

Ephesians

An encyclical letter from the heart of CHRIST
through the heart of Paul to the heart of the Church of all time

by

Walter C. Wright

Moody Colportage #258

Copyright © 1954 by The Moody Bible Institute of Chicago

CHAPTER THREE

FOLLOWING THE WRITER'S GAZE

AS WE HAVE ALREADY SEEN, this letter appears to have been a circular letter, intended particularly perhaps for the church at Laodicea, but for a group of churches in Asia Minor, of which Ephesus was the seaport town. With the exception of the members of the church at Ephesus, those for whom the Epistle was written were nominally strangers to Paul. And yet we must not forget that many who were living in other cities of Asia Minor had heard the Gospel from the lips of Paul when they had visited Ephesus during his residence there (Acts 19:10).

The Epistle was not written with polemical intent: it was not designed to counteract any doctrinal error; it was not called out by any special exigency; it was not colored by local circumstances and conditions. It was in a peculiar way *a revelation*. It was a revelation from the heart of CHRIST, through the heart of Paul, to the heart of the Church of all time.

In the earlier part of the first chapter, the apostle has looked back into the limitless past, and in the spirit of revelation there has been opened up to him the secret counsels of GOD; he has seen GOD exercising gracious and sovereign choices, according to the good pleasure of His will. And then he has looked forward into the equally limitless future and has seen all things being gathered together in CHRIST. And finally, in the closing section of the chapter, he looks upward and sees CHRIST exalted and enthroned in the heavenly spheres, above all conceivable rivals - gloriously and unapproachably dominant.

Let us follow the apostle's eye as he looks in these three directions, and look with him. Let us follow him first in his forward look, for in that we have an intelligent disclosure of the ultimate purposes of GOD for the entire universe.

"That in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him" (v. 10).

We looked at this statement before: we saw that dispensation means literally house management. CHRIST is the Steward of the household of GOD. He is dispensing the government of GOD. And the ultimate purpose of GOD in connection with the administration of the universe is to sum

up, to gather together, to recapitulate, to head up all things in CHRIST. But this summing up of which the Apostle speaks is not a mechanical co-ordination. It must in some way be the expression of a vital union. If that be so, then CHRIST is in some, perhaps mysterious, way related to the material cosmos as well as to the intelligences of the universe to angels and men. This is indeed so.

He stands related to the material order in at least four ways:

- He originated it in creation.
- He co-ordinates everything and holds it together.
- He has identified Himself with it in the mystery of the incarnation.
- He has reconciled all things through the cross.

First: He originated the material universe.

The association of GOD with the physical order is a habit of mind which has become very rare, even with religious people. If we turn to the songs and prayers of the Hebrew people we find constant recognition of GOD as the Creator and Sustainer of the physical order. We find the same thing also in the prayers and sermons of the primitive Church. But religious people today have come so much to associate GOD with a book that they have well-nigh forgotten that He made the world. But nevertheless "**all things were made by him.**"

We think of the Bible as GOD's book, but when we say that we are thinking only of the truth. But He not only originated the truth that is in the book: in the final analysis of things He made the Book. All the elemental substances which have gone into the materials of the book - the leather, the parchment, the silk, the ink; all these came from His creative hand. The truth is His, but the paper is His also! This is CHRIST's first point of contact with the material universe: He originated it.

In the second place: He not only originated it: He co-ordinates everything and holds it together (Colossians 1:17).

He is the invisible spiritual bond of the universe. He is the magnetic force: He is the unseen principle of cohesion. Everything inheres in Him. We speak of the laws of mutual attraction, of chemical affinity, of cohesion, of gravitation. Is it possible that these laws are the moods and methods of CHRIST? We are not left to speculation on these questions. The scientist cannot give us the final explanation of gravitation: the Scriptures tell us that the explanation is CHRIST.

And then, in the third place, He identified Himself with the material creation in the mystery of the Incarnation.

He came into the visible order, not as a Creator but as a Creature. Man is said to be a microcosm of the universe. If this be indeed so, then in His human body CHRIST identified Himself with the material order.

And, in the fourth place, He took this human body - "a little world" - and in that body made a reconciliation for the universe - "**things in earth, [and] things in heaven.**"

Observe how these points of contact with the material universe are brought out in the first chapter of the Colossian Epistle:

"For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him: And he is before all things, and by him all things consist... And having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven" (Colossians 1:16, 17, 20).

It is because, then, of this close and intimate and vital relationship to the physical order that it is possible for all things to be gathered together in Him. Both by creation and redemption CHRIST sustains the most vital and intimate relations to the material world; and that relationship will assert itself in a dominant form.

We return then again to 1:10:

"That in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him"

When, however, the Scripture speaks of the gathering together of all things in CHRIST, the thought is not confined to the material universe. There are in view also spiritual powers, moral forces, economic factors, political units - everything that relates itself to human life; and above all humanity.

And so the apostle continues in the next verse:

In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will (verse 11).

He came into a disintegrated and disordered universe, and set up a new order by the sacrifice of His own life. He made a new beginning of everything in Himself. He inaugurated a new creation, and set it in motion when He arose from the dead; and He has made a new center of attraction in His own person as Redeemer. This, then, is the forward look.

But before GOD gathers together all things in CHRIST He gathers out an elect people. And that brings us to the backward look.

The apostle has looked out into the aeons that stretch themselves into the illimitable future, and has beheld a consummation; but before he has done that he has looked into the equally illimitable past, and in that he has seen a purpose. And this look at the stretches of time that lie behind is not the gaze of human speculation - not if we accept his own testimony on the point.

It is revelation. To use his own expression, it is "**revelation in the knowledge of him.**"

As he looks into the past in the spirit of revelation, what does he see? He witnesses something proceeding in the mind and heart of GOD: he speaks of it as "**the good pleasure of his will**"; "**the mystery of his will**"; "**the counsel of his own will.**"

And while these counsels of GOD affect the entire universe, the revelation gathers more particularly about humanity. And what is he permitted to see as proceeding in the mind of GOD in regard to humanity? He describes it in two words: he sees GOD "choosing" and "foreordaining."

The apostolic Scriptures contain constant allusions to this principle upon which GOD acts. In writing to the Thessalonians this same apostle says:

"But we are bound to give thanks alway to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth: whereunto he called you by our gospel" (II Thessalonians 2:13, 14).

In the same manner the apostle Peter speaks to those to whom he was writing, as:

"Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father" (I Peter 1:2).

Accordingly we read that "**whom he did foreknow ,he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son**" (Romans 8:29).

And so he has looked forward and backward, and now he looks upward. And what does he see? A Man. A Man who has been wounded but is crowned; who has died but is alive; who was crucified but is now glorified. The supreme exaltation of CHRIST.

"He raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come: and hath put all things under his feet" (vv. 20-22).

And this he says is the measure of GOD's power - "**the exceeding greatness of his power to usward who believe, according to the working of his mighty power, which he wrought in Christ.**" GOD took a dead Man and put Him upon the throne of the universe. Thus exalted, and thus enthroned, He represents the Church.

"And hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all" (vv. 22-23).

Let us notice five statements and implications in those two verses:

- (a) GOD has put all things under CHRIST's feet.
- (b) He has constituted Him head over all things to the Church.

- (c) The church is His Body.
- (d) The body of CHRIST is His fullness.
- (e) CHRIST fills all in all.

Shall we take these five statements in their reverse order, and look at them?

(1) CHRIST fills all in all.

It is only very dimly and distantly that we can apprehend the apostle's meaning in such a phrase as this. He conceives CHRIST as being related to the Church, and perhaps to the universe as well, in such a way that He invades with His presence and power the entire order and constitution of things. This thought is developed and expanded in the Epistle to the Colossians as it is nowhere else. The controlling conception of that Epistle is the Allness of CHRIST. Notice how this word and this idea reiterate themselves in the first chapter.

15: He is **"the Firstborn of every creature."**

16: **"By Him were all things created"**; and again, in the same verse, **"all things were created by him, and for him."**

17: **"He is before all things, and by Him all things consist."**

18: **"That in all things He might have the preeminence."**

19: **"For it pleased the Father that in Him should all fullness dwell."**

20: And **"by Him to reconcile all things unto Himself."**

All things radiate from, converge together, and culminate In CHRIST. CHRIST fills all in all.

(2) The Body of CHRIST is His fullness.

Self-expression is one of the instincts of humanity. How early in life this instinct manifests itself! We observe the efforts to evoke the limbs, to control the vocal chords, to co-ordinate the muscles of the face, to express the emotions that begin to surge through the little personality. And the disposition grows with the child; it is not left behind. Self-expression is one of the inner urges of the mature man. Sometimes it paints a picture; sometimes it builds a cathedral; sometimes it writes a book; sometimes it mothers a child. And man is made in the image of GOD. It can hardly be irreverent or unsuitable, then, to reason back from man to GOD. GOD is seeking self-expression. He has expressed Himself in the material universe; He has expressed Himself in a sinless human life. And now He is seeking one more expression of Himself in the mystical Body of CHRIST.

(3) The Church is His body.

This is a great mystery and a great wonder. There is a sense in which CHRIST is complete in Himself. There is a sense in which He is incomplete. He has so conditioned Himself that He depends upon the church to become His fullness. It will be observed that the Apostle does not say that CHRIST is the fullness of the Church, although that would of course be true. What he says is that the Church is the fullness of CHRIST. It is through the Church that CHRIST articulates: He is multiplied in the members of His Body. This conception is underneath that strange statement of the same apostle in which he says in writing to the church at Colosse: **"who now**

rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ, in my flesh, for his body's sake, which is the church" (Colossians 1:24). There were vicissitudes which He could not experience in the days of his flesh; there were labors which He could not undertake; there were sufferings and deprivations which He could not endure. But these incompletenesses are being filled in and filled out by the Church. It is perhaps the same idea which underlies the declaration in the fourth chapter of this Epistle which we are studying.

"Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect [full-grown] man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (4:13).

(4) GOD has constituted Him head over all things to the Church.

It is a body that is under control; it is a body which is functioning; it is a body which is under spiritual domination; it is a spiritual body. It is the very Body of CHRIST. Listen to what this apostle says in another place:

"For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ . . . For the body is not one member, but many . . . Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular" (I Corinthians 12:12, 14, 27).

What is the unifying principle? What is the distinguishing mark of the members of the Body? One Spirit (I Corinthians 12:13) - acknowledging one headship, and one only. He is the Head of the Body.

(5) And then lastly: GOD has put all things under CHRIST's feet.

This is not a hope: this is a FACT. It is true He is not exercising all authority. His foes have not yet been made the "**footstool**" of His feet. But the power is His. It is in reserve. JESUS CHRIST, says Peter, has "**gone into heaven, and is on the right hand of God; angels and authorities and powers being made subject unto him**" (I Peter 3:22).

All this plenitude of power, this mysterious union with the Church, this articulation through the members of His mystical body - all this is in order to dominion.

"The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit thou at my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool. The Lord shall send the rod of thy strength out of Zion: rule thou in the midst of thine enemies. Thy people shall be willing in the day of thy power, in the beauties of holiness from the womb of the morning: thou hast the dew of thy youth" (Psalm 110:1-3).

~ end of chapter 3 ~

<http://www.baptistbiblebelievers.com/>
