The Manifold Wisdom of God

The Household of God in Ephesians 1–4

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The Family of God

My heart cannot get out of Ephesians these days. The household of God, the exaltation of our Lord above all the principalities and powers, the way the whole family of heaven and earth is named by his name; that is what I want to talk about. The eternal family of God is a family grounded in the Father. Jesus told the woman at the well:

". . . the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship Him in spirit and truth" (John 4:23–24).

The Father is the one to be worshiped, in spirit and in truth. That is the central theme of the entire New Testament, and it is the line of continuity that runs from the Old Testament into the New. The Old Testament tells how God called one people out of many in order to bless them and make them a blessing to all the other peoples, so that eventually all peoples would discover the goodness of God and his desire to be their God and their Father, drawing every one of them into the same family.

Paul's burden in Ephesians is to ask: given that, how are we to work with one another? Imagine the cultural diversity inside the churches of Paul's day: Jews still deeply formed by Judaism, Gentiles still emerging out of paganism, all mixed together into this new bag called the

church. Shake it up, press it down, and watch what comes out. There were going to be real challenges. But Paul's claim is that God was going to use precisely that mix (people coming together in humility, working together, recognizing their need for something greater than themselves) to demonstrate to the rest of the world what had previously seemed impossible: that humans can come together under one God, serve one another, and in serving one another fulfill the great commandment to love God with all their heart, mind, soul, and strength.

Grace From the Father, Blessing in the Son

Paul opens Ephesians 1:2 by anchoring the whole letter:

"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ" (Ephesians 1:2–3).

Picture the household. God is the Father. Jesus is the elder brother, and notice, even thirty years after his resurrection, when Paul is writing this around 60 A.D., Jesus is still being identified as the one whose Father is God. He has not stopped looking to the Father. We look to Jesus as the head of this household, our elder brother, the one through whom every blessing flows to the rest of the family. Verse 5:

". . . having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will" (Ephesians 1:5).

Jesus is the unique Son. We are sons and daughters by adoption.

The Mystery in the Fullness of Time

Then Paul opens the lid on what he calls a mystery, something hidden for ages and now coming into view through these little churches popping up across the Roman Empire:

". . . that in the dispensation of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth, in Him" (Ephesians 1:10).

All time has been moving toward this fullness. The fullness began with Jesus establishing the church after his resurrection. And the goal is the gathering together of *all things* in him, heaven and earth singing one song. Earlier we sang of the angels crying "Holy," and all creation crying "Holy." That is what is being gathered.

David anticipates this in Psalm 8:

"What is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that You visit him?" (Psalm 8:4).

Throughout Scripture there is the recurring sense, Paul references it more than once, that the angels are watching humanity, looking in to see whether we will do what God has called us to do. The answer Ephesians gives is that God both commands and empowers us. He doesn't only tell us to be sons and daughters; he makes us sons and daughters by his Spirit.

Sealed by the Spirit

> In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory. (Ephesians 1:13–14)

The seal language goes back to the Old Testament, where the angels of God marked out those who were to be protected and identified as the people of God. Paul says you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit, and that seal is the *guarantee* of your inheritance. Notice the family language. Why do kids stay around their parents long-term? The inheritance, of course. (I'm

kidding: sort of.) Paul is using household and inheritance language because that is the frame: We are heirs in a household.

Verse 17 calls God "the Father of glory." We have been given a measure of his glory through the Holy Spirit; the full manifestation is still ahead. And then Paul alludes to Isaiah 11, the seven-fold Spirit that was promised to rest on the Messiah:

> . . . that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints. (Ephesians 1:17–18)

The same Spirit of wisdom, revelation, and knowledge that rested on the Messiah to help the Father set all things right is now resting on his people. The Spirit that helped Christ set all things right is now setting on us, that the eyes of our understanding may be enlightened to know the hope of his calling. And there are real questions to answer in life, but the answer to all the deepest questions is this: God is your Father. Are you part of the household of faith? Are you holding to Jesus Christ? Are you allowing his Spirit to work in you? Do you understand the hope of the calling that came with the Spirit when he was placed inside you? Because with the Spirit comes every gift and every calling needed for that hope to be lived.

Above All Principalities and Powers

Paul keeps building. Verse 19, the same exceeding greatness of God's power that raised Jesus from the dead is at work in us. Verse 20:

> . . . which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named . . . (Ephesians 1:20–21)

Christ has been exalted above every power. All the principalities that brought hell and pressure and evil and domination on the people of God are now under his feet. When Christ is in his right place, our problems start to fall into their right places. Paul is quoting Psalm 110:

"The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool'" (Psalm 110:1).

Then comes the audacious move:

". . . and He 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 who fills all in all" (Ephesians 1:22–23).

It seems audacious to think we are the body of Jesus Christ on earth. But if the head is in heaven above all principalities and powers, and you are part of the body, then this is not a headless body and not a bodiless head. We are joined to him. We are *in* Christ Jesus. And if we are in him, then we too are above every principality and every spiritual wickedness in dark places. The problems that affect us are at our feet, because we are in Christ. Once we get into our right place, everything else starts to take its right place.

"But God"

Chapter 2 then explains how we got into that place. We were dead in trespasses and sins. We were once moved around by the prince of the power of the air, the spirit at work in the children of disobedience. That's what we *were*. Verse 4:

"But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)" (Ephesians 2:4–5).

"But God." The power of God's love, brought to bear on his creation, is the difference between being driven by the air and being alive in the Spirit. When you feel inadequate, when

you feel like you are not up to the task, remember: the power of God's love has already gone into action for you. That love began before the foundations of the earth and runs all the way through the stream of time until every tear is wiped from your eyes. That flow of love is more powerful than the prince of the power of the air who works in the children of disobedience. Any dead fish can flow downstream. But when God's power comes into you and brings you to life, you can kick against the current of this world and become what you were created to be in Christ Jesus.

Breaking Down the Middle Wall

Paul then moves into the heart of the chapter, the bringing together of those who had been kept apart:

> For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace. (Ephesians 2:14–15)

How was Paul able to walk into pagan cities, plant churches in them, watch Jews come out of the synagogues and Gentiles come out of pagan temples, and have all of them sit down at one table together? It looks impossible from a distance. Paul says: he became our peace. Is there anything that separates you from another person? Is there a rift even within yourself? God has broken it down in the peace of Jesus Christ.

Picture Jesus on the cross. His mother stands at the base. His aunt stands beside her. Mary Magdalene. John, by name. The other disciples are scattered: some watching from a distance, most fled. And then there is the Roman soldier, who will be the very first to declare, "Truly, this Man was the Son of God!" (Mark 15:39). Look at that scene. Jewish women in grief,

a Roman soldier in awakening faith, and Jesus on the cross is already joining them into one body. He is still doing that work today.

"For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father" (Ephesians 2:18).

This is why the Lord came: that we would have access (Jew and Gentile alike, and now humanity at large) to the one Father. No more strangers and foreigners. Fellow citizens with the saints. Members of the household of God. Then Paul shifts the metaphor:

> . . . having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. (Ephesians 2:20–22)

Household, Father, temple, dwelling place, exalted above the things of earth, delivered from death, living true life, all of these images come from Genesis. Walk back through Genesis and you see the enmity in the garden, the warfare beginning between the woman and the serpent, and embedded in that, the promise that God would bring a new man, a seed who would crush the serpent's head. That promise is what is happening here.

The Mystery: Fellow Heirs

In chapter 3, Paul names the mystery directly. Verses 6 and 9:

> . . . that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel . . . and to make all see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ. (Ephesians 3:6, 9)

Fellow heirs. A fellowship in the mystery. That is a problem for us, because most of us would rather have a homogeneous church. "I love my white church," fill in your own version of

that. Why is the most segregated time of the week ten o'clock on Sunday morning? At work, I see diversity. At every other public space, I see diversity. But on Sunday we tend to gather with the people most like us. That is the biggest indictment to the church of Jesus Christ that there is.

Of course, in some communities, racial diversity simply isn't on the demographic table. But the kingdom of God should be the kind of thing that constantly breaks down middle walls of partition. It is a fellowship of diversity: *unity without uniformity*. God works some mysterious thing in the plurality of cultures and people who are all holding to the head together. And outsiders look at it and say, "How is it that *they* can worship with *them*?" How can Democrats and Republicans and independents and libertarians sit in the same congregation? How can socialists and capitalists be in the same body? How is it possible? Roll up your sleeves. *Be the people of God.* That is what this is all about.

All those things (racial divisions, language divisions, political divisions, economic divisions) those are insignificant attributes that aren't part of your fundamental character as a human being. On your deathbed, no one declares, "Thank God I was a Republican." What you will say is, "Look at the people God put in my life: my spouse, my children, the people I worshiped with and worked with, what they brought to me and what I gave to them." That is the power of being in the household of faith. Don't let some peripheral attribute affix itself to you and define who you are. Don't let it constrain your love. God himself has to overcome our political, economic, social, cultural, racial, and linguistic differences in order to communicate with us. The flow of his love is not constrained by those things. So we don't let them constrain *our* love either.

In a polarized world, you will shine as light in the firmament if you embrace that kind of being. It is what Paul calls New Humanity: new-creation humanity. And it is paradoxical.

The Manifold Wisdom of God

Paul names the goal in verse 10:

> . . . to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places, according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Ephesians 3:10–11)

This is the intent. This is the purpose. This is the end goal of God's love. That through *the church,* the manifold wisdom of God would be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places. What an audacious goal.

Do you know what that word *manifold* means? Many-colored. The image is of a prism. As light strikes a prism, it refracts into every color of the visible spectrum. The church is meant to be that prism (multi-faceted, multi-colored) taking the white light of the glory of God and refracting it out to the world in every visible hue. There will not be one person left without an excuse. There will not be a principality, a power, a person in this world unable to see, through the refracted light of the church, the love of God that drew salvation's plan.

That is why Paul, two verses later, just bows his knees:

> For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man . . . that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height, to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. (Ephesians 3:14–19)

How about all that *all*? The love of God does not miss anybody, including you and me. It is a love that keeps filling. Habakkuk and Isaiah both promise it: the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea (Habakkuk 2:14; cf. Isaiah 11:9). Water pretty much covers the seas, doesn't it? So you can read that as a complete coverage. And it is *through the church* that knowledge spreads. The gospel is good news for everyone out there. The door is open. *You* are part of the family. You get gifts. That's the news. Welcome to the kingdom of God, not, "here is your list of rules," but, "you get to be changed forever." You were dead in trespasses and sins, and now you are alive, you are new creation, all the power and potentiality of the Spirit of the living God now dwells in you to make sure that every other person hears and knows that God wants them in his house.

And then chapter 3 closes:

". . . to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen" (Ephesians 3:21).

Forever and ever. When you walk through the genealogies of Genesis ("the generations of Seth were . . .," "the generations of Cain were . . .," "the generations of Noah were . . .") those generations are immaterial compared to the generations of God the Father, forever and ever. Amen.

Therefore, From the Prison

Now we get to chapter 4, and it begins with a *therefore* that has been earned by three chapters of sustained revelation. Because of all that (the high and lofty statements of who God is, who Christ is, who *we* are, what the principalities and powers are, what has been done) therefore:

> I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing

> with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (Ephesians 4:1–3)

Just let one phrase land: “the prisoner.” Paul is writing this from prison. How victorious does that sound? When your boss is writing you a letter from prison, it looks like *they* are winning the day. But Paul inserts the word almost as an aside, because in this inverted kingdom, what we think is power is actually weakness, and what we think is weakness is actually power. The prisoner is strong. The powers are weak.

Every one of us has been given a calling. This is our vocation, our work, our labor. And how do we do it? With lowliness. With gentleness. With longsuffering, that patient endurance for one another while we are all growing up. We are not made into mature saints overnight. There is a development. God is working on us, growing us, maturing us. While that maturation is happening, we need patience with one another. Then we *endeavor* (that’s work; we work hard) to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. The peace that made us all one was found at the cross of Jesus Christ; it is maintained when we all bear our cross and follow him.

One

> There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all. (Ephesians 4:4–6)

All that *oneness*. The reason the church has to maintain this unity is that the principalities and powers are watching, ready to say, “See? They can’t even keep it together. The church always corrupts itself.” That is the world’s standing indictment of the church. And, let’s be honest, the indictment is rightful. The world knows we ought to be different. If the story we tell about Jesus and the Father is true, then our lives should look different. Every time we live just

like everyone else, the principalities and powers whistle through the graveyard. “Whew, glad that wasn’t true. Look at them.” Every time we fail to show the unity of one God, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one body, the powers feel themselves off the hook. But the one God and Father, who is above all and through all and in us all, sees all and is acting in us to bring deliverance.

Gifts to His People

“But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ’s gift” (Ephesians 4:7).

Paul has been speaking about a vocation given to all the saints, but without specifying yet what gifts that vocation comes with. He has been saying, “When you exercise your gift, do it with lowliness, gentleness, longsuffering, bearing with one another in love.” Now he turns to the gifts themselves, by way of a striking citation:

“Therefore He says: ‘When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, and gave gifts to men’” (Ephesians 4:8).

Paul is quoting Psalm 68, but with a twist. Psalm 68:18 says the conquering king *received* gifts from men:

“You have ascended on high, You have led captivity captive; You have received gifts among men” (Psalm 68:18).

In its original setting the psalm pictured God as a great warrior who went down into Egypt, plundered the Egyptians, and brought back gifts to Mount Sinai, a great king returning home with bounty. But the king we serve operates an inverted kingdom. Paul says: He is not *receiving* gifts from us, as though he needed anything. He is *giving* gifts to us. By the time this great king reaches his temple and takes his seat at the right hand of the Most High, he has doled

out all the treasures he might have kept. He has brought the end of exile, the fulfillment Daniel saw, right here in Jesus Christ. And what he distributes is gifts.

"And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ" (Ephesians 4:11–12).

Apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers, given to *equip* the saints for the work of ministry. This is not an exhaustive list of gifts; 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12 list many more. The point is the purpose: equipping the body to know how to behave as children of God. Every gift is for the building up of the people of God.

Growing up Together

> . . . till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting. (Ephesians 4:13–14)

"To a perfect man." I used to read this as though it were about *me*: about my growing up in faith, becoming a mature individual believer. That is a Western reading. But the perfect man here is the church, taken together. We grow up so that *together* we may be a representation of God in the world, a corporate testimony of his glory. We are no longer children tossed by every wind of doctrine, susceptible to the shell-games and dice-work of men (which is the actual Greek behind "trickery").

". . . but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head: Christ" (Ephesians 4:15).

I wish I had a dime for every time someone has said to me, “I feel the Lord wants me to speak the truth in love to you,” and by the time they were done, I felt anything but love. I got a whole lot of their truth. Speaking the truth in love is not getting an opportunity to tell somebody how they are not living up to what God called them to. That is not what this verse is about. *Speaking the truth in love is speaking the truth of the love of God in Jesus Christ, the truth that brings peace to humanity.* That is what we are commissioned to speak.

Are there times for correction between brothers and sisters? Yes. There is a process for that: Jesus lays it out in Matthew 18: go to your brother privately, then with one or two more, then before the church. We don’t dismiss correction. But this verse is not the proof-text for confrontation. This verse is the gospel-as-truth-spoken-in-love.

Joined Together

> . . . from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love. (Ephesians 4:16)

Get this verse tattooed on your forearm. The whole body, *joined and knit together*. (Knitters and crocheters, picture how tangled that is.) Every joint supplies. Every part does its share. Every member of the body of Jesus Christ has a thing to do. You have a gift. You have something to share. And the result is that the whole body grows for the edifying of itself in love.

That doesn’t sound like a super-pastor-led church, does it? That looks like a body with one super-pastor, Jesus Christ, who is head over all things, from whom the gifts and callings flow, and within which every member supplies its part. The whole body grows. What an organic, beautiful thing that is.

No Longer Walking as the Gentiles

Then Paul turns to a sharp correction, and we don't emphasize this enough. The church of Jesus Christ stands in the courthouse of public witness, and there are people testifying against us. Paul says:

> This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart; who, being past feeling, have given themselves over to lewdness, to work all uncleanness with greediness. (Ephesians 4:17–19)

That is the old life. And here is the warning: if we bring the old life into the new life and try to lead and minister in those terms, our leadership will come off as domination, control, manipulation, subjugation, and fear. That is how the Gentiles walk. That is how they manage things. But the people of God lead another way: lowly, gentle, longsuffering, patient, bearing with one another, endeavoring for unity. Division is what sin brings. The righteousness and holiness of the Spirit bring people together in unity.

Put on the New Man

> But you have not so learned Christ, if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus: that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness. (Ephesians 4:20–24)

As you let the spirit of your mind be renewed, I'm going to give you grace to grow up. As I'm being renewed, give me grace to grow up. If I lead and at times fall back into the patterns

of the Gentiles, show mercy. As you lead and fall into those patterns, I'll show mercy and forbearance. Because this is a journey. Be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new man, created according to God in true righteousness and true holiness.

True holiness is where I want to land. The justice of God is not retributive. It is restorative. It restores. That is what we have been called to. And he has not just given us the *command* to walk in it. He has given us the *Spirit* to do it.

If you keep reading into chapters 5 and 6, you find the practical outworking, husbands and wives, parents and children, employers and workers, the whole web of relationships in which the new man is lived out. And it ends with the great chapter on the spiritual battle: "For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God" (cf. 2 Corinthians 10:4). We have joined the Lord in this battle. He has called workers into this work. And the work is the slow, patient, joyful work of being the household of faith, the multi-colored prism through which the manifold wisdom of God is made known to a watching world.

That is enough for today.