Lesson 39


Many scholars doubt that the Apostle Paul was the author of this letter. The reasons for those doubts need not concern us here, and rather than deciding the question, the materials that follow will refer to Paul as its author for convenience’s sake.

Ephesians 1

Verses 3–6: These verses are one long sentence. Consider parsing that sentence to see how its parts relate to one another.

What makes a blessing spiritual (verse 3)? Is it that it has to do with our individual spirits (as opposed to our body or our body plus our spirit, our soul) or that it has to do with the Spirit? What does it mean to say that those blessings are given “in heavenly places”?

What does “in Christ” mean? When someone says, “We are brothers and sisters in Christ,” what does the phrase mean? Does it mean the same thing here or something different? The phrase occurs very often in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, more often than elsewhere. Why do you think that might be?
What does it mean that believers were chosen “before the foundation of the world” (verse 4)? When was that foundation? Does this verse support the teaching of preexistence? What does it mean that we were “chosen . . . in him”?

What does it mean to be chosen by God? Does Abraham’s blessing give any clues to an answer? For what does verse 4 say we were chosen? Are chosen people chosen because they are holy and without blame?

Verse 5 may be confusing because the grammar of the Greek has been translated so literally. Here’s an alternative translation: “Having decided in advance that we should be adopted as children to him [i.e., to the Father] through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will.” The verb translated predestinated in the King James Version and decided in advance in the alternative translation literally means “have placed boundaries.” What kinds of boundaries are set for us in advance of our birth? Does this verse teach that those who are members of the Church were chosen to be so in the preexistence? Does that mean that there are people in the world who were not so chosen? If they were not, why not?

**Verses 9–10:** These verses are part of another long sentence. It begins in verse 7 and goes through verse 12. Read the sentence as a whole before trying to understand these two verses. Consider parsing the sentence as a whole to see how its parts are related to one another and, particularly, to see how verses 9–10 are related to the rest of the sentence.

When is or was “the dispensation of the fulness of times”? How do you know? What does it mean to say that a time is full or complete?
The Greek word for *dispensation* is *oikonomia*, the root of our word *economy*. It can mean the act of administering, what is administered (such as a plan), or a person’s stewardship.¹

According to these verses, what is the mystery—the secret—of God’s will? Why is that said to be a secret or a secret teaching? From whom is this secret kept? Is Romans 3:7 relevant to thinking about what the mysteries of God are? How about Ephesians 6:19?

What does it mean to “gather together in one all things in Christ” (verse 10)? The verb translated “gather together in one” is most often translated “sum up.” It is the same verb used in Romans 13:9. What can it mean to sum up all things, both in heaven and in earth, in Christ? How does he bring all things together in a unity?

**Ephesians 2**

**Verses 1–3:** Whom is Paul addressing in these verses?

The King James translators have added the italicized words “hath he quickened,” even though the sentence makes sense without them. It is not a complete sentence, but we can understand it: “And you who were dead in trespasses and sins.” (Another translation might be “And you, being dead in trespasses and sins.”) Why do you think the King James translators added those words?

What is Paul’s point if we leave out the added words? Which of the following verses would naturally come next if those words were left out?

How would you put these three verses in your own words?
Verses 4–7: Paraphrase this sentence. What point is Paul making by juxtaposing it and the previous sentence? Verse 5 begins, “Even when we were dead in sins, . . .” taking us back to verse 1. Why did Paul interrupt the thought that began in verse 1 to give us what he says in verses 2–3? What does it mean to say that we were quickened (“made alive”) with Christ (verse 5)? What does it mean, concretely, to be made alive in Christ? In Romans 8:11 Paul uses the same verb to speak of the future resurrection. Is that what he is referring to here? If not, explain why he uses the same word. Why does Paul feel it necessary to interject “By grace ye are saved” in verse 5? How is that interjection related conceptually to what has come before and what comes afterward?

Verses 8–9: What would it mean to be saved by works? What teaching is Paul rejecting here? Why is he rejecting it? Here is a paraphrase of verse 8: You are saved by God’s gift through your trust in him; this doesn’t come from you because it is a gift of God. Does the word this in that paraphrase refer to trust, or does it refer back to verse 7, making the two parts of verse 8 parallel to each other in meaning?

Verse 10: When Paul says that we are the work of God, “created in Christ Jesus,” is he speaking of our creation as human beings or our creation as Christians? What does it mean to say that we were “created . . . unto good works”?
When did God ordain that we should walk in good works? What does before mean here?

**Verses 11–13:** From what point of view does Paul ask the Roman members of his audience to see themselves when he refers to them as “Gentiles in the flesh” (verse 11)? After all, they would not have referred to themselves as Gentiles.

Why does Paul add “in the flesh”? What point is he making by adding that phrase? It may help to know that among Jews the term uncircumcision was a derogatory term for those who were not of Israel.

What does it mean to say that those he addresses had been “aliens from the commonwealth of Israel” (verse 12)? Commonwealth translates the Greek term politeia, “a socio-political unit or body of citizens, state, people, body politic.”

Is “strangers of [i.e., alien to] the covenants of promise” parallel to “aliens from the commonwealth of Israel”? (Strangers to and aliens from translate different Greek words, the first meaning “separated or estranged from” and the second meaning, literally, “alien.”)

What does it mean to be “without Christ”? Why are those who are outside Israel “without Christ,” in other words apart from him?

Why would those who are outside of Israel have “no hope” and be “without God in the world” (verse 12)? Hope for what?

How does the promise of verse 13 respond to the problem set up in verses 11–12? Is Paul speaking of the promise of Isaiah 2:2–4?
What blood brought ancient Israel nearer to God? How is that relevant to understanding verse 13?

**Verses 14–17:** What does it mean to speak of a person as peace (verse 14)? “He is our peace” is an unusual usage. What does it mean? Is it merely metaphorical, or is there more to this than metaphor?

What has Christ made one (verse 14)? What wall had separated those who are now one? Is this also a reference to the wall that separated the Court of the Gentiles from the rest of the temple? Or is it a reference to the law of Moses, the wall or fence protecting Israel?

Another translation of “the law of commandments contained in ordinances” is “the law of commandments expressed in rules” (verse 15). What does that mean? What other kind of law is there?

Why does Paul describe that law as *enmity*, “hatred”? Hatred of whom? By whom? How did Jesus Christ abolish that enmity “in his flesh”?

Can you explain the clause “for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace” (verse 15)? The phrase “one new man” could also be translated “one new humanity.” Which do you prefer and why?

What kind of peace does Jesus Christ create? Jews among Paul’s readers could hardly have avoided thinking of the *shalom* of the Old Testament when they heard Paul speak of the peace that God brings. What kind of peace does the Old Testament anticipate?
Paul speaks of the peace or reconciliation between Gentile and Jew with God (verse 16). What element has he added that is new to his discussion?

He says that peace with God happens “in one body” (verse 16). Why this emphasis on Jesus’s body as that which brings peace between Gentile and Jew and between Gentile and Jew, on one hand, and God, on the other? Does this have anything to do with the sacrament—or vice versa?

Why is the cross so important to Paul when he recognizes that the resurrection is central to the proclamation of Jesus as Messiah? (See, for example, Romans 1:4.)

How did the cross, according to Paul, accomplish the reconciliation of human beings to God (verse 16)?

Verse 17 seems to be a reference to Isaiah 57:19: “Peace, peace to him that is far off, and to him that is near, saith the Lord; and I will heal him.” If that is right, then Paul is proof-texting since the original was addressed to groups within Israel, those in exile and those still in the land, rather than to Israel and those outside it. How might Paul have justified that use of the Isaiah verse in this context?

**Verses 18–22:** Verse 18 begins with *for.* It gives an explanation. Of what? Does it tell us what reconciliation of all people with the Father means?

What does “access by one Spirit” mean? What is Paul talking about here?

How might that access to the Father through the Spirit unify us?
Verse 19 begins with an illative, a word that tells us that what follows is a conclusion. As you read verses 19–22, ask yourself how what they say follows from the earlier discussion of this chapter.

To whom is Paul speaking when he says, “Ye are no more strangers and foreigners” (verse 19)? To Gentiles? To Jews? To both? Justify your answer based on what he has said in this chapter.

The word *citizens* is a variation on the word in verse 12 that was translated *commonwealth*. The phrase “members of the household” translates one Greek word, *oikeios*. That word refers to any closely knit group, usually those who are in a close kinship relation, though it can also refer to a temple. What does this tell us about our relationship with God? Paul has been using political imagery. Why does he switch to familial imagery?

We often say that the Church is built on the foundation of apostles and prophets, but verse 20 literally says that the Saints are. *Ye* in verse 19 is the subject of “are built.” What does that suggest about how Paul means *church* here (though he doesn’t use the word itself)? How is that thinking related to the earlier discussion about being outside and inside and about being unified?

What do you make of the fact that Paul doesn’t say the apostles and prophets lay the foundation of this building, but that they are that foundation?

Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of the foundation (verse 20). Is it relevant that the building of this edifice has already been begun? When would Paul think it began?
Does verse 20 help answer the earlier question about why Paul says that the Saints are built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets?

What does the image of the Church as God’s temple teach (verse 21)?

What does it mean to say that this temple grows into a temple in the Lord?

Paul says, “You also are builded” (verses 22), but didn’t he say that in verses 19–20 by saying, “Ye . . . are built upon the foundations”?

In this chapter Paul has emphasized two things about the unity of Christians: it is made possible through the body of Jesus Christ and it happens “through the Spirit” (verse 22). How ought we to think about our relationships with one another, given those emphases?

**Ephesians 5**

Many people, especially many women, have difficulty with this reading. Does it merely reflect the culture of Paul’s time and the first-century Palestinian understanding of the relationship of husband and wife, or does it teach doctrine? Ephesians 6:5, for example, part of the same set of admonitions that begins in verse 21, tells slaves to obey their masters as if they were Christ, but we no longer believe that to be doctrinal. If that part of Paul’s teaching about personal relationships is incorrect or out-of-date, how do we know which parts of the rest of his teaching remain binding on us?
Is there perhaps a mixture of ancient culture and unchanging doctrine in what Paul teaches? If so, how do we sift the doctrinal from the cultural? If the assigned verses or some aspect of them is doctrinal in a relatively straightforward way, what does it mean in contemporary society? These are issues that any careful reader will have to wrestle with. The study questions, however, will focus on Paul’s meaning, assuming that readers will take up those larger questions on their own.

Before you focus on the assigned verses, read the chapter as a whole. Then ask yourself, “Why does Paul decide to address this topic? What motivates these verses?”

**Verse 21:** What does it mean for one person to be submissive or subordinate to another? What does it mean for two people to be submissive or subordinate to each other? How would that be possible?

Does this verse give us a clue to understanding the set of admonitions about personal relationships that it introduces? If so, how does the mutual submission demanded here lead to the relationships described in verses 22–23?

The literal meaning of the word translated **reverence** is **fear**, but **reverence** is a good translation in this context, the “fear of the Lord” of the Hebrew Bible.

For help understanding this verse, see also Galatians 5:13 (the second part of the verse) and Philippians 2:3–4.

**Verses 22–24:** Paul doesn’t see any difficulty between what he said in verse 21 and what he says in verse 22. How do you think he could have believed both even though to us
verse 21 suggests an equality of all believers and verse 23 clearly says that women are not on an equal footing in the relationship with their husbands?

What kind of subjection ought a Christian have toward the Lord? Is it coerced or willing, for example? What does the comparison of the woman’s subjection to her husband and her subjection to the Lord tell us about what Paul expects of the marital relationship? We can ask the same questions of verse 24, which repeats the point: how does the Church submit to Christ?

Verse 23 gives us the reason for wives’ subjection with an analogy: as Christ is to the Church, so the husband is to the wife. What is Christ’s relationship to the Church?

Why does Paul add “and he is the saviour of the body” to the analogy? In chapter 2 (Ephesians 2:1–10) we saw a description of what it means to say that Christ is our Savior. Does that help explain what Paul is saying with this part of the analogy?

Is there some sense in which the parallel of the husband to Christ suggests that the husband is to be the savior of the woman’s body?

Are head and saviour intended to be parallel, so that this is a repetition of the previous phrase?

Perhaps the phrase isn’t intended to be part of the analogy. If not, why is it included at all?

**Verses 25–27:** What does verse 25 tell us about how Paul understands what it means for the husband to be the head
of the wife? Is there anything in the verse about command or authority?

Compare Ephesians 5:1–2. What does it mean to love another as Christ does? Those verses are the thesis statement of chapter 5 and chapter 6, verses 1–20. What do they tell us about how to interpret each part of these admonitions, including those admonitions to wives and husbands?

How does the description in verses 26–27 of what Christ has done for the Church provide an example for how husbands ought to love their wives? Can a husband cleanse his wife? If not, how is the example relevant? If he can, what does that mean?

Is the imagery of Ezekiel 16:1–14 relevant to understanding what the Lord has done for the Church? Is it relevant to this analogy between the relationship of the Church and Christ and the wife and husband? How far did Paul intend us to take the analogy?

Verses 28–29: What does Genesis 2:24 (cited in verse 31) have to do with what Paul says in verses 28–29?

Ephesians 6

Verses 1–4: Compare Paul’s admonitions here (and in Ephesians 5) with Colossians 3:18–4:1. Does that shorter version of the same admonitions help give this longer version focus?

What does it mean to obey parents “in the Lord” (verse 1)? Does what Paul says to slaves (verses 5–6) help explain what Paul means here? It may be important to remember
that children held a social status similar to slaves in Paul’s day. If that is a legitimate way of understanding Paul’s ad-
monition for children to obey their parents “in the Lord,”
what does that tell us about children’s place in Paul’s un-
derstanding of the Christian community? Were they able to
have a relationship of their own to the Lord?

Do verses 2–3 say anything that wasn’t said in verse 1?

What does Paul mean that this, the fifth commandment, is
the first commandment with promise (verse 2)? Presum-
ably he has the Ten Commandments in mind, and the sec-
ond commandment, not to make graven images (Exodus
2:4–6) seems to contain a promise: “Shewing mercy unto
thousands of them that love me, and keep my command-
ments” (Exodus 20:6). Is the latter a promise associated
with not making graven images? Might first mean some-
thing other than “chronologically first”?

What kinds of behaviors might Paul have in mind when he
counsels fathers not to make their children angry? Is Colos-
sians 3:21 relevant to answering that question? Does Ephe-
sians 4:26, where Paul also speaks of anger, use the same
Greek word, help?

What is the second half of verse 4 commending to fathers?
Is “nurture and admonition” a hendiadys (the use of two
words connected by and to say the same thing)? The word
nurture translates a word that means “education” or “train-
ing.” The word admonition translates a word that means
“counsel about avoiding improper conduct.”

**Verses 10–11:** These verses introduce one of the most
well-known passages in Paul’s writings. As you read the
passage as a whole, try to find ways of reading it anew, as if for the first time.

Why does Paul begin this pericope by reminding his readers of the source of their strength (verse 10)?

Why is the “armour of God” needed (verse 11)? Against whom is this armor designed to protect us?

Sometimes we read this and try to create a one-for-one association with Roman armor. There may or may not be such a correlation, but Paul is more focused on Old Testament images of God as a warrior than he is on contemporary Roman soldiers, even if he uses the latter as his metaphor. See, for example, Isaiah 11:4–5 and especially Isaiah 59:17. Compare those scriptures to Paul’s in the following verses. Where are the similarities? The differences? Is Isaiah 52:7 relevant? Who is the audience in Isaiah, and what is the context? How is that the same as or different from the audience and context for Ephesians?

**Verses 12–13:** Here is another translation of verse 12: “Because our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against those in control, against the world-rulers of this darkness, against the spiritual wickedness in heavenly places.” Given that translation, how would you explain what Paul means by *principalities*, *powers*, *the rulers of the darkness of this world*, and *spiritual wickedness in high places*? Are there comparable threats today?

Many scholars believe that “thrones, principalities, powers,” and so on were the names for categories of invisible beings who work evil in the world, in other words, names for different categories of evil spirits. Paul’s use of the terms in
Colossians 1:16 suggests that he is using them in that way. How would that assumption change your understanding of this verse? If that assumption is correct, could you explain Paul’s meaning in a way that makes it applicable today?

The audience of the letter to the Ephesians doesn’t appear to have been under persecution when the letter was written. How, then, do you explain Paul’s concern that they prepare for spiritual battle against evil?

The King James translators have captured a play on words in verse 13: “Ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.” How would you explain what Paul is saying through that play on words?

When is “the evil day” for which we must be prepared?

Verse 14: Why is the metaphor of standing fast so important to Paul’s thought? (See, for example, Romans 1:28; 4:1; and 5:2; 1 Corinthians 10:12; 15:1; and 16:14; 2 Corinthians 1:24; Galatians 5:1; 1 Thessalonians 3:8; 2 Thessalonians 2:15.)

How do other scriptures use the phrase “gird your loins”? What does that act signify? How does girding one’s loins with truth prepare a person to do that?

What does righteousness mean here? Do the earlier Isaiah references help answer that question?

Verse 15: What is “the preparation of the gospel of peace” or “the equipment of the good news of peace”? What peace is Paul talking about? How is the proclamation of that good news preparation or equipment for our battle with evil?

Verse 16: In the Old Testament, God is often said to be a shield, as in Psalm 18:2, 30, and 35. This letter says that
faith in God, trust in him, is that shield. Is that a significant difference?

**Verse 17:** The King James Version of this verse says “take the helmet,” but “receive the helmet” is a better translation. From whom do we receive that helmet?

Of course, that also means that Paul tells us to receive the sword of the Spirit. In what sense is the Spirit a sword?

What does it mean to say that the Spirit is the word of God?

**Verse 18:** Having told us what we need to defend ourselves, Paul now tells us what we need for our offense: constant prayer and supplication. Are those two different things?

*Being alert* is a better translation than *watching.* Luke 21:36 uses the same verb, and the admonition is the same: be alert and pray always. Why does prayer require alertness on our part? Alertness to what?

Why does prayer require perseverance?

**Verses 19–20:** What does Paul want his audience to pray for on his behalf?

Why does he ask to be able to speak boldly twice?

What is oxymoronic about Paul describing himself as an “ambassador in bonds,” in other words, in chains?