

## Prayer

We seek Your love, Lord God, for You are the source of all love. Take away any tendency we may have towards jealousy, anger, frustration, bitterness, and every other emotion that pulls the heart away from the purest attitude of love. Of ourselves, we fail, but in Your power, we succeed, and we praise Your Holy Name for this, the liberation of our souls. AMEN

## Prayer Suggestions

### Prayer ideas

*Pray around the continents of the world, and for their many nations, great and small*

### On-going prayers

- ***This week, pray for prisons.*** *Pray for the work of chaplains, and for the salvation of the souls of those who have committed heinous crimes*
- *Give thanks to God for the joy of food, and eating*
- *Pray for the needs of countries in the 'Pacific Rim'*

## Meditation

Now, let us truly honour God throughout our lives – with conviction.

Giving thanks for the privilege of knowing Christ – without doubts;  
Loving everyone with whom He has placed us – without question;  
Leaving time, each day, to study the Scriptures – without complaint;  
Supporting the church through good times and ill – without moaning;  
Doing all in our power to assist the world's poorest – without protest;  
Giving over all our wealth and possessions to Him – without excuses;  
Offering Him every part of past, present and future – without objection;  
Spending time each day to pray and talk to our Lord – without exception;  
Taking every opportunity to speak openly about Jesus – without hesitation;  
Showing love and care for others as our Lord has told us – without dissent;

And remember; all this should come from the heart – with passion.

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## Bible Study - Ephesians 4:7-13

<sup>7</sup> Grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift.

<sup>8</sup> This is why it says, 'When He ascended on high, he took prisoners captive and he gave gifts to men.'<sup>9</sup> (What does 'He ascended' mean except that He came down into the lower regions of the earth; <sup>10</sup> He who came down is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens so that He might complete all things.)

<sup>11</sup> So it was He who gave gifts, some apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors or teachers, <sup>12</sup> to make the saints ready for the work of ministry, and for building up of the body of Christ <sup>13</sup> until we all reach unity of faith and knowledge of the Son of God, full maturity and the complete stature of Christ.

### Thought for the day

#### **Text**

Ephesians 4:11

*So it was He who gave gifts, some apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors or teachers ...*

#### **Thought**

This is one of three great New Testament texts identifying God's gifts to His people. However, people think that an apostle, a prophet, an evangelist, a pastor or a teacher must be a church leader! Leaders certainly need these gifts, but in addition, each gift may also be given to us in less overt ways.

These gifts have been given so that the love of Jesus may be shared (the gift of the evangelist), one may tell another what the Lord said (the gift of prophecy), and we may help each other understand the truths we find in the Bible (the gift of the teacher). These gifts are given to 'each of us' (4:7f)!

## Review

This is a famous text, largely because it contains a list of 'gifts' given by Christ for the '*building up of the body of Christ*' (4:12). If we are to understand this passage, however, we must remember that Paul is writing here about the unity of God's people, the church. The first six verses of Ephesians 4 challenge us to accept that all God's people are united in Christ, and we are not at liberty to discard this. We are either a part of Christ's body, the church, or we are not, and Paul has already made the clearest possible statement about what constitutes the unity of Christ's body (4:4-6).

So here in this passage, Paul explores the proper differences that exist between people, according to the gifts Christ has given us to do His work. They are all gifts of 'grace', and they all come from Him; they are given '*according to the measure of Christ's gift*' (4:7), and this means that the gifts are all found in Jesus and what we know of His real life. They are not a collection of human properties used by God to benefit His church. All of them are aspects of Christ's own character and work; they are listed in 4:11, and they enable us to carry on the work Jesus began here on earth.

At this point, Paul launched into a small diversion, found in verses 8 to 10. When you first read it, you may wonder what Paul is trying to say. He starts in verse 8 with a quote from Psalm 68:18 and then has to explain his use of the quote (4:9,10)! What he says here is slightly different from the psalm, but we will look at this in the 'going deeper' part of the study; nevertheless, his reasoning is clear. Jesus came down to earth, and possibly also to 'Hades' to preach to the dead (as mentioned in 1 Peter 3:19, 4:6). When He had completed His work and defeated both Satan and death (the defeated prisoners – 4:8), He ascended to heaven (see Acts 1:6-11), from where He exercises the authority of God to govern all things by empowering those who have faith in Him through the giving of gifts. This, of course, is God's plan of salvation, previously described by Paul as the 'mystery' of God that has now been revealed (1:9, 3:3,4,6,9). None of us is perfect like Jesus, and no one has all the gifts and graces of Christ. They are divided up amongst us.

The list of gifts found in verse 11 reflects the priority of the early church, which was to grow (see 4:12). It is tempting to identify the five titles mentioned in verse 11 as leadership functions within the church today, as if any local church should expect to find each of these exercised by its pastor or minister, together with a few others in the church. We have already noted that the 'body of Christ' is far bigger than this, of course, and we should also beware of assuming that these gifts are just for those people who do them 'up front'. As with the other great gifts mentioned in Scripture; the spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12 and the gifts of God mentioned in Romans 12, these may be exercised on a large or small scale. Paul says quite specifically in verse 12 that they are '*to make the saints ready for the work of ministry*' (4:12), meaning that when everyone exercises their ministry gifts, then God's ministry to the world will be effective.

There are various theories about the meaning of these three lists of 'gifts' in scripture. If you read the passages themselves, however, you should quickly see the following. The gifts in Romans reflect different ways that faith is expressed in the church, the 'spiritual gifts' in 1 Corinthians reflect different manifestations of the Spirit in each Christian, and in Ephesians, the gifts reflect the tasks given by God to complete the eternal work of God's Kingdom (4:13). This is a grand vision, but it is fulfilled when all God's people play their part.

### Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- The grace given to us (4:7)
- Paul's quote of Psalm 68:18
- The list of gifts and their meaning
- Building up the body

## Notes on the text and translation

**V8** '*he took prisoners captive ...*' This phrase is not easy to translate, and you will find that a number of Bible versions have '*He led captivity captive*'. However this is a quote from Psalm 68:18 (see study), and the natural translation of this text refers to the taking of prisoners after a battle, and the king

leading them into captivity. Both Greek (Eph 4:8) and Hebrew (Psalm 68:18) may be correctly translated in this way.

**V10 'so that He might complete all things.'** Some Bible versions have 'so that He might fulfil all things'. It is not easy to know what this might mean, so because the Greek word used here refers to something that is finished and completed, I have used the word 'complete'. Christ was ascended to heaven as the final work that completed His earthly ministry.

**V12 'to make the saints ready ...'** Most Bible versions have 'for the equipping of the saints ...'. However, the Greek word here refers to something being brought to a state of compete preparedness, perhaps the 'finishing touches' of being ready (for more, see study).

## Going Deeper

### **The grace given to us (4:7)**

The gifts given to us by Christ are gifts of grace, that is, they come from the generous and loving heart of God, who is intent upon enabling each of us to fulfil our potential as individuals within the 'body of Christ'. So having spoken about the unity of all God's people in Christ, Paul now speaks a little about our diversity. People often use Paul's descriptions of the variety of gifts to justify the existence of different churches, or suggest that the task of the evangelists is somehow different from the task of teaching. For example, in many universities today, sadly, those who teach theology have little to do with evangelism, and vice versa! Such attitudes betray a lack of understanding of what Paul says about unity and diversity amongst God's people, and what he says here exposes our divisions rather than justifies them.

God's gifts are gifts of grace, and they are granted according to '*the measure of Christ's gift*' (4:7). Christ is the earthly origin and example of the gifts found in verse 12, and His use of these gifts led to His death and our salvation! Jesus was sent by the Father (the Greek 'apostello' means 'sent'), He spoke the truth about God (prophecy), He won people for the Kingdom (evangelism), He cared for those He loved (He was a 'pastor') and He taught his disciples (teacher). It is therefore consistent with Jesus' life and ministry that we should continue to do His work, with each of us doing some portion or 'measure' of what He did. As soon as we look at our faith in this way, the ministry of the church to the world becomes clearer.

In addition, thinking first about 'grace' means that we are focussed on Christ, and not on ourselves or our own perceived strengths or weaknesses. Christian ministry is based on God's gifts, not natural resources.

### **Paul's quote of Psalm 68:18**

The psalm quoted by Paul reads as follows:

*When you ascended on high,  
you led captives in your train;  
you received gifts from men,  
even from the rebellious—  
that you, O LORD God, might dwell there.*

This describes the arrival of a king in Jerusalem after a military victory. The king would have to lead the procession upwards (ascend) to the hill of Zion, taking with him any captives taken. In the Hebrew, the text clearly says 'he received' gifts, not 'he gave gifts' (as in Ephesians). Some say that Paul misquoted the text, but there is a possible explanation for what he said. When a king made a triumphal entry, he was clearly in receipt of great wealth and honour (as the psalm indicates), but it was common practice for him to hand out gifts from what he had taken in battle and from his general wealth. Both receiving and giving would have happened at the same time, and those more familiar with ancient times and practices would have known this, whereas such practices are foreign to us today.

It is also worth noting that in Paul's explanation of this text, the words 'He came down into the lower regions of the earth' are imprecise. The ancients regarded the earth as the 'lowest place' in relation to heaven, so this could mean simply that Jesus came to earth to do God's will. Alternatively, the words could imply that Jesus went lower to Hades (Hebrew 'Sheol'), the place of the dead, and this is the traditional understanding of what Jesus did between his death and his resurrection (see 1 Peter 3:19 and 4:6). Arguments rage about which of these is right, but it is impossible to decide; the text is genuinely unclear. Though we would love to know the answer to this conundrum, it makes little difference to our interpretation of the text.

### **The list of gifts and their meaning**

It is easy to be confused about the basic meaning of the gifts mentioned here by Paul, because we use them in certain specialist ways in the church today. I will briefly explain what Paul means by them:

1. **Apostle** – The word ‘apostle’ means ‘one who is sent’ in Greek. The Latin for the same word is ‘missio’ from which we get the words ‘mission’, and ‘missionary’. The Bible uses the word ‘Apostle’ to refer to the disciples who were commissioned by Jesus to ‘go into all the world’ (Matthew 28:19) and to Paul, who was commissioned an apostle (Acts 9). Although it seems right to reserve the title ‘Apostle’ for such people, it hardly seems likely that Paul would not have foreseen a time when others would be called and ‘sent’ out with the Gospel to build on what the first Apostles did. Today, we call these people ‘missionaries’, using the Latin to distinguish this work from the title ‘Apostle’.
2. **Prophet** – Although the popular understanding of a prophet is ‘one who foretells the future’, the term means one who ‘speaks God’s Word’. Of course, when a prophet delivers a message, we can expect that God may well be warning us of the consequences of what we are doing, and will say something about the future. In the Old Testament, prophets were rare, but it is an essential part of God’s plan (Numbers 11:29, Joel 2:28-32, Acts 2:18), that the Holy Spirit should be made generally available to God’s people so that all God’s people might prophesy. This only makes sense if we think of prophecy as meaning primarily ‘delivering God’s Word’.
3. **Evangelist** – The gift of evangelism is not mentioned in the other lists (in 1 Cor 12 or Romans 12), and it neatly summaries the nature of the gifts mentioned here by Paul, which are all focussed on the advancement of God’s Kingdom and the declaration of the ‘Good News’. It is important for God’s people both to accept the gifts of great ‘evangelists’ such as Paul, Wesley, or Billy Graham, and also to accept that Christ calls all disciples to the general task of evangelism. Moreover, as this passage makes clear, it is best exercised together with the other ministry gifts, so that as people hear the Word of God and respond to it, those with other gifts will help them and teach them about God
4. **Pastor** – The Greek word used here means ‘shepherd’, and we cannot fail to connect this with the idea of the priest as a ‘shepherd’ as found in the Old Testament (see Ezekiel 34). Ezekiel describes the failure of the priests of Israel, and says they will be replaced by a ‘good shepherd’, a title accepted by Jesus, who says ‘I am the Good Shepherd’ (John 10:2). This passage tells us that the gift of being a pastor (or priest) comes from God, ‘*according to the measure of Christ*’ (4:7). Moreover, Jesus’ own example of pastoral care for others is shown in His attitude of love and service; no one can be a pastor and ignore this.
5. **Teacher** – The teacher is one who teaches. It is often said that the Bible offers a rather dogmatic approach to teaching, but this may be due to the way we use it rather than the true example of teaching it contains. Jesus was an amazing teacher. Using Matthew’s Gospel, we find that He operated like this. Jesus told his disciples what they needed to know (the ‘Sermon on the Mount’, Matthew 5-7), next, He demonstrated His message by healing and setting people free (Matthew 8-9), then he sent the disciples out to do what he had done (Matthew 10-11), and then discussed with them what had happened (Matthew 13f.). Jesus demonstrated highly sophisticated teaching methodology long before such methods were ever ‘discovered’ in modern times!

### ***Building up the body***

All the gifts in this passage are for the building up of the church, that is, for all its members. It is unwise for us to assume that God will give one gift to one person and another to someone else. Observation suggests that these gifts are given in different proportions to the individual Christians. One may be a great teacher, but also someone who is valued as a pastor not formally, but as one who cares for people on a one to one basis. Another may not demonstrate any of these gifts publicly, but be an effective evangelist through reaching out to and caring for others. As soon as we think of the gifts in this way, we open up the possibility that together with the other gifts mentioned in Scripture, we can indeed account for the enormous variety of individuals within the church. Moreover, when they are all expressed together, they ‘build up the body of Christ’ (4:12), which is clearly what Paul had in mind.

The last verse (4:13) is like a climax, looking forward to a day when God’s people will be united in faith and in the ‘full maturity and the complete stature of Christ’. The verse is enigmatic, for on the one hand, it seems easy to say that this is a vision of the future, speaking of the church as God’s Bride, ready for His coming at the end of Time. On the other hand, if this is all it means, then the vision seems rather irrelevant to us now. Why would Paul offer a glimpse of what can never be achieved whilst we live?

Yet by speaking about ‘maturity’ in Christ, this passage challenges us to believe that we should be living as God’s people with maturity in Him and unity in Him as real and practical objective. God’s people are called to work for this unity, and to use the gifts given by grace to proclaim the Gospel by word and deed.

### **Application**

After reading and studying this passage, I cannot escape two conclusions. Firstly, that God’s people should refrain from separating out these gifts of God so distinctly that the terms are only used to refer to specialist

ministries or to define the roles of individuals. To do this mitigates against the fullest understand of the gifts, and Paul calls to all God's people to build up the body of Christ. Secondly, we must not so much seek to understand what single gift God has given, as to find out what combination of them and in what 'measure' (see 4:7) they have been given us. This will help us apply this text not just to ourselves, but to each individual God has made, and do justice to the importance of all these 'gifts' in the ministry of the church.

If we approach the text in this way, we can break down false divisions and begin to bring the Gospel to the world with integrity. People are won for Christ because Christians are sent to preach the Good News, they are challenged to respond, they are cared for, and they are taught. All these things are essential to the success of our 'missionary' endeavour, balanced differently according to the cultural and social needs of the people to whom we are sent. The conversion of the world does not belong to the solo evangelist, and the teaching of the faith does not belong to the theologian, and neither can the pastor make up for the failure of the church in other aspects of its ministry. When the church is in a mess today it is often because these divisions have been made. Let us follow Scripture and seek to follow what it truly says.

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## Questions (for use in groups)

1. What do the gifts mentioned in this passage mean to you, today, and what has this study shown you about what they are and how they are to be used?
2. What do you believe verses 9 and 10 mean? Did Jesus descend into 'Hades', and does this Scripture support this idea?
3. How is the church of Christ built up in your congregation? What do you do to extend the Kingdom of God?

## Discipleship

### Discipleship issue found in this text

- *The grace of God measured in His gifts*
- *The ministry gifts of God*
- *The building up of the body of Christ*

### Personal comments from the author:

*I have not mentioned this in the study, but these gifts are not called 'spiritual gifts'. They are indeed spiritual, but their focus is the ministry of God's people, not personal spirituality. I realise that all too often, people look at Scripture seeking to find some personal benefit from God, but He wants His people to do His will, and this is nowhere more evident than here. When God's people do His will, then they will find His blessing.*

### Ideas for exploring discipleship issues

- *After reading this study, reflect carefully on your own gifts. How are they balanced within your own life? How do you know which gifts the Lord wished you to exercise? Discuss this with another Christian.*
- *Have a good look at your own church. To what extent does it exercise the entire ministry written of here. Should it do this, and how should it work with others to perform the whole 'ministry of Christ'?*

## Final Prayer

Jesus Christ, You have set an example for us that is incredibly challenging, and we frequently fail to live up to its heights. Encourage us to persist in faith, so that we may continue to preach the Gospel and grow the Kingdom of God in our midst. As we ask this, we give You praise and glory. AMEN

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