where we putrid sinners were.

THE STORY OF LAZARUS

There was our Lord standing by the grave of his friend, Lazarus, the stone rolled away and Lazarus stinking — what a sad result. The Saviour turns his eyes to heaven and says, 'Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I know that you always hear me' (John 11:41–42). The 'line' was always kept open between our planet earth and heaven. The Saviour was dead upon a cross, and Satan thought he had squashed his life out. But it was part of God's plan, showing us not only that there is a God, but exactly what he is like.

If you are not yet a Christian and your reason is that you think God has been hard against you, I ask you to look at our Lord Jesus Christ on the cross and see what God is really like. Rather than have you perish, he himself would perish — were that possible. What have you got against him? What a wonderful story it is: Christ died under the burden and guilt of our sin that he might bear the wrath of God. We were the children of wrath, but he bore the wrath for us. But God, by his grace, raised him from the dead and placed him at his own right hand and demonstrated that not only is there a heaven but we can be taken there, and at this moment a man is already there. What a victory. An actual man who walked with two legs on our earth, utterly undefeated in faith, spotless in life, triumphant in death, is now raised to the right hand of God.

Christ has opened up the way to God

What does it mean? The way has been opened; if only men would trust him. The line has come down and we have been indissolubly linked with Christ. We too, in spirit, are seated with Christ at the right hand of God. It isn't merely that one of these days we are going to heaven, when this life ends. It is as we are here and as we do our daily work, carry out our responsibilities, that the way has been opened and we now know there is another world. We are in touch with the other world. As this planet spins under our feet, we have that eternal life already. It's been spinning for a long time, and one of these days it will spin right out. It won't be there any more. But you don't have to worry because you have that eternal life and are already seated in the heavenly places.

Rise, my soul! behold 'tis Jesus,
Jesus fills Thy wond'ring eyes;

See Him now in glory seated,
Where thy sins no more can rise.⁸

Why did God do it? So that, throughout eternity, there might be a special exhibit in heaven: 'So that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in his kindness towards us in Christ Jesus' (v. 7).

In the second book of Samuel (ch. 20) we are told that the rascally old Joab committed the appalling offence of assassinating Amasa, the recently appointed commander of the forces under David, and Amasa lay on the ground in his blood. Anybody that came up stood still and looked at him. So, my Christian friend, when you get to eternity, I don't know how many other companies you will find there, but every angel that sees you will stop and look at you. 'This is somebody from that curious planet Earth, who rebelled against God. Out of the kindness of almighty God's heart he went and saved them. God's own Son was sent down, and there he was murdered and thus saved them.'

It's an incredible story. There was no salvation for angels that sinned, as far as we know. How can it be that God had mercy on men and women? The very angels of God will stop as they pass by you, and eternity will have this permanent exhibit of the riches of God's kindness towards you.

How did God do it and why?

How? Well, he did it all himself. Were there ever such lovely verses:

By grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. (2:8-9)

Look at their context. It tells me that I am not merely forgiven, but, in Christ, I already sit at the right hand of God now, and this vast triumph of God's grace was not by my merit. He did it, and did it all. Only he could do it, for I needed new life and how could any but the Creator do it? The creation had gone wrong: it needed re-creation.

Get a hold of it. These verses are not exhortation. They do not address themselves to us and say, 'You, who are sunk in the despondency of your sin, try to rise.' What a mockery such a thing would be. They tell the likes of me that, in Christ, I am already made alive and risen and seated, as joined to Christ, and God has done it from first to last. It is 'his workmanship' (v. 10).

Why? When God created Adam in the first place, he didn't create him to be a gentleman who sits at home and does nothing. No, God created him and then gave him a whole garden to develop, so that Adam should work and have Eve to work alongside him. God had already prepared those lovely works for them to do. You don't like gardening? Well, perhaps you haven't seen real gardens! When God planted a garden, it was such a lovely gift to be given,

⁸ J. Denham Smith (1817-1889).

a garden to look after. First of all, God gave Adam life—Adam didn't work in the garden in order to get life. He had to be created first, then given life, and then he worked in the garden.

'We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them' (2:10). God has given us new life and seated us with Christ in the heavenlies, all of his own creatorial grace. As bankrupt sinners we just have to take it as an act of faith. It doesn't mean that when we get home to heaven we shall be sitting around doing nothing with our feet up—that is not meant to be true even now. The doctrine of God's grace is not that we go and do nothing. It is that, having given us life, God has already prepared a programme of delightful works, both here and hereafter, for us to engage in. And with the works he gives the ability.

I wonder what those works are going to be when I get home to glory. If they are going to be anything like the garden of Eden they will be captivating. For myself, I still hope it won't be a garden because I don't know about gardens! But I leave it to God's good imagination that the works he has prepared for me to walk in will be of the same dimension and quality as the grace of his salvation.

By way of practice there are already some works we could be doing, and all of us know what they are!

Shall we pray.

Our Father, we have dwelt long at thy word. The memory now, from our advantage point of salvation, of what we once were chills our very hearts. But at the same time it magnifies within us thine inexhaustible and infinite grace. Now through Jesus Christ our Lord we offer thee the gratitude of our hearts. The triumphs of thy grace turn our very sinning into an eternal exhibit of the riches of thy grace.

As now we bow gratefully before thee, we pray that thou wilt not allow our gratitude to run away fruitlessly into the sand and come to nothing. Help us to find those good works that thou hast before prepared that we walk in them. By thy grace help us to do them now, as thou shalt for all eternity. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Movement Two: The Role of Christ in History (2:11–4:16)

1A. Christ's Preaching to Jew and Gentile (2:11–22)

Readings: Ephesians 2:11–22; 3:14–17; 4:4–9; 6–12, 16

We must now begin in earnest the study of the great second movement of thought in Ephesians. We would do well, therefore, to spend a little time surveying some of the leading themes in the movement. It too deals with one of the major purposes of God.

The first movement presents God's purposes in these terms: *The purpose of God in creation* — 'that we should be before him in love, with the status and ability of sons of God' (1:4–5).

The second major movement of thought very soon introduces us to another of God's purposes: *The role of Christ in history*.

God has determined to make himself room in time and space: room to have a dwelling-place that the almighty God, Creator of the universe, might himself enter into the creation he has made, and there display his glory and make known his personality by means of localizing his presence somewhere within his creation.

1. Christ's preaching to Jew and Gentile: Therefore, the very first paragraph of Movement Two (2:11–22) ends by telling us that God's purpose is that there should be a building, 'joined together, [that] grows into a holy temple in the Lord'; having 'preached peace' to both Jew and Gentile (v. 17). It goes on to remind us that each little bit of building in that temple, such as the believers here in this church in Ballyhackamore as they are brought to Christ and built into that great scheme, already forms 'a dwelling place for God through the Spirit' (vv. 21–22).

2. Prayer for apprehension and knowledge: The second paragraph of Movement Two (3:1–21) likewise reminds us, through the words of Paul's prayer, what God's continuing purpose for believers is. Paul is praying for those who are already believers, and who already know something of the indwelling of Christ in their hearts. He prays for them nevertheless, that God would grant them to be strengthened in their inner being by his Spirit to this end: that Christ might dwell in their hearts (vv. 16–17). We are still thinking of that great purpose of God to make room for himself within his creation, and now in the hearts of his believers.

3. Triumph over the opposition: The third and final paragraph in this movement (4:1–16) reminds us that there is one body, even as there is one God and Father of all, who is not only over all and through all, but is also in all (vv. 4–6).

God made for himself a dwelling place in his own creation

So here we are brought face to face with that incalculable wonder that the transcendent Lord of time and space has been pleased to intervene in his own creation and enter it and make himself there a dwelling place. Perhaps, at first sight, the wonder of it does not fully come home to our hearts, and that for two reasons.

In the first place, we are used to the idea. We have known it for such a long time, ever since we knew anything. Since the day when we opened the heart's door and invited the Lord Jesus in, we have known about this glorious plan. Familiarity, while it has not bred contempt, has perhaps reduced some of the wonder of it.

Secondly, the wonder of it may not have come home to our hearts because we have not always stopped to think about what it involves; and even when we try to think, we very soon find ourselves running up against problems and wonders that surpass our very understanding and ability to conceive of them.

But let me 'stir up your sincere minds' just for a moment. This business of God dwelling within his own creation—what a wonder it is! I suppose all of us find it very easy to see at once that the universe in which we live was created by God. Because we understand that, we understand that the universe had a beginning. Then we understand that there must have been a time when the universe did not exist. God always was: even before the universe existed, he existed. He had no beginning; he is the eternal God. No one had to create him, he was the self-existent, eternal, almighty Lord. There came a point when he was pleased to create the universe, and so the universe began. That is very easily understood.

I wonder what you would say to me, if I asked you a simple question? 'Where was God before he created the universe?'

That was not meant to be a trick question, but did I hear some of you say, 'Well he was in heaven, of course'?

Was he? Before he created anything, he was in heaven? Wait a minute; are you telling me that heaven is as eternal as God is? I was asking you, where was God *before he created anything at all*? Did he have to create heaven as well, or is heaven a thing like God himself, equally self-existent and eternal, without beginning? Some people talk as though heaven were like that.

Let us think of, say, a Mr Jones. We cannot think of him without thinking of some place for him to be in. He is in his study, or he is in the kitchen, or he is in the office, or he is in the field. In fact, if you try to think of Mr Jones without thinking of a place for Mr Jones to be in, you get yourself in a muddle

In consequence, when we start to think about God, some of us find it very difficult to think about God without thinking of some kind of a place for God to be in. But when you think more deeply, that's rather silly. For there are not two things self-existent and equally eternal: God, on the one hand, and then some place for God to be in, on the other. There is only one eternally self-sufficient, self-existent, and that is God himself. The very heaven of heavens he had to create, which is why Solomon is talking more prose than poetry when he says that the very heaven of heavens 'cannot contain you' (1 Kgs 8:27). The highest heaven there is, is but the created heaven that he himself was pleased to make.

The wonder to which these passages call our attention again is that the self-existent Lord has been pleased not only to create a heaven, but to create a universe, including our planet,

and has deigned himself to come into it. That is a tremendous marvel. When eventually we come round to seeing that he has not only come into our world, but the bit of time and space that he has chosen to dwell in is your heart, your personality, then the wonder of it surpasses anything that we could possibly express.

The formation of the Body of Christ

The second major movement of thought will likewise draw our attention to another theme: the formation of what the New Testament calls the Body of Christ. That too is a wonder—not of course unrelated to the first. What a magnificent thing it is! The wonder of it fills Paul with joy and gladness. He goes on to explain what God has done: ‘This new man that Christ has created, there was never the like of it before. God has not merely taken Gentiles and added them in their thousands to the Jews; he has taken Jew and Gentile and made out of the two of them one absolutely brand new thing, one new man.’

If you probe what God has been doing since the times of Jesus Christ, you will come across a novelty, the like of which neither heaven nor earth had seen before: a new kind of a thing. In the first paragraph it is called ‘one new man’ (2:15); in the second ‘the body’, a body in which Gentiles are fellow members just like the Jews (3:6). In the third paragraph, it is called ‘the body of Christ’ (4:12).

What wonders this involves. First of all, as chapter 4 reminds us, it involved first of all the coming of Jesus Christ our Lord into the world. The marvel of his descent: “‘He ascended”, what does it mean but that he had also descended . . .’ (v. 9). This was a staggering new thing: that the almighty transcendent Lord, who made space and time, should himself become human. Oh, the wonder of that body of Jesus Christ: his literal physical body that you could have measured as so many feet long and so many inches wide. Without ceasing to be the transcendent Lord of space and time, transcendent still he humbled himself and became human and had a body that you could measure in terms of space and time.

As if that was not wonder enough, there is a bigger one! The Bible tells us that when he rose again from the dead and ascended he did not go back simply where he was before. Yes, he ascended where he was before, but now, being the transcendent Lord, he remains human still. The doctrine of the incarnation and the ascension teaches us this: there is somewhere in God’s heaven still that human body that is Jesus Christ our Lord. The incarnation has not been undone. The very Godhead has been changed, and changed eternally, as the Son of God has become man and remains man still. Though he has ascended far above all heavens, he is still involved in space and has a human body still.

As though that were not wonder enough, now we are told that we who have trusted Christ, be we Jew or Gentile, by faith we have been created in Christ one new man, and have been so joined to the Lord Jesus that he and we form one Body. The universe shall yet see this surpassing wonder unveiled—Christ and his people forming a new kind of personality in God’s universe, a corporate personality that is Jesus plus all who trust him in one Body.

The reality of progress within history

The third leading theme I would like you to notice with me, as we peruse the second major movement of thought, is that everywhere throughout its three paragraphs it breathes the wonder and excitement and reality of progress, genuine progress. For in this second movement of thought, we are not thinking merely of God's creation, we are thinking of God's ways in history. A very interesting thing is that when God set his heart upon having this dwelling place *within* creation, God himself did not try to do it all at once. But God has set himself limited goals in the different epochs of history, and as one age has given way to another God has moved the project on and moved it up.

It is an exciting thing to look back in history, and say: 'Yes, there was an age and time when the dwelling place of God was only made of gold and silver and precious stones, glorious in their array, but that is all it was. Now another age has dawned and the purpose of God has been moved on and there has been genuine progress. Now we've reach a stage when God has a dwelling place within space and time, but it is a *spiritual* dwelling place. That does not mean that it does not have a material content. It does; but the material content this time is human bodies and human personalities. This time it is not limited to a city like Jerusalem; it is universal. Chapter 2 reminds us that we have not yet seen the finished product. The real big aim and end and object, that final Temple, is only in process of being built, and the completion of the project awaits the dawning of a greater age.

Progress! Why should we bother to notice it? I wonder what it means to you, this idea of progress in history? Perhaps you do not like history to start with, so you are not interested in any progress in history. If so, I suggest to you that that is a little bit of a pity. You will find that there is nothing in this universe that stands still. Nothing! You sit as still as you can, but you are still moving at a colossal rate. The planet is taking you through space. You cannot be still. Where is it going with you? The whole universe is moving. Where is it going? Is it making any genuine progress, or is it just moving? There are days when I seem to be moving a lot, but making no progress—just going round and round in circles, getting largely nowhere! Is our universe getting anywhere, or is it just moving?

What progress our scientists have made in the last one hundred years! What an age to be living through to have seen the progress; and now in our day and generation they are making strides in the understanding of our universe the likes of which our fathers never dreamed of. Geometrical progression, for instance, till it leaves us stunned and we wonder what 1991 will be like, if they have got so far in 1981! All this great progress—tell me, is it real progress? Or is the whole thing empty and doomed to destruction?

What is your view of life? If you are a mechanic, is it worth trying to improve the car engines you are working on, or do you think that the movement of history is nonsense and meaningless, and it doesn't matter whether you go forward or backward? What is your view of history?

My view of history is that our blessed Lord Jesus is going to be the heir of all things—history included. Yes, this is a fallen world: a lot of its progress has been engineered by men who do not know God, and some who do not care to either. But the God who made our world is behind its history and there is such a thing as genuine progress in human life, and Christ

will be the heir of all things, human progress included. The world is not just going to go out as a failure. Progress is real.

Whether or not you are interested in history, you are a part of it! They may never write a book about you, but you are part of history.

'Mrs. Smith, just tell me who you are. Are you merely the woman who sits here during the time I'm talking to you?'

'Oh, no, I am more than that,' you say. 'I am a little wrinkled now and not as strong as I was, but I can remember myself when I was a vigorous young lady, beautiful beyond description, and I could have run five miles with anybody!'

'You can remember that, can't you? You have made a bit of—would you call it *progress*? Is it that you are some different woman? What are you?'

What a marvellous thing a human personality is; you cannot put it in a box. It's a thing that's got a history. To describe Mrs Smith, you'll have to take a big chunk of history, because she fills it. Has all that has gone by been lost?

You say, 'Certainly not!'

Mrs Smith will say, 'I was born again on 5th June 1891 and that bit is not going to be lost! No, thank God, it will not be lost.'

'What is more,' says Mrs. Smith, 'since that date in 1891 when I got converted I have made a lot of progress.'

I hope so, and that is not going to be lost either, is it? Tell me, does it matter how you live as a believer? Since Mrs. Smith got converted in 1891 she has made a lot of progress. Here is another good man and, since he got converted in 1892, he has not made much progress. Does it matter? Or when they get home to the Lord in heaven, will God wave a wand and the good woman and the good man will appear equally the same, whatever progress they made, or didn't make, on earth. Tell me, does history matter? Does time matter? Does progress matter?

Progress is eternally valid

Chapter 4 gives us the answer. History and time do matter eternally, for this great Body of Christ that is in process of being made is minute by minute growing, and it is growing by that which every little piece supplies (v. 16). That means my little piece; and as I grow and I help my fellow believers grow, the progress that is being made is eternally valid. God is pleased to work out his purposes in history through time by means of gradual progress. It will make an eternal difference, my brothers and sisters, whether you have progressed in the things of God or not.

Doubtless, you will tell me: 'When I see the Lord Jesus I shall be like him. John says that when we see him we shall all be like him' (1 John 3:2).

And so you will—what there is of you! Some of us will have grown and made progress, as chapter 4 tells us, and we shall be like Christ. Some of us will not have made much progress, but what little there still is of us will be like Christ nonetheless.

It is then for these exceedingly practical reasons that I would like us all to notice this leading theme of progress in time, in history, in the ways of God that so marks this second great movement. It proclaims God's purpose within history, and therefore his developing and progressive works, and it fills history with hope. It is the mark of a Christian, now genuinely

converted to Christ, that whereas before he was without hope in the world—had no goal; now in Christ he has a solid ground for hope.

Christ's preaching to Jew and Gentile (2:11–22)

Now let us come to the beginning of that first paragraph in chapter 2:

Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called 'the uncircumcision' by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh made by hands—remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise . . . (vv. 11–12)

Paul exhorts us to look back to pre-Christian days. Not so much to the time before our particular and personal conversion but to the *pre-Christian times*, and he invites us to observe that God has not tried to do everything at once. In pre-Christian times things were different from what they are now. In those times Gentiles were called *the uncircumcision* by those of *the circumcision* and they had no immediate place in the ways of God.

What is circumcision all about?

It was one of God's early ways with men, but by no means the first. He called out a Gentile by the name of Abraham, converted him and made himself known to Abraham as the living God. 'The God of glory' appeared to Abraham (Acts 7:2–3), showing up the falseness of the idols of the Gentiles, and brought Abraham out as a pilgrim and a stranger, owning God—the living God—to be his God.

From Abraham God produced a race of men by physical descent, and every male in that descending race was required of God to be circumcised. So there came into existence something new. There had been many nations before, but there had never been a Hebrew nation before. God, who is always doing new things, made a new beginning. Oh that we could get our Gentile prejudice out of our hearts and minds and enjoy this. What was God doing? He was coming in at a point when you would have thought that everything was almost lost, and he was making a new beginning towards achieving his purpose.

Men had known God before Abraham. The Bible does not tell us that the Jews were the only people that ever knew God. That would be nonsense. The men before the flood had known God: great men of faith like Abel and Enoch had known God and walked with God. At the time of the flood there was Noah and his family; and after the flood there were people who knew God and walked with God. The Jews were not the first to know God, nor were the Jews the first to have a true religion. Abel had one! God showed to Abel the whole business of sacrifice, and Abel was not a Jew. After the flood the Bible introduces us to a man called Melchizedek. Obviously he was not a Christian, nor was he a Jew. Yet he was a priest of the Most High God and knew the living God (Heb 7:1). He had a ritual that he could use in the service of God that God owned and God blessed, and God used his ministry to bless Abraham. The Bible does not tell us that the Hebrews were the first people that ever got to know God. Certainly not! God had made himself known to men.

But in those days, now speaking generally (not of every Gentile in particular), mankind had departed from God. As Paul puts it, 'knowing God, they did not choose to retain the knowledge of God in their hearts but changed the truth of the glory of God into a lie.' And they began to liken the eternal God to a man, or sometimes to insects and creeping things and animals, and lower still (see Rom 1:21–24).

Someone might say: 'In those far off days, some of those nations were very enlightened and had great moral codes. Look at the laws of Hammurabi.'⁹

Yes, I have looked at them. Of course they had great moral codes; God has nowhere said that people did not understand morality before the Hebrews came along. Right from the very first they had a conscience, and from the earliest days they had laws to regulate society and a sense of right and wrong. But what happened? By and large they forgot God and, instead of the true God, turned to idols. What happened next? Their moral laws went on, and as far as their morality went they were quite decent people—for a while.

Just like many people in Belfast today. Their parents are believers, they were brought up to love their neighbours as themselves, but now they have rejected the knowledge of the true God. They do not want anything to do with God; but they are still concerned about morality, aren't they?—having a fair deal at work and looking after the neighbours. For a while, when men reject the knowledge of God they still carry on the morality that went with it. The trouble was that, as the knowledge of God waned and men plunged more and more into the dark, morality went downhill, and evil, cruel and wicked things began to spread.

We see it going on around us today. Men and women give up the knowledge of the true God. You have got to have some god or other, so what god will they make? Let me tell you of some ancient gods.

There were some people who said, 'We cannot believe in the great Creator any more.'

All right, so who is in charge then?

'Chance', they said, 'it's all chance.'

Then they spelt chance with a capital 'C', and made Chance into a goddess.

'No, no!' said other people. 'It is not Chance; the whole universe is determined by fate.'

And they made Fate the ultimate goddess that controls everything.

Ask your friend at work who doesn't believe in God, 'Who controls everything?' If he is a learned scientist, he might say that the whole thing is pre-determined. It is programmed and we are nothing more than computers with bits of chemicals strung together. We are pre-programmed and, though you might appear to be free, you are in fact living in a mechanistic universe and have no free will. Ultimately you are what the chemicals make you and the whole thing is determined mechanistically. Well, that is just the same old idolatry as it ever was!

Another person, who has not thought so deeply, will say: 'I don't think there's anybody in control. It's all chance and when your number comes up, that's it!'

And what's wrong in thinking like that? What has always been wrong with idolatry! When people get lost in idolatry they become prisoners. Is it true that it is all pre-determined? Are

⁹ Hammurabi (1810–1750 BC) was the sixth king of the First Babylonian Dynasty. He is known for the Code of Hammurabi, one of the earliest surviving codes of law in recorded history.

you but a machine and your personality is only a thing? Well then, if we get a clever engineer along who can adapt your brain by putting a few screws tight that were loose, we could make you run a bit better couldn't we? And if you are only a machine we can do what we like with you, as I do with my car. It is only a machine and it does not have any right to protest: it has to suffer what I do with it. And if you are only a machine we can do what we like with you—and the man of sin will (2 Thess 2:3).

You say: 'I can't believe that! It robs me of all my personality if I am but a machine.'

All right—you are a *personality* and you have a free will—who is in charge of that? Your little decisions cannot control the whole lot, so who does?

You say, 'It is all by chance.'

Well then, it does not matter what you decide. Whichever way you go you are trapped and dehumanized, and the meaning is taken out of history. Oh the terror of idolatry, when men lose the sense of the true and living God!

Why God raised up Israel

It was not to spite those Gentiles that God raised up Israel. It was in God's great mercy he raised them up to protest against the idolatry of the other nations and to preach the gospel to the Gentiles, by making himself known to Abraham and revealing himself through that special nation to the world at large. That was his idea, but first of all he had to start with Abraham and then develop the nation.

When God thought of making himself known through Abraham he faced another problem. The nations had their temples. Many of them by this time were utterly corrupt: some of them even with human sacrifices, sacrificing little innocent babies on altars to grotesque images. Temples filled with prostitutes in the name of religion, deifying sex—like our modern world does.

'Well,' says God, 'if they want to know what God is really like, we shall have to shut out that kind of stuff. I shall have to have a temple where only Jews may come, and among the Jews only priests may come. We must put a wall round it and isolate it to keep it from the horrible corruption and perversion of Gentile religion, to show men what the true God is really like, and what his service is like.'

That was not to spite Gentiles; it was God's way of reacting in his mercy to men.

So he chose Abraham, developed the Hebrew race, and he put a wall round them. By definition, and as a result, those who were not circumcised Hebrews in those days were outside. Paul is just relating the fact; he is not being rude. They were separated from the Messiah, for God had promised that through the Jews one day the Saviour of the world would come. He had not promised it to any of the Gentiles. Read the Gentiles' own history books: they do not have any hope in a coming Messiah.

Ask Plato. He was a wise old man. We owe him a tremendous lot, but ask him what hope he has. He hasn't got any. He reckons that this world is a poor place, the human body is a pretty poor thing, and it would be wise to get out of it as soon as you can into some world beyond. He has no hope for this world.

Ask the Stoics, then, what their hope is. They are pretty wise as well. What is their hope? Well, their hope is that the world goes on like it is doing now, and one of these days will come

the final conflagration and it will all be burned up. And when it has been burned up we will start all over again exactly as it was before, with all the same details as before. I am glad that I am not a Stoic! Imagine seeing the whole show through again in every detail. Would you like to live your life over again in every detail? I would prefer progress, if there is any, not just repeating the same old thing all over again.

Ask the Epicureans. They were evolutionists. They believed in the atomic theory—they invented it, or took it over. What is their hope? Well, they will tell you that *matter* is eternal. It is just going on and on and on and on forever.

‘What! The same world as it is now?’

Yes!

‘Going on forever? Is it not going to improve?’

No, because the whole thing is by chance.

As Paul says of the Gentiles, they were without Messiah, without any hope of a coming Saviour, ‘*having no hope . . .*’ (see 2:11–12).

It is perhaps the most terrible thing that you can say of your neighbour, if he is not a believer in the Lord Jesus, that he has no hope—no solid hope for the development of the world.

The political parties will soon be round our doors again. They will have their programmes and tell us how they are going to improve things. We have heard it many times. Our Communist friends will tell us that the very laws of history guarantee that one of these days the great utopia will come. But the laws of history are contradicting the Communists nowadays, are they not? One of the saddest things that you can say about Gentiles without God is, they do not have any real hope.

Then Paul says, ‘*. . . and without God in the world*’. At best they knew about him dimly, but had no immediate access to his presence. And there was even worse than that. They were ‘*alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise*’ (v. 12). Because of it there grew up on both sides an antipathy one towards the other. The Israelite, as he looked out upon the uncircumcised Gentile, came to despise him in all the folly of his idolatry. The Gentile, as he saw the Jew professing this great religion but in his daily work being a Pharisee of the worst kind—proud and breaking the very law he preached—grew angry and an enemy of the Jew. So that, at long length, it looked as if the whole thing was going to fail in its purpose. Indeed, the Jews failed so terribly that in the end God had to get rid of them; send them off to Babylon and then to Assyria. Finally, he let the Romans turn them out altogether.

Was it all a failure?

No, it was not! Well then, what was the purpose and value in that period of God’s dealings in history? It served this tremendous purpose: making God known and establishing who was the true God.

‘How was that, if the Jews failed?’ you may ask.

Go back to Old Testament days and consider all the nations: their religions, their laws and their literature. I can guarantee you one thing: when you come to the Jew you will find something unique. In his sacred literature, the Old Testament, right from the very first word

you will find the true and only God. Monotheism preached, pure and simple, in vivid contrast to all the other nations with their polytheism and idolatry.

I must therefore ask myself, where did these Jews get this marvellous idea that there is just one God? Some will say that it gradually evolved. Well, that is precisely what it did not do! If you look at that same record, you will find that no sooner had God revealed himself to the Jews on Mount Sinai as the one and only true God, than they went away from him. They had to be hauled back again, and no sooner had he hauled them back again than away they went into the idolatry of the nations around them. The very people who have given us this Bible to witness to the fact that there is only one God, were all the time themselves slipping back into idolatry. By this you may conclude that the Jews did not invent the idea of one God.

They did not gradually evolve into it. If evolving was true, they were going the other way. They were given it! Here is God intervening in history to make himself known to this Jewish nation and to give us his word through them. Their very failure shows that the thing was in fact given of God, and certainly not their invention. If you read the Old Testament that God gave to the Jews, you will find it says that one day the Messiah would come, the Saviour of the world.

You say, 'How shall I know whether it is true and not a bit of Jewish nationalism? They had got it into their heads that they were God's favourites, so of course the Saviour of the world would be a Jew. Had the English written the Old Testament, the Saviour of the world would have been an Englishman for sure! Therefore, it was their simple pride that dared to tell the world that the Saviour of the world would be a Jew.'

Not so fast! When he came the Jews rejected him. To this present day, officially and as a nation, they reject Jesus the Messiah, who has proved to millions beyond doubt that he is the Saviour of the world. They did not invent the idea. Those centuries that God spent raising up that nation in history, giving them his laws and giving them hope, were years that have pointed conclusively to where you may find the true God within history.

GOD'S ONGOING PURPOSES AND OUR PROGRESS

But that is not the end of the story. When it seemed as if this too had all gone wrong, then God intervened in history once more and set going another move. That is the kind of a God he is. When the world nearly destroyed itself with its violence and sin God had to destroy it with the flood, but he showed that he had a new thing and invented an ark and began again. When the nations were lost in idolatry God did another new thing: he created the Hebrew race of Israel and began again. Next, when Israel had gone almost beyond repair, God intervened once more, began again and carried it one stage further.

If we are beginning to get the idea, we shall find our hearts rising with expectation and we shall say, 'I know what that new stage is and how wonderful it is compared with the previous stage. It was good, but now I can see its purpose and how much more wonderful this new stage is.'

Once you start talking like that you will find yourself presently saying, 'And if this present stage is wonderful, what will the next one be, when the Lord comes and God's great plan has been brought to fruition?'

When that begins to rise in your heart, then you will find that it has a practical implication in its tail. If God has been on the move; if the thing is even now moving forward, what

progress am I making? Since I got converted, what progress have I made? Is it visible? How much shall the progress of my life contribute to the final achievement of God's purpose?

The Lord encourage our hearts and give us visions of his purposes and vistas of the future, so that we might now give ourselves seriously to the business of making progress along with his purposes.

Shall we pray.

O God our Father, we bow before thee this evening in the impression that we are involved in things bigger than we ever thought of. While we thank thee each one personally for his or her own individual salvation, we bless thee that as we open our eyes we discover that we are part of a grand purpose that has filled history. We bless thee for the assurance in our hearts that life is not vain; all is not vanity; our labour in the Lord is not lost and fruitless. Because of our Lord Jesus Christ, thy Son—his coming and his resurrection, and his coming again—life is worthwhile and progress is real, and we are pushing forward to the coming of the great day.

We pray that our studies might therefore be for thy glory, and grant, Lord, that they will give us a new earnest to grasp the time, to redeem the time, to seize hold of life with both hands that we may make the optimum use of it in all its departments; that, be it in the natural and secular, or in the spiritual and sacred, we may make progress to thy glory, and that it may all contribute to the achievement of thy final purpose.

And Lord, we praise thee this evening that we do not have to wait for thy coming, but even now, here in this life, thou dost deign to dwell in our hearts through faith, and for this we praise thee. O Lord, find thyself ever greater room in our hearts and dwell therein through Jesus Christ thy Son; and not externally only, but internally there may be bigger progress as Christ gets more and more of us, to his satisfaction and to his praise. Through that same Lord Jesus Christ, we ask it. Amen.

Movement Two: The Role of Christ in History (2:11–4:16)

1B. Christ's Preaching to Jew and Gentile (2:11–22)

Reading: Psalm 68:14–18; Ephesians 3:1–13; 4:1–16

This is the second evening that we shall spend on the second movement of the Epistle to the Ephesians. We noticed that it extends from 2:11 to 4:16, and discovered that it has for its major theme *the purpose of God in history to form for himself a dwelling place within time and space*.

We reminded ourselves that even in its final form the great dwelling place of God is to be located in time and space. When John sees the vision of the holy city coming down from heaven, he is not only informed that this holy city shall form God his tabernacle, by the means of which he dwells among the nations of the earth, but John is given to see very clearly that that final and eternal dwelling place of God is not hidden away in some remote heaven, but comes down out of heaven toward earth—the linking place between heaven and earth. Very much, therefore, in time and space.

We were reminding ourselves too that our blessed Lord Jesus, who has given effect, and shall yet give greater effect, to this determination of God to have a dwelling place in time and space, has himself done a superbly wonderful thing, staggering beyond our wildest imaginations. *The uncreated God has taken a body and become flesh*, not only for the time of his sojourning amongst us here on this planet, but, praise God, in his ascension far above all heavens he retains that human body. Difficult as it is, and impossible for us mere creatures to explain how the infinite, uncreated God, transcendent over time and space, can yet have a body with its measurements, yet Scripture affirms it and we believe it. And the disciples, who just a moment ago felt his body and knew it was flesh and bone, and saw him go, were told that *that same Jesus would come with a glorified body*—but a body still of flesh and bone. So determined is God to have a dwelling place within time and space.

And therefore we noticed how this second movement in Ephesians is concerned with God's purposes in history. And we noticed further that when God set his heart on this great project of having a dwelling place, God didn't insist or attempt to have that purpose fully fulfilled all in one go, but was content to do it stage by stage; and that very design of God to come at this purpose stage by stage by stage is what gives to history its very interesting progress—real progress, permanent progress. It means that the progress we have noticed in history is not an illusion: not all comes to nothing in the end. It is real progress on all fronts and the ground of great hope for those who know the Saviour.

We noticed likewise that in the prior age, the age of God's special dealing with the Jew, God was content to have as a dwelling place a mere tabernacle made of gold and silver and

wood and cloth. After that he was content to have the more permanent temple built of stone. But then we noticed that in this age God's purpose has moved on. Not just with a bigger temple, just continuing with the same idea but enlarging it a bit, but with a new kind of a temple. There has been progress, not merely linearly; there has been a progress in category. In this age the exciting thing is, not that we have a bigger temple than Solomon thought up, or a bigger temple than Herod built; we have a different kind of temple. It is more magnificent than Herod's temple, as heaven is more magnificent than earth. Now God has a dwelling place in time and space still: a dwelling place in redeemed human personalities.

And the progress we can see between that age and this age sets us all agog. We don't necessarily want to go home to heaven tomorrow—though some of us wouldn't mind, but it sets us all agog to see the next great move. How we shall be surprised—just as you might have been surprised if you had been living in the Jewish age and read the stories about temples and things—to see that God's new invention is something bigger than in the Old Testament prophets. And when we see the great unveiling of the finished thing we shall be staggered with the newness and the unexpectedness and the wonder of the rise in category.

And of course, along with that, we also thought from Movement Two of the related topic: *the formation of the Body of Christ*. You won't read a word of that in the Old Testament. But now God's ways of dealing with men have progressed, and in this age God has done a new thing the likes of which nobody ever expected or heard of. And so we learned that God's ways are progressing, and it makes of history an exceedingly exciting thing, for you never know next what God has planned.

And then we spent a long time thinking about *God's ways with Israel in the past*. We noticed that, while God has been content to do things in stages, we are not to think that the early stages of his purpose were a kind of makeshift: do the best we can for the moment, but unfortunately it's not very good. Of course not! Every stage in God's working in history has been the product of divine and flawless wisdom: the very best that God could do for that particular age.

And so it was with God's ways in history with Jews, and we spent a long time thinking of the wisdom of God's ways with the Gentiles in that far off day when he called out Abraham and made from him a special nation called 'the circumcision' because that nation stood in relationship with God. We saw how it was God's protest, and yet at the same time a kind of gospel preaching to the nations around. It was his protest against their idolatry; his reaffirmation of what the living God is like. Through Israel and the law he gave them, God was protesting against the nations' uncleanness in which they were getting ever more deeply submerged.

At the same time it was God's indication that there was a progress in history, for he gave to Abraham the covenant of promise that one day through him and his seed the Messiah of the world would come, give Israel an outstanding inheritance in this world, and through the Messiah restore all things. That was the promise and revelation given to Israel, and it stood for centuries as a divine voice, a unique message, a veritable gospel in the world—a gospel that we still need. We still need to protest against idolatry and man's uncleanness, and ever more we need the affirmation in a world that's lost and doesn't have any hope that this is God's world. *God has a purpose, not just for some remote eternity: God has a purpose in this world.*

We also found that God's dealing with the nations in the time of Israel wasn't his final answer to mankind's need, and because it wasn't the final answer, but only one of the preliminary stages, it caused in its way (if you don't mind me saying so) some unfortunate results. It did it this way round: the very fact that God chose Abraham and started the new race from him, distinct from the other Gentile nations, emphasized *the distance between the Gentiles and God*. It wasn't God's fault: they had already gone away. It wasn't God who created the distance. Men had once known God, but not wanting to retain him in their knowledge they had gone into all their philosophical notions. Lost in their idolatry, they were already at a distance. But when God chose out Abraham and revealed himself to Abraham and the nation of the Jews, it emphasized the vast distance that had opened up between God and the Gentiles.

It emphasized also *the sinfulness of the Gentiles*. God didn't make them sinful, but when God gave his law to the people he had to say, 'Here is the true God: not there. Jehovah is the true God: not Baal, not Zeus, not Aphrodite, nor any other. Here is the true God, and likewise here is health, here is purity, here is love; these other things are perversions. He commanded his people therefore, through the law, that they didn't behave like the sinful Gentile nations around them.

The fact that God gave a covenant to Abraham with a promise to be fulfilled later on in history did but emphasize the sorry, drear fact that the Gentiles without God had no hope. It didn't mean that it was hopeless to get Gentiles saved. Thank God, it didn't mean that. Some did get saved. But it did emphasize the fact that, as far as history was concerned, the Gentiles had no hope. They had their philosophies, but none of them gave any real hope for this world; any more than their modern equivalents do, apart from God.

The difference the coming of Messiah made in the world

I should like to spend a very few moments on the end verses of chapter 2, and then move on to chapters 3 and 4. I want just to summarize what we began to look at, where the apostle describes the tremendous difference that has come about in God's actions and ways with men through the coming of the Messiah. You know this particular part very well indeed; and when we have grasped again and emphasized the tremendous step forward in God's dealing with the Gentiles that has been brought about by the coming into our world of Messiah, then we can go on to look at those other examples of progress in history that the work of God has taken since his coming, and so sharpen our hope and expectation for that next great step that shall take place *when the Lord shall come again and the great dwelling place of God in time and space shall be complete*.

What new moves, then, did Messiah make when he came into the world, particularly with regard to the Gentiles?

Abolishing the old

The first thing these verses tell us is that he abolished the distance (2:13). What volumes that tells us about the heart of God, a God who desired to dwell with men and in men. The sight of Gentiles going off into their perversions broke his heart, but the first thing that broke his heart was the

distance. He had it in his heart from all eternity not only to make man but to come and dwell in man. The thing that broke the very heart of God was the distance that opened up. Therefore, when the inspired apostle comes to tell of what Christ came to do, the very first thing he notices is that he abolished the distance: 'But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ' (v. 13).

Notice it is not now so much a question of *forgiveness*, though that is true. It is a case of *redemption*—notice the reference to the blood of Christ. But now it is not so much the redemption that has been bought for us; it is this great and marvellous fact that we have been brought near. All that terrible distance that his law had to emphasize has been done away through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

So near, so very near to God,
I cannot nearer be;
Yet in the person of his Son,
I am as near as he.¹⁰

Let us praise God for this, my brother, my sister. What would have happened to you had that distance remained? What would have happened if that great gulf had forever become *fixed*. But there came one, and he strode across the distance and paid the price of sin, and in him we are made near. Near enough for God to dwell in us.

He also abolished in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility (v. 14), and thus made peace between Jew and Gentile. (Not, of course, peace between Jew and Gentile in the world. The Palestinians still fight the Israelis and the Israelis still fight the Palestinians. There is no permanent peace except in Christ.) I will not take time to explain it here, but I must state dogmatically that I understand the Greek to say that the middle wall of partition was the *enmity* that has sprung up between Jew and Gentile. He has destroyed that; another bit of distance gone, another bit of separation gone. How did he destroy that enmity?

He abolished the law of commandments expressed in ordinances (v. 15). Let us be careful to consider in what sense he abolished it. He did not say that the law of God did not matter. He certainly did not say that the law of God was wrong. That law had fulfilled its special and very necessary function of pointing out man's sin, and still does. But the law could not save anybody. It could not save the Gentiles; it could not even save the Jews. We know it from our own personal experience that it is often the very law of God, that witnesses against our sin, that has the reaction of making us rebel against God; and not only to rebel against God, but to hate the very people that quote the law. Preachers are not all that popular in certain quarters. We do not like the people who probe our consciences and remind us that we are sinners.

There was added to it the sad fact that the very Jews, through whom God spoke the law, abused it. They imagined that they could get to God's heaven by keeping it, which showed how little they knew it. They paraded themselves as though they were superior to the Gentile, and with a curl of the lip they talked of those 'uncircumcised Gentiles', implying that they themselves were somehow better. You know what that did to Gentiles: they hated these Jews. They hated the God that they stood for, and the law that they stood for. Pride in Jew and

¹⁰ Horatius Bonar (1808-1889), 'A mind at perfect peace with God.'

enmity in Gentile had been the unfortunate result of that law. It was not the law's fault. But even had it not produced that result, it was no way of forgiveness, no way of closing the gap, no way of stopping the enmity.

Therefore, God's ways with men had to take a new step forward, and it did so in Jesus Christ, in his flesh, in his becoming human. In bearing the penalty of the law in his own body on the tree, he was able not only to pay the penalty of the law and thus uphold it, but put it aside as a way of salvation and open up the way of salvation by the grace and the blood of Christ, so that now Jew and Gentile can find salvation on exactly the same ground. 'For there is no distinction: for all have sinned', be they Jew or Gentile (Rom 3:22-23). Thank God, there is no distinction in this, that 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved' be they Jew or Gentile (Rom 10:13).

Creating the new

Jew and Gentile in one Body (v. 16). Then, of course, he has not only abolished the things our verses tell us but, like a good builder when he has demolished the bad things, he starts to build the good things. Having abolished the old, he started to create the new, and this was the very exciting bit. People had heard of forgiveness before, but they had never heard of this before. He took the Jew and he took the Gentile, and of the two he made *one new man* (v. 15). That was utterly revolutionary. Notice, he did not take the Jew and then say, 'we will add a lot of Gentiles to you'. If he had, the Jews would have said: 'Yes, but we were first here; we are the originals. Allow them to come in, but we were here first!'

God saw to it that nothing like that ever happened, because they were not there first. Oh yes, I know that they were first in history, but not in the Body of Christ. The Body of Christ is not old Judaism with a few Gentiles tagged on; it is an utterly new thing. He created one new man by baptising both Jew and Gentile in one Spirit into one Body (1 Cor 12:13).

Both reconciled to God through the cross (v. 16). Then he introduced them both to God. Do you see how the thought is going? We are thinking about God's purpose: God wanted a dwelling place in time and space. He had that old dwelling place in Israel with the tabernacle, the law inside it and the wall around it that kept Gentiles out. That could never be the final answer. God in a little tabernacle in a corner of the wilderness and a vast world lost to him? He not only wanted the old wall down and Jews and Gentiles in one new man, but here comes the purpose: they've got to be reconciled to God. On what grounds was he able to do the reconciliation? There was no privilege or superiority; they were both reconciled to God in one body. He introduced them to God on the same ground and reconciled them 'through the cross, thereby killing the hostility'.

Both have access in one Spirit to the Father (v. 18). Then, the crowning thing. If God wants to dwell amongst men, the opposite side of that coin is that men must have access to God. With the distance eventually covered the plan is now really progressing. God had set his heart upon having a dwelling place, a temple; and the foundation being laid, we are being built and are growing into a holy temple in the Lord (v. 21).

That is a crude summary of those verses, but what I want to get across is this idea of *progress*. Progress in God's ways with the Gentiles from one age to the next.

Chapters 3–4 will continue the story

We have been thinking now not of the Jewish age, but after that, the coming of the Lord Jesus. We have been thinking of his death at Calvary; how he rose again; and how through his apostles he came and preached (2:17). I like that little bit! It was not enough for the risen Lord that he had made the basis of salvation by dying at the cross; there were Gentiles out there in Asia Minor, in Rome, in Greece (and Ballyhackamore), and he was not prepared just to have the gospel made possible. 'And he came and *preached* peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near' — what a lovely term.

PROGRESS THROUGH THE PREACHING OF THE GOSPEL

I think of the man who wrote those words, the man who brought the gospel to Europe, the man under God to whom we owe our salvation. He paid so dearly for bringing it. Many a day, in Paul the apostle, the risen Lord by his Spirit came and preached (3:8). Still he comes. What a lovely thing: in office, in school, in preaching hall, through evangelists, through Sunday School teachers and Bible Class leaders, the risen Lord comes and he preaches, closing the distance between God and man.

Movement Two

2. *Prayer for Apprehension and Knowledge (3:1–21)*

Two more examples of this idea of progress

1. Progress in God's revelation through the preaching of the gospel (3:1–13)

In particular the progress in God's revelation that has taken place since our Lord Jesus went back to heaven. In chapter 3 Paul was about to encourage the believers by telling them that he was praying for them: that God's purpose might be realized even more fully in them, and that Christ might dwell in their hearts. He said, by inspiration: 'I, Paul, a prisoner of the Lord for you Gentiles' (v. 1), and then he was guided by the Spirit to break off, for it reminded him of his special ministry in history.

You will have a very difficult job to exaggerate the importance of Paul in history. I want to spend a few moments pressing home what Paul himself says here. It is exceedingly important for our Christian faith; for the fact is that there was a great deal of truth that our Lord himself never spoke about while he was here on earth. Nor did he speak about it in those forty days before he left (as far as we know). But he told his disciples before he left them that the Holy Spirit would come, and when he came he would lead them into all truth. Paul is now pointing out to us that what our Lord promised has now been fulfilled in God's holy apostles and prophets like Paul and others, and supremely in Paul.

You say, 'what kind of things?'

Well, take this matter that the Gentiles are fellow members of the Body. You will not read of the Body of Christ in the Old Testament. It is not there. There were no meetings for Abraham to go to. In Moses's day they went to some meetings. They knew about forgiveness; they knew about redemption, but they had never heard of the Body of Christ. Isaiah knew a bit more. He talked of that glowing time when Messiah should come and all the Gentiles should come to Messiah, but even Isaiah never talked about the Body of Christ.

'What about our Lord, then?'

Read the first three Gospels. There is not a word about the Body of Christ.

'Ah,' you say, 'when we come to John, the Lord Jesus does not actually use the term *Body of Christ*, but he is talking about the same thing.'

I dare say he is. Those 'other sheep' that have got to come, and 'there will be one flock' (10:16)—that is getting near it. Then what he told us about himself dwelling in us, and we in him, and God in him, and he in the Father, and the Father and the Son in us, 'that they might

be one' (see ch. 17). He does not actually use the word *Body*. That is right at the end of his ministry, in an upper room, from the lips of someone who didn't go anywhere near a Gentile except on one or two occasions. It was no accident, but by divine intention that God's revelation did not finish with the ascension of our blessed Lord.

But our Lord promised there would be a further revelation after his ascension. It would be by his Spirit through his holy apostles and prophets. As I said, what an exciting thing it turned out to be, how the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the Body and fellow partakers of the promise. Why did God not talk about this wonderful thing before? Because it would not have made sense before!

Just let's go back a bit. The promise was given to the Jews and they were made heirs. Genesis 15 will tell us about it, as God covenanted by promise to Abraham and to his *seed*. He made those glorious promises of what the New Testament eventually describes as world inheritance to Abraham and to his offspring. The old Jew then said, 'Yes, that is us: Abraham is our forefather, and we are the seed. And as for those Gentiles, they are hopeless! They are just not in it. There is the covenant—read Genesis 15. It is a legal document, signed sealed and settled. There is not a breath in it of any Gentile inheriting anything. They have not got a chance.'

Well then, how do we Gentiles get into that Old Covenant? Don't say we don't get into it, for Paul says we do. How do we get in? Listen to the covenant again, the covenant of promise. It is to Abraham *and to his seed*: and *the seed is Christ* (Gal 3:16). We have been baptised into Christ, if we have trusted the Saviour. We are in Christ; we have put on Christ. If we are in Christ, then we too 'are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise' (v. 29).

Staggering, isn't it? But let us think out how that can possibly be, and when you ponder it you will begin to see the wonder of God's progress. When Jesus Christ our Lord came into our world, he came as a real man, but not just as a man, a different kind of man. He came not merely as a son of man but as The Son of Man. And because he is the Son of Man, he is able to incorporate all those who trust him into himself. We've never seen such a thing. What do I mean? God had new ideas. He is going to make a new kind of a man. Jesus Christ is the Lord from heaven, a life giving Spirit. The marvel about him is that he is able to incorporate men and women into himself, so that you can literally say of them that they are 'in Christ'.

Let us think of that for a moment. The world has had some great teachers and religious leaders. It has had Plato, for instance. I find him very interesting. He had some very good ideas, but even those who admire him most would never talk of being *in Plato*, would they! It would not make any sense. The Muslims revere their prophet, but even they never talk about being *in Mohammed*. It would not make sense. But with Jesus Christ there has come something fantastic and unique. Not merely did he come and talk; he is a new kind of a man, who can incorporate men and women into himself. Whether you know it or not, if you have trusted Christ you are *in Christ*. That ancient covenant, in which God promised to give certain things to Abraham and his seed, will be given to you—*because the Seed was Christ and you are in Christ*.

That surprised the Jews to no end! They had not reckoned on that, but then you never can keep pace with God, can you? He is always doing more than you expect. Thus has he shown

us a magnificent salvation—‘Once in Christ, in Christ forever.’¹¹ An individual still, a personality still, but not just an individual: salvation has done something more for us than I could possibly describe, or you take in. You are no longer your little self, by yourself. When you said ‘Yes’ to Christ, you were consenting that Christ took you as an individual personality and incorporated you into himself so that you and he became one.

To tell us about that wonder and all its unfathomable implications, God had to wait until the Lord Jesus had risen from the dead. What sense would it have made for Jesus of Nazareth to say, for instance to the woman with the issue of blood, ‘Trust me, you could be in me.’ How could she be in him as he walked the streets of Canaan? That would not have made any sense. It had to wait until the Lord had come, died, risen again, gone back to the Father and sent the Spirit, that any talk of the Body of Christ would make sense.

Therefore, what Paul preaches is not just a little bit tacked on to the gospel. It is one of those next stages forward in God’s progressive revelation to men. Paul says: ‘I want you to get a hold of it, you Gentiles in particular, for you scarcely realize yet how important I am. I am in prison for you, and you might think (particularly if you listen to the Jews and some rather strange brethren), that I am an oddity. James is not altogether sure yet! But it is for your very glory that I am suffering; for what God has made known to me is by a dispensation that he has given me. To me, though least of all the saints, he has given this particular place in history, to make known this glorious new thing by the revelation of God’ (Eph 3:8).

It was such a new thing that even the principalities and powers in the heavens look on it aghast. It was something that the archangel Michael didn’t know; and it overjoys me that there is something that the devil did not know. The Bible tells me that there are two things which none of the princes of this world knew: the hidden wisdom of God—‘for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory’ (1 Cor 2:8). And they did not know this great new thing that God was doing in the middle of creation, making a new kind of man, this new thing called the Body of Christ. They see it with wonder and they are agog with expectancy as they see the man Jesus raised above them, still human. And as they look at men and women on earth, they are told that these have been united with the Son of Man, and in God’s purpose they too are destined to be above angels, principalities and powers. The novelty of it causes the angels themselves to bow and scrutinize and think and magnify the variegated wisdom of God (Eph 3:10).

Why should I bother to notice this matter of progress in revelation?

Because there are many folks who deny it, that’s why! You more mature and solid Christians have never come within miles of liberalism, but some of us have to come near its blasts in schools and elsewhere, and hear people saying, ‘Ah, that was only Paul.’ One learned philosopher/theologian has said that in the Old Testament and in the New, what we have is not the word of God; we have the word of certain elders in the churches. The common basis of criticism is: ‘That is what Paul said, but that was simply his response to the Christ event’ (whatever the *Christ event* was), ‘but of course Paul could be wrong. We do not necessarily have to agree with Paul’s response; we can have our own response to the Christ event.’

¹¹ John Kent (1766-1843), ‘Sovereign grace o’er sin abounding.’

You will find them saying: 'Paul tells us in so many words of Christ's pre-existence, but Jesus did not claim pre-existence.'

You say: 'He did. He said it in John 8: "Before Abraham was, I am"' (v. 58).

They say: 'There you are again, that is what John says.'

So they do not accept what John says and what Paul says as the revelation from the risen Lord. It is merely the response of certain early Christians to what they are pleased to call 'the Christ event'. I have even heard it with my own two ears from people who never did claim to be theologians. Present them with some command of Paul in the New Testament, about being baptised or something, and they will say, 'But that is only what Paul says.'

Oh, really! So you do not believe this bit of progress that, after the Lord rose and went back to heaven, there came a further revelation by the Spirit through the holy apostles and prophets? You want to be careful if you should think that for our Lord is on record as saying, if you do not accept them, you do not accept him either (Luke 10:16). The church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone (Eph 2:20). If you do not get built on the foundation layer of the apostles and prophets, perhaps you are not in the same building—and there is only one true building.

2. Progress in the Holy Spirit's work in the hearts of believers (3:14–21)

We are still thinking of God's great purpose that runs through this section, that God will make himself a dwelling place in the hearts of men. Already that purpose is achieved, because when anyone receives Christ, Christ comes into him or her. And yet Paul tells us here that he is praying—and he makes it explicit—for people who are already believers. They already have the Holy Spirit, but he prays that God would give them the workings of the Holy Spirit in their hearts, so that they may be strengthened in their inner being by that Holy Spirit. What for? 'So that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith' (vv. 16–17).

You say, 'But Christ is dwelling in my heart'.

Well, of course he is. If you are a believer, Christ is dwelling in your heart. God's desire is to dwell in us; but do you think God is satisfied with what he has got yet? You would be disappointed, and you might have your doubts about heaven, if he were! No; the final product will be that I shall be 'filled with all the fullness of God' (v. 19). All the glory of God and all the character of God will find its expression in me until there is not a part of me that he does not fill.

When they built the tabernacle and presented it to Moses, Moses erected it and presented it to God, then God came down and filled it. There was no room for anybody else and the priests had to get out. God is not going to be content with us either, until his dwelling in us means that he has filled us in every part of our being and all the fullness of God is in us. It has not happened yet.

You say: 'It will happen when the Lord comes.'

So it will, my brother, but it had better start happening now. Why do you suppose the Lord has left us here and not taken us at once to heaven? We should not just be sitting around, wasting our time. The Lord has left us down here to do something. History is more real than that. The purpose of time is that we make progress. The years of our converted life are not to be frittered away by standing still. They are the time when, by God's Spirit, our hearts might

be strengthened; that Christ might come and take his abode ever more fully in our hearts. That is a process, and a process that takes a necessary preparation. It involves the strengthening of my inner being by God's Spirit, and it involves that I become more and more rooted in the love of God (v. 17).

I wonder how rooted in the love of God I am. When somebody has just given me a little more than I can take—stood on my little toe or something, you will find out how rooted in the love of God I am now. I lash out here and there with my tongue, and when asked to forgive, I say: 'No, I never will! I cannot afford to.'

You say, 'I thought you had made more progress than that'.

But I am not yet really absolutely secure in the love of God, so I am all on the defensive. I have not really got the sense in my heart of the overwhelming love of God, so I am afraid that you will find out that I am not one hundred percent a saint. Occasionally there is cheating and lying, and an unwillingness to forgive because I think I can't afford to, which comes from not being rooted and secure in the love of God.

'I pray for you,' says Paul, 'pray constantly for you that by his Spirit God will go on in this work of strengthening your inner being; that Christ might more and more and more dwell in your heart; that you, being rooted, might come to understand the tremendous breadth and length and height and depth of this great mystery that embraces both Jew and Gentile and all who will trust the Saviour, and that you might finally know the love of God and be filled with all the fullness of God.'

Some older believers have lived long enough to know the difference it makes. As the outside person has become a bit old and decrepit, inside there is a security now, a firmness. There is a calm; there is a rootedness in the love of God that was not always there. There are times when you get insights into the love of God that you would think were like a wave that would carry you over the border of time into heaven itself. We are meant to make progress. Of course, God will do more than we can ask or even think (v. 20). That does not mean we should take it for granted, but we too should bend our knees with Paul to pray that God would do this thing for us because eternity will soon be here and we have not a lot more time to pray.

The great final matter of progress

The progress that chapter 4 speaks of in the building up of the Body of Christ. We shall speak of that tomorrow, for the clock likewise makes progress and tells me that it is long since time I stopped.

Movement Two: The Role of Christ in History (2:11–4:16)

3. *Triumph Over the Opposition (4:1–16)*

Reading: Ephesians 4:17–32; 5:1–2

In the course of these studies, I have many times made the suggestion that there are three major movements of thought in the Epistle to the Ephesians. The first movement ends in 2:10, the second in 4:16, and the third with the end of the epistle itself.

Doctrine and practice in this epistle

I am aware that this disagrees with what you will find in many of the commentaries, which insist that the epistle is really divided into two parts. The first part, they say, comprises the first three chapters and deals with doctrinal matters; the second part, from 4:1 onwards, deals not so much with doctrine as with practical matters. Therefore, while I want to say that the first paragraph of chapter 4 (vv. 1–16) strictly belongs with what has immediately gone before, other commentators would say that 4:1 makes the break, and turns from what has gone before to things practical and their practical application in the Christian life.

Let me immediately say that this is not a matter over which I would want to fall out with any of my fellow-teachers, nor students either. It would be a foolish man who would become dogmatic about such things; and I do hope that my fellow teachers will not want to fall out with me but will bless me still in the name of the Lord in spite of my particular views. For, truth to tell, whatever movements of thought there are in this epistle, it is more like a work of music, which may have its slow movement, fast movement and any other movement, but none of the movements is a water-tight compartment. The themes that are to be heard in the major key in one movement are also still to be heard from time to time in a minor key in another movement.

To change the metaphor: it is like a tapestry, where a major theme will appear again in a different colour in another part of the tapestry. I do agree wholeheartedly with all those who would tell us that the first sixteen verses of chapter 4 have to do with practical matters. I even go so far as to agree with them when they say that verses 1–16 are integrally related to what follows. That can be proved. Look at 4:1: 'I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called'.

That emphasis on the practical walk of the believer reoccurs throughout the rest of this Epistle—4:17, echoing verse 1, says, 'This I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer

walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds.’ Chapter 5 verse 2 carries on the theme, exhorting us to ‘walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us.’ Chapter 5 verse 15 again insists on the same theme: ‘Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise.’ Those who would tell us that from 4:1 onwards Paul is dealing with practical things related to the believer’s walk have a good case. So we are all agreed.

But I just want to say that the first paragraph of chapter 4 is continuing and concluding the themes that have been the major themes throughout the second movement. On previous nights we have seen what these themes are. Movement Two has been concerned with *God’s plan in space and time to have a dwelling place*. As his plan has progressed in history, it has come to this time when God’s dwelling place is to be found in the hearts of his people, even in that wonderful thing that is the Body of Christ. His people are built together ‘in one body’; or, to change the metaphor, they are ‘being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit’ (2:16, 22).

So, this idea of God dwelling in us is continued in this paragraph. For example, it says, ‘One God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all’ (4:6). And the theme of *the Body of Christ*, which Movement Two has earlier introduced, is carried on at great length here (vv. 4, 12, 16). It is practical, yes, but practical as it is related to this matter of God’s dwelling place and the Body of Christ.

As well as that, it is carrying on what is a major theme in this second movement: the idea of *progress within history*. There is marked progress when we consider the difference between what God is doing now with Gentiles, and what he was doing in times before Christ came. There is progress in God’s revelation too. It not only progressed with the incarnation and the teaching of Christ on earth, but it is progressing even further with the ministry that has come down from the risen Lord through the holy apostles and prophets with things that were not even mentioned when Christ was on earth.

There is progress too in this business of God dwelling in the hearts of individual believers, as they are strengthened daily by the Holy Spirit in the inner self, so that Christ may increasingly dwell in the heart and take over occupation of the person. That is progress, real progress, and very necessary progress.

Progress in the building up of the Body of Christ

Now as we come to this final paragraph in the second movement, we find progress again. This time, not of Christ dwelling in the heart of the individual believer so much as progress in the building up of the Body of Christ. This is a practical matter; it is not just a theoretical matter. This great Body of Christ on which God has set his heart, and which is already in existence, is a something that is not yet complete, and for its completion God has given over this particular age in history. In God’s mind, time—that passes us by every second and carries us on—is supremely important, because it is now in time, in history, that the progress has to be made that is necessary if the Body of Christ is going to be complete.

The unity of the Body: unity that exists

So let us begin in this first paragraph of chapter 4, and consider this matter of the Body of Christ. We notice, if we give heed to the passage, that it is very much concerned with the *unity*

of the Body. In fact, it is concerned with two unities associated with the Body. In the early verses it is concerned with the unity of the Body that already exists: 'There is one body' (v. 4). It already exists. What we have to do is to 'maintain the unity of the Spirit' (v. 3). It already exists and we are to maintain it.

The unity of the faith: unity as a goal

Then, as we come to the end of the paragraph, Paul speaks of another unity. It is not a unity that already exists, but a unity that is set before us as a goal away out in the future: 'until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God' (v. 13). We have not attained it yet; it stands as an ideal, as a goal, and we press towards that mark. Here the necessity is that we resist all tendencies that would stop us arriving at that goal.

Triumph over the opposition

It is on this second unity that the apostle spends most of his time in this paragraph. Paul is particularly concerned here with the opposition that exists and works against the purpose of God. In the final paragraph in Movement One, when Paul was considering the purpose of God in creation, he turned to considering the opposition to God's purpose and how he majestically has triumphed over it (2:1–10). It was opposition consisting not only of our human rebellion, but of the very power of 'the god of this world' (2 Cor 4:4). Now, in the final paragraph of Movement Two, he recurs to this theme. It is now the opposition to God's plan and purpose within time to have a dwelling place. His goal at the end is that the Body of Christ will be complete.

It is exceedingly important that in this present time we make progress. But we are to know that there are great and powerful forces that, hour by hour and day by day, work against that purpose and seek to stop the attainment of that goal. We must be aware of it. We need also to be aware of the glorious provision God has made for the overcoming of that opposition, so that we may take advantage of it and, in spite of the opposition, grow and contribute to the final state and perfection of the Body of Christ.

When we come to the final paragraph of Movement Three, we shall find Paul again recurring to this theme of the opposition, and the great provision God has made for overcoming it.

The unity that exists

First of all, then, let us consider in this paragraph the unity that exists. 'There is one body and one Spirit—just as also you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call' (4:4). That is a fact, a reality. The danger is that, there being one Body, we shall allow ourselves to behave, if we are not careful, as if there were two or three. That would be a curious thing to do, but better Christians than we are have fallen into this trap. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one Body, one Spirit. That does not need to be engineered; it is a fact, a reality. The danger is that perhaps all of us will behave at times as though there were two or three Bodies. What we have to do, by God's grace, is to resist the temptation and maintain the oneness of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Paul tells us what it will take to do this. It will take a

tremendous lot of 'humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, and eagerness to maintain it' (see vv. 2–3).

We shall find, on occasions, that Christians are difficult to get on with. We may find that hard to believe! Two brothers in the Bible Study may have different analyses of the portion under consideration, and they perhaps suspect each other and think that the other brother is not on the right lines at all! Temperatures may rise. Or, he may not hold your prophetic views, and prophecy is your favourite topic in biblical matters, so he is suspect, is he not? And, at any rate, he rarely ever speaks on prophetic things; he usually speaks on the Holy Spirit. And you—you would go anywhere to hear someone speak on prophecy; you would not go anywhere to hear someone speak on the Holy Spirit.

At Corinth things were even worse than that (see 1 Cor 1:11–17). They were beginning to form cliques around their favourite preachers: I am of Paul; I am of Apollos; I am of Peter. Mercifully, Paul was able to nip it in the bud, and he did so with some strange and almost sarcastic questions. 'Is Christ divided?' 'Are there two Lords?' 'If there is only one Lord why do you behave as if there were two or three?' 'Was Paul crucified for you?' 'Were you baptised into the name of Paul?' There is only one baptism, so it is a good thing none of them was baptised unto Paul. What were they doing? They were behaving as if some of them were baptised to Paul, some of them to Peter, and some of them to Apollos. It would not do. It will never do to make two where God has only made one.

Peter's hypocrisy regarding eating with Gentiles

This can happen at more serious levels too. There is that famous occasion recorded in Galatians 2 where, at a certain conference, Paul had to rebuke Peter—no pleasant task, but it had to be done. Why? Because Peter did something at that Christian conference which, had he been allowed to get away with it, might have split the very gospel itself. He had been eating with the Gentile believers at the conferences, but one day he withdrew, and not because he was sick. He was acting hypocritically, hiding under a false appearance because some brothers had come down from Jerusalem. They were a bit strict about things up in Jerusalem, and people were wondering what would happen to him when he got back to Jerusalem, if he was not careful. So he withdrew from eating with Gentiles. What was the matter with that? The very gospel was at stake! Are there two gospels? Is there one gospel for Jews and another one for Gentiles? Are there two kinds of salvation? Are Jews saved by a super-salvation and Gentiles by an ordinary, or even a questionable kind of a salvation? It is a serious thing to even ask these questions.

Peter had real difficulties. The social habits of Gentiles were terrible. Some of them would not wash before meals. They did not keep the Sabbath. Peter would have found it very difficult putting up with the way some Gentile converts behaved because he did have a conscience about some Old Testament laws, rules and regulations.

But Paul wanted Peter to face what was basic and fundamental. Were there, or were there not, two ways of being saved? Are there two Bodies of Christ—one for Gentiles and one for Jews? If there is only one gospel, only one salvation, only one Body, Peter would have to acknowledge it even to the point of coming and eating at a table with the Gentile converts. He

would have to learn to distinguish between things that are absolutely fundamental to the faith, and things that are, as some theologians term them, *indifferent*.

It is hard to do so on some occasions, and it raises all sorts of questions as to where we should draw the line. If the truth was told, we sometimes draw it in funny places. Some very sincere Christians have believed that they should not use leavened bread at the Lord's Supper, so they have stayed away. Is that a *fundamental* of the faith? We shall certainly have to learn a lot of forbearance one with the other, and, by God's good grace, maintain this unity. There is only one Body. Will we, God helping us, live to give expression to this truth? We sing sometimes, 'We would remember we are one with every saint that loves Thy name'.¹² May God help us to mean it, and act on it!

The unity that is set before us as a goal

Then there is another unity that is not a fact yet. It is set before us as a goal, for the Body of Christ is not yet complete—it is on the move and growing. We are to aim at unity: 'Until we all attain to the unity of the faith', that is, until we all believe the same thing, 'and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ' (v. 13). What a wonderful expression that is. We are to grow up until we come to commensurability with the very head in heaven (v. 15). The very mention of it brings an awe into our spirits. When we think of him who is the head, with all his grace and all his wonder, and that we are part in that Body that is to grow up to a maturity that is proportionate to him, we surely realize that we have a long way to go yet.

That is the goal. But we may as well face it straight away that there are great forces constantly at work to stop that growth and defeat that purpose. Verse 14 speaks of them particularly. It talks of 'every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.' They are men who do not accept the authority of the head in heaven. Why they should bother themselves with theology, in view of that, we may not know, but they do! Their ultimate aim is to have more freedom, but the Bible calls it *wandering*. It is error, and the great danger is that dear believers may remain children in the faith and be tossed all over the place instead of making progress.

This is a very real matter. Progress in the Christian life can be held up for all sorts of reasons. The writer to the Hebrews reminded them that he would like to talk to them about Melchizedek, but then he says he is sorry that he cannot (5:10–11). Why not? They had been converted for some years and they should have been able to understand these things, but they could not, so he did not tell them. Why could they not understand it? Was it terribly deep? Well, it was not the very *milk* of the word, of course not; it was more like a medium sized beef steak! Why could those dear believers not take it in? Was it the preacher's fault: should he have explained it more? Should he have been more practical? No. The preacher was not wrong this time. (He very often may be, however.) These folks had been converted and, had they continued to grow through the months and years; they could have taken it. But they did not. They wandered about for some years and had not taken the necessity to grow in the faith seriously enough, so they had not developed.

¹² James G. Deck (1802-1884), 'Lord, we would ne'er forget Thy love.'

Then, why not start off all over again? It is a fact that, if you do that kind of thing, you not only remain a baby but your very faculty of understanding becomes blunted, so you cannot really start over again and grow. You become 'dull of hearing' (Heb 5:11–14). A new convert has a will to learn, even though he cannot understand the deep things of God. Yet it is amazing what he can learn, even of the deeper things. It is a tragic fact that a person who has been saved for twenty-five years and has not attempted to grow in his faith will not be teachable, since his very faculty of understanding will have become blunted. That is a very real thing. Please do not be deceived by the idea that, since all believers are going to be in heaven, it does not matter how you live here and now, or how you progress in the faith. In heaven God will not wave a wand and make us all be the same.

The provision Christ has made for us

Here in Ephesians 4, however, we are not thinking of the believer's own neglect, but of the believer as a child, young in the faith and wavering as a child does. We are also thinking of false teachers. What provision has the Lord made for this? In the middle verses of the paragraph Paul turns to describe the provision, and how delightful it is.

Paul got his idea here from reading Psalm 68. To say that is in no way to be disrespectful to the Holy Spirit's inspiration of this passage. Psalm 68:18 is quoted by Paul here in 4:8: 'Therefore it says, "When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men."' Paul had been thinking of the dwelling place of God in the believer, and in Psalm 68 he had come across this topic of the dwelling place of God: '. . . at the mount that God desired for his abode, yes, where the LORD will dwell for ever . . . the LORD is among them; Sinai is now in the sanctuary . . . that the LORD God may dwell there' (vv. 16–18).

We can almost see Paul rubbing his hands with glee in his study, or as he was travelling, and saying: 'Here it comes again: this revelation that God has given to me, about his purpose to form a dwelling place in the Spirit, may not be explicitly stated in the Old Testament, but look at this hint of it. *The Lord in his dwelling place—yes, that is God's purpose.*'

The chariots of God are twice ten thousand, thousands upon thousands; the Lord is among them; Sinai is now in the sanctuary. You ascended on high, leading a host of captives in your train and receiving gifts among men, even among the rebellious . . . (vv. 17–18)

That set Paul thinking. It is colourful language: whatever does it mean and what has it to do with God's dwelling place?

HOW COULD GOD ASCEND ANY HIGHER?

The first problem is to make sense of the phrase, 'You ascended on high'. How could that be true of God? How could God the Father ascend anywhere? He always has been the transcendent Lord. We can never imagine God going any higher than he always has been, so what can the Psalm mean? Well, if God is ever going to *ascend*, it must mean that he will first *descend*. Paul saw it—it is messianic.

In saying, 'He ascended', what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth?' (Eph 4:9)

It begins to fit into place. For the purpose of this great dwelling place amongst men, God, the second person of the Trinity, first descended. He came to his earthly dwelling place, the temple at Jerusalem, and found in it a den of thieves and robbers perverting the very truth of God. He was finally obliged to walk out of it and say, 'See, your house is left to you desolate' (Matt 23:38). They put him on a tree and even as he hung there they mocked him, saying 'You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it again in three days, save yourself!' (27:40).

He descended. Then he rose again and ascended on high, leading a host of captives, and took gifts *from* men—so the Psalm says (68:18). Paul, quoting it in Ephesians chooses to rephrase it: 'When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts *to* men' (4:8). How do we work that bit out? Why did Paul change it?

THE CAPTORS HAVE BECOME CAPTIVES

Let us think about this. It is not so difficult as the theologians make it out to be. Paul is thinking here of that same military metaphor that he uses in 2 Corinthians 2:14— 'But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession'. He is likening our Lord to a great conqueror like Barak in the Old Testament, though infinitely greater. Barak turned the tables on his enemies and led captivity captive. The people who once held Barak and company captive were turned round, and Barak led them captive (Judg 5:12). He is thinking of our Lord as a mighty military conqueror who has conquered his foes and ascended in triumph, receiving the tribute of his conquered foes. Who might they have been? Demons? No, not in this context. Paul is thinking of the captives as men and women like himself, who once were the dire enemies of Jesus Christ but have been conquered by him. 'He leads us in triumph,' says Paul, using a delightful image.

In Paul's day, this was the habit of the Romans in particular. They had great military generals who from time to time came to England. The ancient Anglo-Saxons put their best soldiers in the front row against these Romans, but the poor innocent Englishmen had not seen Romans before! The Romans ran round them in circles and conquered even the English giants, put them in chains and took them off to Rome. Then the victorious Roman emperor staged what was called a *Triumph* and strutted through the streets of Rome in his great triumphal chariot with all his soldiers, in front of all the crowds. In this procession he put the big Englishmen in chains. The crowds were so impressed to think that they had got a general who could conquer such savages and bring England to the tribute of Rome.

'That is what Christ has done with me,' says Paul. 'I was once his fiercest enemy. I once fought against him, determined to stamp out the name of Jesus. With the name and authority of the high priest I went to imprison his followers, with their notions that Jesus is God, and make them blaspheme.'

And what happened? The great conqueror beat him. He brought Saul of Tarsus to his knees as a captive of Jesus Christ (Acts 9:4).

'Wherever I go,' says Paul, 'it is certainly not me nor my fighting ability that is advertised; it is the wonder of the great general whose defeat of me brought me to my knees and made me a captive. And, I might add, a willing captive. What a magnificent Saviour he is! I can never get over it. I was his chief enemy and no sooner had he rescued me than, risking everything and daring to count me faithful and loyal to him, he put me into his service. He gave me to the Body of Christ to be an apostle' (see 1 Tim 1:11–14).

Yes, he who ascended first descended and now has ascended again. Let us see it again and think of his triumphs. We have known a few spiritual giants. Some of them were rough and tough boys before they were converted. Some of them were tough physically and some tough intellectually. Some of them were brilliant and very powerful men in their own spheres even before they met Christ. But oh, the wonder of Christ: he took them captive. All their lives were handed over in tribute to him—he received gifts from men, as they laid all their gifts at his feet—and the risen Christ took them and gave them to his Church.

It amazes our hearts to think of the wealth that Christ has expended on the likes of us. But Paul—we would never have got near him in academic circles—Christ won him and gave him to the Church. With his magnificent brain, Paul was inspired by God's Holy Spirit and gave us this epistle, amongst others. Nor did he stop with the apostles, Paul and Peter and company; he has also given us evangelists and pastors and teachers, right down to this very present day. They are magnificent men and women that God has saved and Christ has subdued and he has given them to the likes of us.

Why were they given as gifts to the Church?

What has he given them for? For the building up of the Body, so that the risen head through these gifts might fill everything. If the Body of Christ has to progress and grow, then our Lord is not leaving it to chance. As the ascended head in heaven, he has ascended 'that he might fill all things' (4:10). Magnificent warrior in the fight that he is, he has his men now—apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers—whom he has given and whom he uses. He uses them to get all the rest of us converted to start with, and then perfect us so that we in turn might begin to do our particular job. It is all for the perfecting of the saints in their work of serving (4:12). That is why the gifts are given.

They are not given so that the rest of us can put our feet up and say: 'Thank you, Lord. I have got servants galore waiting on me—Paul, Peter, Matthew, the elders in my church, the evangelists—I can afford to sit here, put my feet up and let them do the work.' No! They are given to us to perfect us, so that we may begin to do our job of work; and thereby the body begins to grow 'by that which every joint supplies' (4:16 KJV).

We must be both realistic and practical. Every joint in the Body does not have to be an apostle. We all have to grow and some of us have more potential than others. It is no good any of us getting it into our little heads that we are going to grow to be as big as Paul. Some of us used to think such things in our youth! We need not think that we will be as big an evangelist as Wesley was. If we ever did think such a thing, we have learned better sense since then. Such in all probability is not within the potential of any of us, but our difficulty is in developing the potential we have got. The temptation always is to let some of it lie undeveloped.

Yet the Lord's people have far more potential than they think. Some think that because they are not preachers they do not have any potential. That is a lack of imagination, is it not? What vast potential there is of different kinds. The work of the Lord in many countries wilts because evangelists and missionaries are obliged to do not only their own work but a lot of things for which they do not have the particular potential. Other folks sitting at home do have

it, but it has not occurred to them that they could be part of the missionary team. Their professional qualifications could be part of the work for developing the Body of Christ.

What is the opposition?

Let us think now for a moment of the opposition. Here it is *false doctrine* (v. 14). This paragraph is certainly about practical things, as I noted at the start of this study, but what I would not agree with is that doctrine is not practical. We may know what they mean who say, 'Give us something practical', but there is not one comma in the whole of the Bible that is not practical. God has not written one semi-colon that is not aimed at saving our souls. So please do not let anyone hear us talk as if God has made a mistake in writing some parts of the Bible because they are not practical. He has written this book for us because in the great battle of life we need to know it.

We may teach our children to be polite, say their prayers at night, and be kind to widows and orphans. Good! But where will they be in a few years' time, even if they are kindly and generous, if in their schools and colleges they have their faith snuffed out and they do not believe Scripture any more? If those with the spiritual responsibility to teach them think they need simple things and give them little simple things, and when they go out into the world they are given big things, real things—physics, cookery, nursing, and all the rest, they will come to the conclusion that the little things they got in church were only fairy stories for children, and the real things are the professional or trade interests. What then?

It is a battle, so let us wait on the risen head and those gifts he has given us in his holy word, and see to it that as each of us is able to help the other and learn from each other, that we grow and cease to be children who can easily be knocked over by the wind of wrong doctrine.

Nowadays there are some theologians who will write books, such as *The Myth of God Incarnate*¹³, in which they deny the incarnation and the ascension. They pose as theologians and would try to break the believer's loyalty to the Lord Jesus. We need to know how to fight for the spiritual lives of our young people and their loyalty to the Lord. In our exalted Lord we have sufficient to bring us through, but it is not a game. The learning of God's word and the learning of the faith is a battle; it is not a hobby.

¹³ John Hick (Editor), SCM Press 1977.

Movement Three: The New Man: Imitator of God and Christ (4:17–6:24)

1. Christ's Teaching About the New Man (4:17–32)

We now come to the third movement, and you may wonder why I have left so little time to spend on such a large part of the epistle. It is not altogether an accident; though I confess to all sorts of faults and weaknesses in that direction! It was impossible from the start that in eight sessions on Ephesians we should get round to considering in detail all the practical commandments and exhortations in these three chapters. Moreover, had I attempted to expound them all in detail, important as they are, it would have led me into areas of family life where I could only have spoken with a kind of theoretical authority that comes from deep practical experience. I must leave it to your elders and Bible class leaders who are experienced in these things to teach you the practical implications of the faith. I wouldn't like you to think that I have proportioned things this way because I don't think they are important. They are vitally important.

The role of the new man

What I want to do with this final movement is a very simple thing, and that is to point out in these chapters *two of the basic principles upon which believers are now expected to run their lives*. I have entitled this in my own thinking as 'the role of the new man'. In the epistle we have had God's purpose in creation and God's purpose in the ministry of the Messiah within history. Now we turn to the newly created man; what is to be his role and how he is to live. I want to emphasize two principles that stand out in my thinking in these final chapters as underlying all the particular exhortations.

If we are not careful there is the danger that we shall come to think of this practical part of the epistle somewhat like this: in chapter 3 we have all the good and lovely things that God has done, and now at last we shall have to try and be grateful and pull our socks up and behave.

It has been known for parents, wanting their children to behave very well in the evening when the visitors come, to conclude that a good precaution to take and an inducement to their behaviour would be to give them some goodies in the afternoon—large ice creams and other such things. The children begin to wonder why Mother is being so especially good to them, and find out that she has Mrs Jones coming to dinner. Their mother then asks them to please show a little gratitude and behave in the evening. But that does not always work!

The kind of exhortation that says, in the first three chapters we have all the wonderful things that God has done for us, and chapters four to six are telling us to try and show a little

gratitude and behave, is not quite good enough. Even though it is true in a sense, there is more to it than that.

In these final chapters, therefore, we shall hear Paul asking us, not once but many times, to behave in the light of the truth. It is not merely truth in the sense of doctrine, but *truth in the sense of reality*. Paul tells us that we cannot behave in such and such a way. Why not? Because it is to make a mock of reality.

If we go out on a foggy, dark night and go staggering down the street without looking, we will walk into a lamp post. A lamp post is a very real thing! We had better know it is there and take a torch and look. If we want to know how to walk home in the dark without getting some great bruises, we had better investigate reality and bring a bit of light to bear on the realities of life. *That is principle number one.*

Let us briefly notice how it works. Paul tells us to put away falsehood and speak truth, the one to the other (4:25). Why should we? Because 'we are members, one of another' (Rom 12:5). That is the reality. Is it a reality to us? We all get annoyed with ourselves sometimes and address ourselves in such terms as 'stupid', but, being sane, we do not normally take out a knife and cut our hands off. However, some of us may have been known by our words and behaviour to wound fellow-believers very seriously. Why do we do that? We would not wound our own physical bodies like that. Why not? It is because our bodies are real, and if we put in a physical knife we would feel it. *Is the body of Christ not a reality? Is it just a theory?*

Why must we speak the truth with our neighbours? Because this is not just a theory—it is a reality. What unites our brothers and sisters and us together is unseen—it is the Holy Spirit himself. We are in Christ and the Holy Spirit lives in us. To hurt a Christian brother is to wound the Body of Christ and hurt the Holy Spirit. So, let us not rail at our brothers and sisters. We must be careful what we say, because the Holy Spirit is in them and we could grieve the Holy Spirit, 'by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption' (v. 30). That would be an exceedingly foolish thing to do, yet we often do it. Therefore, in order to behave in a practical way, we have got to face the truth: what do I really believe?

Certain folks nowadays say that Jesus Christ is so loving that he does not mind if young people get muddled up. The fashions of the world are changed, and if they get muddled up sexually and in other ways he will not mind. Will he not? Where do they get that idea from? They will say that even the Church nowadays is more permissive. Is it really? Paul tells us to open our eyes to reality: 'But that is not the way you learned Christ!' (v. 20). See the reality in Jesus. What he actually teaches on these things is often so different from what is taught by our permissive society and permissive church leaders.

Thus Paul pleads with them and exhorts us similarly to plead with the unconverted. The sorry thing about this unconverted world is that people walk in the dark, unaware of the realities (5:8, 10–11). They live as if there is no God and they made themselves. They may as well hit their heads up against Gibraltar—what they are doing is not real. The reality is that there is a God, and to live as though there is not is to live a lie and be utterly unreal. May God give us the grace to let Christ so shine on us that we will reflect his light and, being light in the Lord (5:8), cast some reality around ourselves in this dark world.

Can we live by this standard? Yes, we can! Is it too high for us? No, it's not! Why so? This *new man* that Paul talks about—he has been created after God, but is it real or is it only a story? The new self is real; as real as the old self was (4:24). It is not mere gratitude that would lead us to live like Christ; God has made provision—realistic provision—and there is such a thing as the new self that God has created. We all can live better than we do, if only, instead of saying when we sin, 'I couldn't really be expected to be any better than this', we learned to face reality. There is a new man, and by God's grace we can put him on.

2. Exhortation to imitate God and Christ (5:1–6:9)

The second principle that runs through all this third movement of thought is the principle of imitation. I am not here thinking about imitations, which would be the opposite of reality, but *the principle of imitation*. How are we to live as believers? We are to live on the principle that we are new men and women, created after the image of God, and we are to learn to imitate God and Christ (see 5:1).

Imitation is a tremendous way to go about things. You can see boys on the street playing football, and one of them is going to be a goalkeeper. He thinks he is Pat Jennings or Peter Shilton or somebody else, and he does it like he has seen them do it. Good for him; if he does it many times like that he will perhaps be a great footballer one day. Here is a little girl nursing a doll, giving it a little bottle. She has seen Mother doing it in reality and she is copying her. She has got a mother's instinct in any case, and although she is only playing at the moment she may well do it in reality one day.

If we start imitating God and Christ we may not get on too well at the beginning, but if we go on imitating them we will find that the divine nature in us will prove to be a reality and we will become more like Christ. How has God behaved towards us? Well, for Christ's sake he forgave us (4:32). Could we then refuse to forgive some brother or sister? Have a go at imitating God: how has he been able to do it with us?

We perhaps say that we would like to be a bit more of a help in the church, but in our church they are a funny lot—they do not appreciate our ministry. They are an ungrateful crowd. Have we ever thought of imitating Christ in this matter? He looked at a very funny crowd of people, including us, and gave himself for them as a sacrifice to God (5:2). God wants us for his dwelling place, for some reason or other. So we should serve the Lord, and what it costs us to give ourselves for them we shall in our hearts be offering it to God as a fragrant offering and sacrifice. The more it cost Christ to do what he did for us all, the more fragrant was the sacrifice to God. Let us try to imitate Christ in the way he filled heaven with fragrant perfume by giving himself in the service of the likes of us.

Husbands and wives (5:22–33)

There is a very clear example of imitation here for husbands and wives: 'as Christ loved the church' (v. 25). What kindness he showed in loving us and accepting us as we were, and giving us assurance that he will never cast us out since we are secure in his love. But it is not just a sloppy thing. Though he accepts us and give us security, he has got his eye on our blemishes and blotches. He does not mention them to us every breakfast time, but he is determined to get rid of them, good husband that he is. He accepted us as we were, while we were yet

sinner, and will not cast us out; but he is not content to see us remain sinners and he is not going to have his bride turn up in heaven with blotches and blemishes and spots and pimples (5:27). He is determined to live for us until he has got rid of the last spot and blemish.

That is love! It is acceptance—not criticism that would make us feel he is rejecting us; and then a devotedness of love that will not be content until it has us perfect. So, husbands and wives have got their work cut out for them. To imitate Christ is far from sentimental kindness.

3. Triumph Over the Opposition (6:10–24)

Warriors in the battle

This business of being the new man created by God brings with it the certainty of battle, and we are expected to join in it. When God made the first man and put him in the garden, Satan attacked him at that level through fruit from a tree. Now we are the new man, created after God, and it means a bigger battle. The battlefield has shifted from the garden of Eden, which was a very lowly battlefield, to the very heavenly places. That is where God has introduced his Son, and, in Christ, his people. Because he is determined to have this dwelling place there for all eternity and to have his people before him, the battle goes on in those heavenly places.

We have to be aware of the *dimension*. It is a battle for men's souls and their heavenly destiny. If we are not aware of that, we could get a victory over our next door neighbour about the grass or the garden or the bonfire or something else, or a tactical battle with the businessman, and think we have won. But it may have closed our mouths, for we cannot now talk to them about the gospel, and Satan has actually won.

And in our churches, if we are not careful, Satan will lead us down a path until we are so unbalanced and begin to push our views and think we are standing for the truth, and even be prepared to split an assembly wide open for what we think is the truth. The very results ought to show us that it is no victory, but a battle that Satan has won. What a responsibility it is to be the new men and women in Christ, created of God and asked to join the sovereign Saviour himself in the warfare in the heavenly places.

These are some of the basic truths and realities, and the principle of imitating the divine persons, that underlie our practical behaviour as believers. Let us take courage—the war is going to be won. May God help us not to lose too many battles between now and the final winning of the war.

Thank you your great patience and cooperation and for the sense of happiness you have brought with you to these meetings. I fancy that some of you have been praying for the meetings and for the preacher. God bless you and reward you, and if you can spare the Christian charity from time to time pray still for me.

Shall we pray.

Our Father, we thank thee for thy word, and for the delightful and wonderful things thou hast shown us therein. Thou art he that has wrought us for this self-same thing and given us the earnest of thy Spirit in our hearts, making us long for eternity when we shall be at home with the Lord and finally see the great reality on which thou art already working, and all those lovely surprises awaiting us in the ages yet to come.

We thank thee for these meetings, for making the process of learning enjoyable and at times quite happy, yet sometimes quite hard. Now Lord, we pray that we may not mistake the enjoyment of the learning for the blessedness of the doing. Strengthen our faith to grasp thy realities and nerve our endeavour by thy Spirit, so that we may fight the good fight and lay hold of life that is life indeed, so that we may know what is the hope of thy calling and by his grace fulfil it, to the end that Christ may even now dwell in our hearts and we be progressively filled unto all the fullness of God.

With our thanksgivings now we ask thy parting blessing, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Appendix: A Brief Table of Contents

Movement One: 1:1–2:10	Movement Two: 2:11–4:16	Movement Three: 4:17–6:24
The Purpose of God in Creation	The Role of Christ in History	The New Man: Imitator of God and Christ
<p>1. God’s Plan for Us and for the Universe (1:1–14)</p> <p><i>a.</i> <u>Before the foundation of the world</u>: chosen in Christ: to be ‘before him’: to be ‘sons’: all things to be headed up in Christ.</p> <p><i>b.</i> <u>Now</u>: blessed, made a heritage, redeemed, sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise.</p>	<p>1. Christ’s Preaching to Jew and Gentile (2:11–22)</p> <p><i>a.</i> <u>Aforetime</u>: Gentiles separate from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers, without hope.</p> <p><i>b.</i> <u>Now</u>: made nigh, one new man created out of two, reconciled in one body, access in one Spirit, growing into a holy temple.</p>	<p>1. Christ’s Teaching About the New Man (4:17–32)</p> <p><i>a.</i> <u>Former manner of life</u>: walked as Gentiles alienated from the life of God, vanity of mind, darkened understanding, deadened sensibilities.</p> <p><i>b.</i> <u>Now</u>: put away old man, put on new man, created after God; grieve not Holy Spirit in whom you were sealed.</p>
<p>2. Prayer for Revelation and Illumination (1:15–23)</p> <p><i>a.</i> That God may give you a spirit of revelation . . . the eyes of your heart being illumined, that you may know . . . the riches of . . . the inheritance . . .</p> <p><i>b.</i> Christ . . . far above all rule and authority . . . head over all things to the church . . . the fullness of him who fills all in all.</p>	<p>2. Prayer for Apprehension and Knowledge (3:1–21)</p> <p><i>a.</i> The mystery of Christ . . . the unsearchable riches . . . in other generations not made known as it has now been revealed . . . Gentiles are fellow heirs . . . strong to apprehend . . . that you may know.</p> <p><i>b.</i> The wisdom of God made known to principalities and powers through the church . . .</p>	<p>2. Exhortation to Imitation of God and Christ (5:1–6:9)</p> <p><i>a.</i> You are now light in the Lord; walk as children of light; awake . . . and Christ shall shine upon you; no unclean person has any inheritance . . .</p> <p><i>b.</i> Christ loved the church and gave himself for her . . .</p>
<p>3. Triumph Over the Opposition (2:1–10)</p> <p><i>a.</i> You were dead; walked according to the prince of the power of the air . . .</p> <p><i>b.</i> The quickening, raising and seating of the believer in the heavenlies in Christ.</p> <p><i>c.</i> The gift of God by grace; good works which God before prepared that we should walk in them.</p>	<p>3. Triumph Over the Opposition (4:1–16)</p> <p><i>a.</i> Captivity led captive: the sleight of men, in craftiness, after the wiles of error . . .</p> <p><i>b.</i> The descent of Christ; his ascent far above all heavens.</p> <p><i>c.</i> Grace given according to the measure of the gift of Christ . . .</p>	<p>3. Triumph Over the Opposition (6:10–24)</p> <p><i>a.</i> Standing against the wiles of the devil.</p> <p><i>b.</i> War against principalities and powers in the heavenlies.</p> <p><i>c.</i> The armour of God: feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace.</p>

About the Author

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