

# Sunday Evening 3rd November 2013 Kenneth Gray

## Ephesians 6:10-24 “Our defence is sure”

In concluding his epistle to the church in Ephesus Paul does not do what any missionary might do and send a ‘report from the field’ detailing the minutiae of missionary life. His letter is not about himself it’s all about Jesus. Paul never wastes time on the trivial and his whole letter to the Ephesians is full of clear practical teaching.

This passage begins with an exhortation: *“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power”*. During his recent study leave Kenneth visited several churches in the US and the UK and perceived that even in what might be called ‘strong’ churches there was a sense of fearfulness, particularly in the US. They seem to be worried about society and about government pressure to conform to the secular agenda. Churches are losing confidence in the Lord.

Yesterday’s Review Day for West Renfrewshire Youth Trust had been very encouraging in that it had been reported that SU staff were receiving positive reinforcement from school staff despite recent attempts by the Secular Society to challenge and discredit SU work in schools. The trust in SU that had developed over many years was not easily being undermined by secular forces and SU staff were being advised by school staff that there was “nothing to worry about”.

Paul message to the Ephesians to stand strong is one we must heed. Christianity has become all about being ‘nice’ and we seem ready to rush to get out of people’s way when they dislike something we say or do. We should stand firm but we are spiritually weak and physically tired - to stay strong in the Lord we need to put on the full armour of the Lord, drawing strength from his mighty power.

Paul paints a vivid picture almost as if inspired by the sight of a Roman centurion in armour nearby. Rome was very powerful in Paul’s day and its influence is still evident even today in the arts and architectural heritage and in institutional structures such as governments and universities which have senates. In Paul’s day Rome hated the Church and he wanted to build up the church to withstand *‘the devil’s schemes’*.

Kenneth observed that many people enjoy reading about history but his recollection of school is that history teaching seemed to be about one battle after another: the 30 years war; the 100 years war; the Napoleonic war etc. etc. Many of the battles, particularly in earlier times, seemed to be about standing firm. They involved short bursts of fighting with the winners being those who stood firm, held their ground and didn’t give way. Armour was heavy and made it difficult to move quickly or for long periods of fighting.

Our battles are against forces that are stronger than we are. It is hard enough to overcome physical flesh and blood forces but even harder to overcome spiritual forces of evil. There is a horrible depravity evident in modern society. We try but cannot hem in the evil forces - all we can do is stand firm. But we cannot stand firm alone, in our own strength. Nor are we intended to be ‘cannon fodder’ in the battle against evil. We are to defend ourselves wearing the ‘armour of God’ and the full armour at that. Like any soldier if we forget a piece of vital equipment the consequences can be disastrous. But sometimes we are too prideful to have recourse to God’s full armour.

Paul says *“Stand firm then, with the **belt of truth** buckled round your waist”*. Stick to the truth of the Gospel. Do not embellish the Word or water it down. Do not seek to self aggrandise by exaggerating or distorting its claims.

*“with the **breastplate of righteousness** in place”* - The glorious righteousness of Jesus Christ is our protection, and we can only don it if we know him and have given our lives to him.

*“with your **feet fitted with the readiness** that comes from the gospel of peace”* - Our feet are vulnerable and we know how painful it can be if something falls them. Paul is advising us to be ready to respond with the Gospel of peace. The church doesn’t need to justify its existence through social work activities. Instead

it should first be concerned to take forth the Gospel.

*“take up the **shield of faith**”* Arrows can assail us from all sides but we can *“extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one”* by holding firmly on to the shield of faith. To follow Christ does not mean we will never suffer harm and injury but forces of evil cannot rob us of eternal life.

Paul ends this metaphor with the image of *“the **helmet of salvation** and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.”* Our heads are the most vulnerable parts of our bodies and we need the Spirit’s help to avoid all wrong-mindedness. The Word is our strong sword both defending us and attacking the forces of evil intent on destroying us.

Finally Paul exhorts us to *“pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests.”* Prayer is the forgotten weapon of the church. We have lost the desire and the will to pray. We lack the alertness and persistence in prayer that Paul describes. Revival does not come to a church where prayer is not the cornerstone of its life. We need to practise praying all the time - prayer is our most offensive weapon - and we need to pray for *“all the saints”*. Prayer should come as naturally as breathing and not become a rigid, tick box ritual.

Reflecting on his study leave visits to other churches Kenneth concluded that there was nothing wrong with the preaching; there was nothing wrong with the welcome; there was nothing wrong with the service - but perhaps power is lacking because prayer is lacking.

The power of Paul’s preaching was the power of Jesus in him because the Christian church was praying for him. We need to rediscover our prayerfulness so that we can stand firm in the power of the Lord.

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## **Sunday Evening 20th October 2013 Jack McHugh Ephesians 6**

Resuming our studies of Ephesians Jack reminded us that Paul had, in the previous chapters, been emphasising to the Ephesian brethren that before their coming to faith in Jesus they had been spiritually dead.

This epistle describes what it means to be a Christian in all aspects of our daily lives. For God there is no such thing as a ‘Sunday Christian’. We are not only expected to behave as godly churchgoers once a week but also as godly people - parents, children, slaves, masters - the rest of the week too.

In verse 1 Paul says *“Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.”* So when our children ask why they should be obedient it should be enough to point them to this text and say “because the Bible says so”. Sadly this level of reference to God’s Word is diminishing in the world today and young people are more likely to demand their own way. In 2 Timothy 3 Paul predicts that such attitudes will be evident *“But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy....”*

The modern trend in Western society is to consign elderly parents to care homes rather than look after them in our own homes. This suggests that many sons and daughters find their own selfish lifestyle more precious to them than their duty to accommodate parental needs. Respect and care for our parents is not only a duty, says Paul, but it is also in our own interests “so that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.”

Paul also has an instruction for parents: *“Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.”* Children do need boundaries but negative warnings and admonitions must also be tempered with positive encouragements and appropriate praise so that their

spirits are not broken. Adults' behaviour must therefore be Christ-like rather than dictatorial.

We might do well to ask how well the Church performs in this regard. Clearly in some churches children are dismissed from services and have no status or significance in the church family. We are blessed in Freeland and our children and young people are a delight and a credit to the teaching they have received. Elsewhere children are 'tolerated' at best. But nor should we dilute the Gospel message to make it accessible to children - the Gospel is of itself sufficient to attract, sanctify and convert - but let children come and hear the commands of Scripture for themselves.

Paul directs his instructions about godly living also to those who were slaves exhorting them to "...serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord". God expects the Christian slave to work ungrudgingly, when the master is not looking as well as when he is. As for masters, they are to "treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favouritism with him."

The standard of godly behaviour Paul is outlining for us to aim for here is that of "a slave of Christ".

Contemporary Christian language describes freedom from the slavery of sin, where Satan holds sway and has the authority over our lives, and total commitment to serving Jesus our only Lord and Master who will provide all we need and more. God has made us slaves of Jesus Christ, sons and daughters who are joint heirs to eternal life in Heaven.

Paul's epistle is a reminder that we are all called to be godly and we are all equal in God's sight. All our deeds and actions should glorify God. Let us take on board the deeper message that we should particularly value those whom the world does not value - the poor, the needy, the dispossessed, the difficult, the unlovely.

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## **Sunday Evening 22nd September 2013 Kenneth Gray, Ephesians 5:1-21 "Living in the light"**

We all know that children copy their parents taking on both their good habits/characteristics and their bad. Paul here tells the Ephesians "*Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love*".

Jesus is the ideal we should emulate but our natures are sinful and when Paul lists the sinful behaviours to be avoided - sexual immorality, any kind of impurity, greed, obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking - we can all relate to some of them if we are honest with ourselves. Paul warns the Christians of Ephesus: '*For of this you can be sure: no immoral, impure or greedy person - such a person is an idolater - has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.*'

As Christians then we must be clear that it is not just the 'big sins' like violence and murder that alienate us from God but also all the more familiar everyday nastinesses in how we think and talk and interact with others that offend God and threaten to destroy our souls.

We may not set out to be sinful but it is so easy to drift into sinfulness by engaging in unwholesome, foolish talk or by exposing ourselves to ungodly influences. Kenneth referred to 'TV torpor' - an unthinking habit of watching whatever comes on our screens, however unsavoury, without exercising our judgment about its suitability. People get sucked into the world of soap operas and other TV dramas until they mistake fantasy for reality. This is evidenced by the tens of thousands of letters of protest received some years ago by the then Home Secretary when a character in the radio 4 show 'The Archers' was put in prison.

Taking Christ as the ideal Paul states '*there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity*'. This is hard to avoid in our society where sex is used to sell every kind of product imaginable.

Sexual immorality was even more prevalent in Paul's day and he knew that if the Christian community did not take a stand against it they would in fact be colluding with those who disobeyed God - they too would get sucked in again to darkness. *'Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient. Therefore do not be partners with them.'*

Paul then tells them something quite startling that we would do well to think about. *'For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.'* None of us listening to this sermon tonight probably thinks of him/herself as ever having been 'darkness'. But we were darkness until we came to faith. Our former way of life no doubt seemed natural, not wrong, but now we know better. Now we must find out what pleases Jesus Christ so that we can reflect the light that comes from a transformed life.

Some people will tell you that it is OK to be like other people so long as you believe the right things. But we cannot ignore what it means to live in the light. Paul does not describe the secret sins of those who reject Jesus because *'It is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret.'* Our job as Christians is to show the beauty of the light in all aspects of our lives. *'But everything exposed by the light becomes visible – and everything that is illuminated becomes a light.'*

As this godly light shines on it sin loses its allure and we see it for what it is. The world does not appreciate this exposure and Christians are criticised for hampering people's fun. The truth is that as we bring the light to bear on the world we expose the sordid reality of sin. We must work to halt the church's desperate rush to say 'bad' is 'good'. Darkness flees from the light and does not understand it. If the church does not take a stand against immorality what chance is there for the world? In the past 400 years Christian teaching has underpinned our culture but in the last 60 years that has been changing. The church must hold the line not shift it.

This week, when many innocent people have been murdered in a Nairobi shopping mall, we can only wonder how many of them, Kenyan Christians, had perhaps been planning to talk to a friend or a neighbour about their faith but had now had that opportunity snatched from them.

As Paul advises *'Be very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil.'* He is preaching against those things with which the Ephesian church is struggling. The church must rekindle its fire and recover its excitement about the Gospel. This is a big challenge especially for a church like Freeland that is full of reticent Scots. But we can do more to encourage one another and not rely on the minister to do all the hard work. Submitting to one another is something else that does not sit well with the Scottish temperament. As Christians we must listen to each other and learn from one another, submitting to the truth even if we do not.

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## **Sunday Evening 15th September 2013 - Kenneth Gray, Ephesians 4: 17-32 'Escaping futility'**

Continuing his teaching of the Gentiles in the Ephesian church Paul tackles the question being asked by those converted regarding whether all the Gentiles were going to be saved. Paul urges the converted Gentiles to be different from their unconverted brethren. So many Gentiles were living sinful lives and refusing to accept the Good News. Their hard hearts made them resistant to the Truth and determined to continue living lives of greed and immorality. *"Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, and they are full of greed."*

Kenneth observed that it is often the case that something of the old ways of doing things, old behaviours, old attitudes persist whenever when people undergo some major change in their lives. Thus for the new Gentile Christians there had to be a concerted effort to shake off some of their former practices and ways of thinking when they came to faith in Christ. What was true for this early Christian era in Ephesus is also true for us in our post-Christian era. Western society is currently rejecting Christ and discounting the

Christian religion as irrelevant but many Christian values persist in people's thinking and underpin society's institutions.

The aim of the Reformation was to return the Church to what was regarded as its simpler, uncorrupted New Testament roots. The Ephesian society Paul describes sounds familiar to us. The Evil One has managed to create in our times a society that is very like that New Testament society from whose contamination Paul desires to protect the young church in Ephesus. The modern church is surrounded by pleasure seekers who have given themselves over to every kind of immorality. Society's 'heroes' are being found to have feet of clay and popular celebrities are regularly being exposed as indulging the basest of proclivities.

People today continually accuse the church of ignorance and describe Christians' beliefs and practices as 'mediaeval'. The church is urged to be 'more enlightened' in its views. Some church leaders would have us believe that 2 thousand years ago people were ignorant about what was sinful - this is untrue. Paul spells out for the early church exactly what practices are sinful for a Christian. He exhorts the Ephesians to put off their old selves and live a new way as God intends. The Holy Spirit inspires Paul to write uncompromisingly to the New Testament church about how they should now be living.

It is still important today that the church 'holds the line' without compromising the Truth. We must not airbrush away the differences between the church and the society which surrounds it - between the old lives and the new. If the Sheep start to look like the goats they will begin to act like them too.

The futility of their thinking made the Gentiles vulnerable and we too must guard against such error. Kenneth commented that we sometimes know a thing is futile but it doesn't stop us doing it. For example people, seeing a building on fire, will run to fill buckets of water and throw them on the blaze risking their own safety in a desire to do something rather than nothing until the fire tenders arrive.

The truth of the Gospel should be the only currency in which we operate and in the battle to win souls for Christ prayer is the strongest weapon we have. When we fear the Evil One is gaining ground and begin to think we cannot stand against him we must never forget that the One who is in us is greater than the one who is in the world.

In verse 25 Paul is forthright. *"Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbour, for we are all members of one body."* He is hitting at 2 types of falsehood: 1) the blatant lie and 2) avoiding the truth. He also says "In your anger do not sin". Kenneth admitted how easily anger could take hold of him about trivial things - like a driver cutting ahead of him on the road or the 'android' voice in the call centre failing to resolve his issue - whereas he found it harder to whip up anger about the important things. Anger robs us of reason, judgment, compassion. Christians should be different from the rest of the world.

It is said the Devil makes work for idle hands and here Paul advocates that *"Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need."* He also warns against unwholesome talk including things like spitefulness and gossip that destroy rather than build up relationships.

Our talk should be about Christ. The church should be excited about Jesus and keen to take every opportunity to tell people about him. We should be like a new parent when the baby arrives - unable to contain our joy. This is what folk outside the church should be able to sense about the church community - a bubbling up of joy that never wanes.

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# Sunday Evening 8th September 2013 Kenneth Gray

## Ephesians 3:14-21; 4: 1-16

Kenneth observed that nothing a preacher might say can make the Bible any better than it already is. Whether it is an OT passage listing genealogy, a lyrical passage from Psalms or a wonderfully descriptive passage like this NT letter of Paul's, the Word is inspired and inerrant such that it almost seems superfluous to preach on it.

Paul here is painting a picture of what the church should be like. The challenge for us is to assess how far this description matches what the church today is actually like. Last week we looked at Paul's sense of the unique ministry to which he had been called - to encourage the Gentile believers and reassure them that God's love, mercy and grace was for them as much as for the Jews, his chosen people.

The Jews were proud of their ancestry. They were descendants of their father Abraham and nothing could change that. Jews today still regard themselves as Abraham's children. Paul has made it clear to the Gentiles that they share in the same inheritance and that they too bear the most beautiful name of Jesus. In verse 14 Paul now tells them 'For this reason I kneel before the Father'. There is no commandment, no special instruction in Scripture that requires us to kneel when praying. However there are some situations that we pray about where we feel it right and appropriate to kneel when we are approaching God in prayer. Our most fervent, heartfelt prayers are likely to be those we make on our knees. So here Paul emphasises the fervour of his prayer by mentioning that he is on his knees.

And what is Paul's prayer? *'I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.'*

As a minister Kenneth has encountered many people in the church who find it very difficult to articulate their faith. For some faith is something they have never attained despite regular church attendance over many years. They may have listened to the Gospel year in year out but there has been no significant change in their lives. Such people, and unbelievers outside the church, find committed Christians strange and difficult to relate to because we have such confidence about our faith.

This can be very off-putting for non-Christians. It's a bit like being in a maths class where the teacher begins to explain a complicated theorem and there's the one person who immediately 'gets it' almost before the explanation is finished. Everyone else is struggling to keep up and some never 'get it'. This enviable facility of that individual does not endear him to his peers - rather, everyone resents the seeming ease with which everything has 'clicked into place' for him. They feel diminished. So it is when someone expresses his or her lively, genuine faith in Jesus Christ - it can have the same effect. The great blessing we enjoy can also be a discouragement for others but there's nothing we can do about that and we certainly should not down play the strength of our faith or our joy at being redeemed. We do need to pray, as indeed Paul prays, that people come to know Jesus, be open to the faith and grasp it, so that they may *'be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God'*.

God is pouring that fullness of knowledge into finite bodies. As God pours in something must flow out to make room for this new gift, so we get rid of the rubbish which fills our minds. Paul wants the Ephesians to be filled up with God and to discard everything that impedes the growth of their faith and the service they render.

Kenneth recalled a sermon by Rev. George Duncan where he commented that psychologists claim that we never forget anything. For example if we do something wrong it remains like a scar on our memory, a persistent blot on our conscience that can hamper our capacity for emotional development. If we fill our minds with rubbish and sinfulness it stays there unless we 'fill ourselves up' with God. Paul tells the Ephesians that 'God is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us'. Some of us will never be clever, artistic, athletic, beautiful, popular etc. but all of us can be filled to the full extent that God can endow. Thus Paul concludes this intense prayer extolling God's glory.

Chapter 4 opens with an exhortation *'As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.'* Kenneth remembered when an ex prisoner joined the accountancy firm where he worked. It is a hard thing to be an 'ex con' - people will always think differently about you because you have been convicted of wrongdoing. At first this colleague was scared to talk to anyone in case they asked awkward questions or in case he got hurt by their attitude. He was not proud to be a prisoner. Here, though, Paul is proud to be a prisoner of the Lord. Most of us, thankfully, will not be imprisoned for our faithfulness to Jesus Christ but we may well be ridiculed, misunderstood, excluded or victimised in various hurtful ways.

We must be aware that the Evil One twists things and engineers bad situations in our lives then says 'What kind of God is this that puts you, his followers, through such terrible experiences?' Paul is a great example of how a believer should respond to Satan's undermining and to adversity. The trouble is that most of us do not live lives in line with our calling as followers of Jesus.

In verses 1 to 6 Paul outlines Christian attributes and behaviours that the church has ignored probably more than any other Scriptural teaching and as a result it is now frequently characterised by anger, conflict and disunity.

But living as Paul describes does not mean that 'anything goes'. We are often lazy in our thinking but we need to be able to exercise true humility, gentleness, patience etc. without condoning heresy. What's wrong is wrong and it is not 'loving' to pretend it's right. Those attributes listed by Paul should be our 'default setting' in the church and should underpin the judgment we exercise when assessing how we should respond when challenging situations arise that might require us to sacrifice unity for the sake of truth. In our 275th anniversary year we in Freeland are reminded that our church was formed by breaking the bond of unity.

Paul describes the depth of God's grace. A mathematics lecturer once observed that he could survey a lecture hall full of students and identify those who were grasping the point of the lesson and those who were floundering. He recognised that there is a level of mathematical understanding that each person attains and beyond which they are lost. It's different for each individual. Paul explains *'But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.'*

Our experience will be different from the next person's. We all experience the same saving grace but the way it is manifested in us will be different. Thus God uses the 'apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers' in their various roles to build up the body of Christ. We must not think we have all got to be the same but neither should we make this an excuse for not working at improving our deficiencies. God gives these varied gifts to prepare different people for diverse works of service.

Some people seem never to want to grow up. They resist change of all kinds. An elder once commented that for many people in the church the peak of their Christian education occurs when they are 14 or 15 years old in Bible Class. This is the level of their Christian maturity and they remain comfortable at this level throughout their lives.

We worry about bad people abducting our young children or 'grooming' our teenagers for evil purposes via the internet. We worry because the young are so easily deceived by cunning evildoers. But if we remain immature in our faith we too are easily deceived. Is that not what we see happening in the church? The Evil One does not even have to be terribly clever because we are so easily taken in.

Therefore let us fill ourselves up with Christ and as Paul states *'Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.'*

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# Sunday Evening 1st September 2013. Kenneth Gray, Ephesians 3:1-13 - 'God's marvellous plan for the Gentiles'.

Kenneth commented that we can often feel we owe a debt of gratitude to someone who has helped us come to faith, who first opened the truth of the Gospel for us. Unsurprisingly then, when Paul is imprisoned, the New Testament church is very concerned.

Firstly, they are filled with natural human sympathy for a person in trouble. Secondly, though, for the Ephesian church Paul is not just a preacher **to** the Gentiles he is also an advocate **for** the Gentiles. He has preached against the Jews' reluctance to accept the newcomers as equals, as fellow believers in Christ. Now the Gentiles are worried that their place in the church will be undermined when Paul's authority and influence are curtailed by his imprisonment.

This fear is not groundless. We only have to think about churches in America where the full acceptance of black Christians in traditionally white churches has been slow to happen such that many all-white and all-black churches still persist despite the colour bar having long been removed. Nor is it always a question of race that seems to make it difficult for people to work and witness harmoniously in churches. Sometimes it's differences in age, gender or socio-economic status.

Here Paul is at pains to make it clear that what God has offered to the Gentiles is what he has been longing to give them through the ages. He has now chosen to reveal himself to the Gentiles through the Jews. Paul is now sharing with the Gentiles the Good News that God's love is for everyone. This mystery was revealed to Paul and his special obligation is to share it with the world and the church.

Our first reaction as humans when someone says 'God has laid this on my heart' is to be sceptical. We know there are charlatans and misguided people even in the church and we must remain vigilant for individuals who try to mislead us or who are deluded. But Paul is in Scriptures and we know he is God's chosen instrument. Isn't it amazing, though, that God should choose Paul, the archetype of Jewishness, to advocate on behalf of the Gentiles and to bring to them the Good News? Paul wants the Ephesian Gentiles to know about God's love for them because they have been in his heart for ever. This encouragement for the Ephesians is also a great encouragement for us today.

As Christians in a secularly-minded world we struggle to find new and better ways to evangelise. The young people we encounter seem particularly cynical. Our battle involves perseverance in the face of the prevailing cynicism and disinterest.

Kenneth illustrated his point by describing the train journey between Glasgow and Edinburgh. As we travel along we can look out of the windows and glimpse the backs of people's houses - a more authentic insight into how people live than a look at house frontages. The train periodically stops at a station then moves off again but the town or village where it has stopped remains unaffected by the train's progress. Kenneth felt the church was often like a train. We frequently go about our business and even work hard at it but no-one seems to be affected or changed by our efforts. We in the local church have a tremendous opportunity. The business we are in is to be committed to serving the Lord in this very place for a lifetime.

Paul had previously resisted bringing the Gospel to the Gentiles. It is often an indicator of an authentic calling by God when the individual initially tries to resist it. Paul states: *"I became a minister according to the gift of the grace of God given to me by the effective working of His power. To me, who am less than the least of all the saints, this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ"*

This is another great Christian paradox: How can you make clear the 'unsearchable riches'? The answer is never to stop trying. Paul was not very well qualified to preach to the Gentiles. As a Jew he did not feel they took God seriously enough and they had a different view of the world. Like some benign elderly uncle he



too was set in his ways and uncomfortable with change. Nevertheless, in obedience to God, Paul embarked on the most far-reaching change there has ever been, taking Christianity from a small sect to a world-wide religion. We forget that Paul was writing when the church was operating largely in the Middle East and not in the West. There are now millions of Christians across the world. Although the church is declining in Scotland it is growing in places like China and India. Even our local Presbytery has ministers of Brazilian and Pakistani nationality.

God's plan of salvation is universal. As Paul affirms: "His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Kenneth observed that our newspapers are full of doom and gloom. There are individual tragedies recorded as well as major world conflicts and there seems to be happening a collective headlong rush into sin. It is clear that someone is co-ordinating and organising all these horrors. Even the politicians refer to such acts as 'evil' because deep down they recognise Satan's hand at work seeking to undermine God's plan and purpose for mankind. But God has accomplished through Jesus. Christ has taken upon himself the wickedness - ours and that of every one of his redeemed people.

We always present the best aspects of ourselves to others but inside we know what we are really like. All our defects and deficiencies are now hidden in Christ. Paul teaches that our joy now is that *"In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence."*

Kenneth remembered that when he was moving into the manse some 25 years ago the new carpets he'd ordered failed to arrive when expected. He found the phone number of the supplier's headquarters and rang the MD to find out the reason for the delay. He recalled the consternation of that MD who was concerned mostly to discover how Kenneth had acquired his direct line number.

In most of life's transactions it is very difficult to get straight to the top person unhindered. As Christians we have the unparalleled privilege of direct access to the top at all times. Paul's message to the Ephesians is therefore that they should not worry about his situation and that the Gospel remains the same whether or not he is around.

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## **Sunday Evening 25th August 2013. Kenneth Gray, Ephesians 2:11-22. 'Jew and Gentile reconciled through Christ'.**

In this chapter Paul addresses a big issue for the Ephesian church - the mutual accommodation of the Jewish and the Gentile members. Kenneth recalled that Freeland had experienced a somewhat similar challenge in the past when newcomers were first beginning to come along attracted by the faithful, bible-based teaching. These new people inevitably brought different ways and outlooks and disturbed the status quo. We have now grown accustomed to introducing newcomers and we have learned how to accept and accommodate different approaches and styles, but it took us time to adapt.

Kenneth knew of another church where 90% of the congregation were born-again Christians but their 15 elders had not been converted. There was enormous tension between the members' hopes and aspirations and the decisions taken by the eldership. The elders' stranglehold on church affairs was perpetuated by means of their resistance to the appointment of new elders with different views. Not until this cadre of the unconverted died off did the church manage to move forward! When we see how issues of theology or race or age or gender etc. can divide a church then we see how relevant is this message of Paul still today.

Kenneth remembered listening to a preacher from Malawi who had revealed how difficult it was proving to

elect elders because of the requirement for monogamy in a society where polygamy had been commonplace for generations. The Malawian Christians had found faith in Jesus but had retained their cultural predilection for polygamy.

For Christians from the Jewish tradition the only right way to stand before God was for a man to be circumcised - a concept alien to the gentile Christians. Paul addresses the Gentiles, not as somehow 'second class' converts due to an accident of birth. Rather, they are a people who have been elevated by Jesus to the same status of redeemed souls as their Jewish counterparts. "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ". Paul states that, because of things they could do nothing about, the Gentiles had been excluded from the citizenship enjoyed by the Jews - but now no longer. As born-again people accepted into the family of Jesus Christ they are no longer excluded from the benefits of citizenship.

The church today needs to understand Paul's message. We are all part of the Christian community but unless we are born again we remain foreigners.

The great tragedy of our age is that more and more people live without hope. Kenneth sees this at funerals in the pain and despair experienced by the unbelieving bereaved. For them the end of earthly life is all there is. As God's people we must give an account of the hope that is ours in Jesus Christ. The challenge is to bring comfort without compromising Gospel Truth.

We all know how frustrating it can be to be far away from a desired person or object or place when we long to be near it. Paul paints a picture of our longing to be near God but being estranged from him because of our sin until Jesus brings us near by his blood.

Those of us who have had the privilege of seeing a close friend come to Christ will know what a deeper, closer relationship with them results from their conversion. It doesn't matter how close someone is to grace if they have not crossed into true faith.

We all long for peace. Paul's message is that Jesus is our peace. Peace for the soul comes from being reconciled with God, being in his presence, no longer estranged.

One of the biggest current global issues is how we deal with Islam. Predictions about the approaching numerical superiority of Muslims and the western distaste for many aspects of Sharia law combine to make us fearful. We should not be afraid. Our attitude to Muslims must be one of seeking to win them for Christ. We should be encouraged that millions in the Islamic world are already being converted to Christianity such that even the secular newspapers are commenting about it.

The Islamics are like the 'uncircumcised' to whom Paul is referring. We as individuals are 'temples of the Holy Spirit'. Collectively we are the body that is his church. Whether former Jews or former Gentiles or former Muslims, in Jesus Christ we are made a whole community of God's people - his church. *"And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit."*

Paul's message reminded Kenneth of the Sagrada Familia church in Barcelona, construction of which began more than 130 years ago and is still ongoing with a predicted finish date in 2026. There are conflicting views about the architectural and aesthetic merits of the building and both critics and admirers are very vocal in expressing their opinions. But we cannot see what God sees. We must not criticise and complain about our brothers and sisters in Christ. Every 'building' needs diverse materials to make it strong. The church in Ephesus is being built to God's glory by redeemed people from different traditions and backgrounds. We now are the 'building' where God lives - let us not fall into the trap of thinking of ourselves as 'us' and 'ours' when we are 'his'.

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## **Sunday Evening 18th August 2013. Kenneth Gray, Ephesians 2:1-10. 'From life to death'.**

Paul begins chapter 2 with a reminder to the Ephesians of what God has done for them as well as for himself *"As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins..... But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved."* That same power that raised Jesus from the dead has restored them from the deadly grip of sin and given them new life in Christ.

We all need to be reminded of that from which we have been saved - we forget all too soon. We tend to see the best in ourselves and find excuses for our sinful behaviour. It is human nature to wriggle out of situations where we are at fault and pass the blame to someone else. We only have to watch children squabbling to see neither party wishes to own up to being in the wrong. How familiar is the cry "But he started it!" Similarly, opposing fans at a football or rugby match will each interpret the same infringement on the pitch as the fault of the other side.

This is a problem too for evangelical Christians. We can begin to see ourselves as better than others and to think of ourselves as 'deserving to be saved'. Paul is saying to the New Testament church 'you were dead but now you've been saved' and that message is still true for us too.

Equally, those who have not accepted Jesus Christ have not been saved and are still under Satan's power. We should not be surprised, therefore, about the evil things that occur in the world. The Evil One works tirelessly and we can observe his handiwork today in places like Syria and Egypt where people's hopes for freedom and democracy have been snatched away. But, sadly, most people fail to recognise that they are in bondage to the Devil.

Paul does not mince his words. *"Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath"* The great paradox of the Christian faith is that the God of grace and mercy is also the God of judgment whose abhorrence of sin results in his wrath being visited on the unrepentant. Paul reminds the Ephesians that, despite their sinful natures, God's mercy and Jesus' sacrifice have enabled them to avoid the consequences of their sin. And we too are beneficiaries of that grace and mercy. But we must remain vigilant because the Evil One never gives up trying to lure us back on the sinful path to eternal damnation.

The Prime Minister is currently trying to tighten up safeguards preventing children accessing pornography on the internet. - it seems there are no limits to the depravity of which humans are capable. Satan is clever. He even presents sin in the guise of worldly kindness and 'fair-mindedness' to make us feel better about the wrong behaviours we practise, tolerate or encourage. Paul emphasises that we are evil by nature and it is only by God's grace we have been saved.

For most of us feeling 'rich' is perhaps an unfamiliar experience. Here, though, Paul gives us a beautiful picture of the lavishness of God's grace and mercy describing the unimaginable richness we have been given in the forgiveness of our sins.

Paul says 'all' our sins have been taken from us. For Kenneth this called to mind the picture of an athlete who has given his all in a race and is almost dead on his feet. Jesus comes and lifts him up from his lowest ebb and revives him making him even more alive than he was before. When we come to faith we find new depths of beauty and meaning in the world around us.

God does not save us or nothing. He saves us to be put in the highest place because we are made holy in him. Why then does the world think the church is dead? Kenneth commented that he continually meets young people who are cynical about the Christian faith and view the church as irrelevant to their lives. But when they start to ask questions in small groups or in one-to-one situations and receive sound, truthful answers they have their minds opened. How sad it is that the church gives the impression of deadness!

Paul reiterates that we are saved by grace 'through faith' and even that faith that saves us is a gift from God. People often say to Kenneth "I wish I had a stronger faith". But God does not dole out faith in small measures. If we truly believe, our faith will be sufficient for the service God requires of us and the life he has planned for us. Doing good works does not create faith. We are "...*God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do*".

We are the tools God uses to do good in the world. Tools are better in the hands of the craftsman than in the hands of the amateur. We therefore do better when we serve at God's direction, doing the work he wants us to do and each of us will be given different work to do. Furthermore, it makes no difference in faithfulness whether we are called to minister to 40 or 40 thousand. We will meet people here in Scotland, in Bridge of Weir even, who will never have anyone speak the Word to them unless we do. That is how important our work and witness really are regardless of how insignificant we might feel ourselves to be or indeed how busy and important we might think we are.

Kenneth noted that the newspapers are full of stories about a talented footballer who is not satisfied by his pay scale - a classic case of the individual worker believing himself to be more important than the team. Regrettably, a similar pridefulness can be found in the church. Let us remember this as we undertake our Christian work and witness in this coming week.

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## **Sunday Evening 11th August 2013. Kenneth Gray, Ephesians 1:15-23. 'Giving thanks'.**

Paul's words in verse 16 present a challenge to the church in every generation: "*I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers.*" When did we last praise God and give thanks for the church down the road or in the neighbouring parish? Paul does not question whether the Ephesian church is 'sound' and orthodox in all its practices - he is simply glad that there is a congregation of God's people worshipping him in Ephesus and he thanks God for them. Unlike Paul do we not seem to be more concerned about 'wasting' our prayers by praying for other nearby churches when we could be directing our prayers towards more 'worthy' targets.

During his recent trip to the United States Kenneth had been struck by the apparent lack of interest, even reluctance, among the 1000 ministers attending a conference to get to know one another or explore ways of working together.

Biblical orthodoxy is important to Paul but that's not all that's at stake here. Paul knows God has called these people to service in the church at Ephesus so who is he to question God's plan? We should be similarly concerned for churches we know about that are facing challenges and we should continue to pray for them. There are many churches that are struggling not just in Scotland but also in America. We tend to think of the churches in America as large and thriving. Kenneth visited two such congregations which had thousands of members and annual incomes ranging from \$7million to \$13million. But there are also many churches that are smaller even than Freeland, and many that are struggling to survive. Faithfulness does not always lead to growth.

We should remember to give thanks for neighbouring churches and not think of them as the 'competition'.

Paul has 'not stopped praying' for the Ephesian church. His devotion is untypical of human behaviour. Most of us start projects and tasks enthusiastically then our interest wanes over time. Not so with Paul. He says similar things in many of his epistles and we wonder how he found the time to travel to so many parts of the known world, write and pray for all the different people and situations he encountered. **But Paul's commitment to the Lord's service was total.** He never wasted time or opportunities to do the Lord's work whether travelling, recuperating from illness, enduring imprisonment or preaching to assemblies or groups. We could all pray more if we re-ordered our priorities and organised our time better. Just think how much time we waste watching rubbish on TV for example!

We should not regard prayer as a burden. We do not have to pray for absolutely everything all the time. God lays things on our heart that we feel moved to pray about and our approach to prayer should not be merely mechanistic. Rather, we should become prayer warriors. Paul's specific prayer for the Ephesian church is one that we would do well to pray for ourselves and for others *"I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better."*

We all need to know God better in good times and bad times, in our joys and in our sorrows. We live in an age where people seem to know others less and less. We no longer talk to people - we email. We are becoming detached from one another. It should be different in the church. Church should be a place where we get to know and trust one another and develop honest relationships. The church's business is to find ways to get to know God better and help others also get to know Him. It's not about better buildings, more secure finances or better-structured institutions.

In verse 18 Paul prays that *"the eyes of your heart may be enlightened"*. As a church our hope lies in eternal life in heaven. Paul wants the Ephesians to know that hope. As Christians we don't think enough about heaven. Much of what we do is grounded in earthly endeavour. Despite the familiar aphorism the church is not so 'heavenly minded' as it should be. If it were perhaps its mission would be of more 'earthly use'. It is important for Paul that the Ephesian church comes to know new life in Jesus Christ and discover new hope in the riches of their glorious heavenly inheritance. Heaven is the place where God dwells and Jesus has dominion. As Christians we have confidence that this earthly realm is not all there is.

Paul goes on to remind them of God's power - the immeasurable, incomparable power that raised Jesus from death to life. God applies this amazing power to the work of his church and Paul wants the Ephesian church to rely on this power. It is power that does not spring from human will, skill or intellect but is accessed when God's people accept it and allow God to move in their midst. Paul finishes the passage in speaking of the exalted status awarded to Jesus *"far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come"*.

We are familiar with and often impressed by earthly titles with which people are invested. The royal family, for example, have numerous titles that reflect certain relationships or responsibilities they are considered to have in relation to various people and places. Jesus is placed so far above all such titles as to make them meaningless and inconsequential. **For Christians the only title worth having is 'redeemed'.**

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## **Sunday Evening 4th August 2013. Kenneth Gray, Ephesians 1:1-14. 'Called to holy living'**

Whereas many of Paul's epistles were written to be read by churches in other regions as well as by the congregation to which they were addressed, this letter was intended as a particular encouragement to the church in Ephesus.

Ephesus was a known centre for commerce and trade where idolatry was very prevalent such that when the Gospel was preached there riots took place in the streets in response to the Christians' preaching the doctrine of the One True God.

Paul knew that the Evil One would continue to find new temptations to snare the believers until their resistance weakened. He knew how important it was to encourage the Ephesians and build their confidence and their ability to withstand persecution in the anti-Christian hot spot where they lived. He therefore set about reminding them of their inheritance as God's chosen people - that their salvation is

secure.

Kenneth observed that when children are given spending money on holiday, which they are free to spend however they choose, they often purchase some gaudy worthless plastic toy that we as adults regard as a waste of money but which the children regard as their heart's desire. They may play with it for a short while then it gets discarded never to be picked up again because it has turned out to be less captivating and rewarding than first anticipated. The Christian faith can be like that for some of us. Our first flush of excitement and enthusiasm for the Gospel can be hard to sustain in the face of life's difficulties and we feel our faith is less fulfilling than we had hoped it would be.

Paul recognised that most of the Ephesian believers by this point were gentiles. They lacked that sense of God's purposing throughout history that was familiar to those from a Jewish tradition and upbringing. They had a different way of thinking than their Jewish brethren and were struggling to get to grips with the Judaic mind set. Paul message to them is that they are Christians not because of any whim or any decision they have made but because God has chosen them. Those who are His are His because He has called them and they have responded.

We all know the longing to be chosen for something whether it's team games, a promotion or a lead role in a play for example. To be 'chosen' brings confidence and heartens us. But we are not God's chosen because of anything special in us. So why has God chosen us?

Firstly, he has chosen us "to be holy and blameless in his sight". Those with a conservative stance in the church are often criticised for lacking love and being too judgmental - not seeking to 'live holy lives'. Clearly Paul is urging the Ephesian Christians to be more like Jesus in how they live.

Secondly, God has chosen us to be his sons and daughters "in accordance with his pleasure and will" - It brings him pleasure to have kinship with his chosen people.

Kenneth commented that one has only to look around at society today to notice how little happiness there seems to be among people. A general sense of happiness seems sporadic and very short-lived - ignited periodically by a national sporting achievement or some such event then quickly snuffed out. Brits, apparently, are regarded by other Europeans as the 35th least happy nation and they claim that we work too hard and don't know how to relax and have fun.

Paul reminds us that our faith gives God pleasure but we must ask ourselves how much pleasure do we ourselves derive from our faith? On a recent holiday in Denmark Kenneth discovered that the Danes have a paradoxical view of the church. Over 90% of the people contribute through their taxes to the upkeep of the Danish Lutheran Church but fewer than 10% actually attend church. They see church as a miserable place that they wish to avoid so they take nothing much to do with it.

Paul moves on in verse 11 to explain more to the Ephesian church about their 'chosen' status. "In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory."

Yes, Christian people have been chosen from the beginning of time. However, we only become God's elect when we hear and believe the Word of Truth. Then we receive the seal of his Holy Spirit when we respond by committing ourselves to Jesus. The Spirit is the "deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession".

The concept of 'paying a deposit' against the day when we can purchase something in full is much less prevalent today than it used to be. Paul is pointing forward to the day when 'all will be ours'. But we must not miss the key point Paul is making. In induction and ordination services we talk of the 'gracious gift freely given upon repentance' - indicating that we are required to do something in response to God's graciousness in offering us salvation.

It is wonderful that, even in our seemingly Godless age, people still come into the church in a state of unbelief, hear the Gospel message, are captivated by it and respond by giving their hearts to Jesus Christ.

So many of us in the church have been believers for so many years that we have perhaps forgotten that first wonder and excitement of discovering for ourselves that Jesus loves us and seeks kinship with us. We have forgotten, too, how to share that experience with others. We need reminding about that moment when we first came to faith. Paul's reference to the Ephesian Christians' inheritance aims to be a reminder of the unparalleled graciousness of God towards his followers.

Our inheritance will be heaven. None of the most beautiful spots we can find in this world will stand the slightest comparison with the beauty of the heavenly inheritance awaiting us when we are for ever his and he holds us eternally in his grasp.

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