

07. Ephesians 4:1-10



## Living the mystery (4:1 - 6:9)

### Ephesians 4:1-3

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg [παρακαλεω] you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, <sup>2</sup>with all humility (ταπεινοφροσύνη) and meekness (πραΰτης), with magnanimous love [μακροθυμία], bearing with one another in love, <sup>3</sup>making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

The central revelation proclaimed in the gospel concerns the all-embracing nature of God's love, and God's will that all peoples be bound together in love in the church. Paul begins his exhortations by appealing for unity. The word translated here by 'beg' is the Greek *parakaleō*. Paul is conscious of being an instrument of the **call** that is coming from the risen Christ.

‘with humility’ (ταπεινοφροσύνη)

Thinking of oneself as being ‘low’ (ταπεινος)

Being ‘low’ has no value in itself, but it does attract God’s compassionate love, and it does hold out hope for redemption.

The following text from Isaiah is typical: ‘Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the Lord has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his lowly ones (ταπεινος)’ (Isaiah 49:13).

Sirach recommends lowering oneself before God: ‘They who fear the Lord keep their hearts prepared and bow down their souls in his presence’ (Sirach 2:17; see also 7:17; 18:21).

Greek moral philosophy, outside the Bible, has no place for ‘thinking of oneself as low’. ταπεινοφροσύνη does not occur prior to Paul. Shortly after him we find it being used by Plutarch, Epictetus and Josephus, but always as a vice, never as a virtue. As they use ταπεινοφροσύνη, it is best translated ‘small-minded’ or ‘mean-spirited’. It is the equivalent of having a low self-esteem.

In the Greek Old Testament the related adjective [ταπεινοφρονος] occurs once: ‘A person’s pride will bring humiliation, but one who is **lowly in spirit** will obtain honour’ (Proverbs 29:23).

The related verb (ταπεινοφρονεω) also occurs only once in the Greek Version of Psalm 131 which prepares us for its use in the New Testament: ‘O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvellous for me. But I have calmed [The Greek reads: ‘I think of myself **humbly**’] and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; my soul is like the weaned child that is with me. O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time on and for evermore.’

The following scene from the Gospel recalls Psalm 131: ‘The disciples came to Jesus and asked, ‘Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’ He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, ‘Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven’ (Matthew 18:1-4).

The little child is offered as a symbol of humility for it beautifully captures Jesus’ own childlike trust in the God whom he calls ‘Abba! Father!’ He wants his disciples to have a heart that is humble like his (Matthew 11:29). Because Jesus looked up to God in loving trust, he was able to look up to everyone, delighting in people with the delight that belongs to the innocence of childhood and experiencing it as a privilege to serve them.

All this provides the background to the virtue which appears for the first time in Greek in Paul. 'Thinking of oneself as low' (or 'humility') is an attitude of mind and heart that recognises oneself as God's child, sharing the life of his Son, and therefore as living in total dependence on God. The humble person delights in this dependence, knowing that God is a Father and can be absolutely counted on as a source of life, love and hope.

The self held a central place in the ethics of the Greek and Roman moralists, for they thought of their individual nature as sharing in the divinity. The divine in each person was thought of as identified with the self. It was important, therefore, to recognise and respect one's self, and not to think of oneself in a servile way.

For the Christian the divine Spirit which sanctifies the self is not identical with it but is the Spirit of Jesus: 'It is no longer I who live, It is the Messiah who lives in me' (Galatians 2:20). To know how to obey the divine will, Christians do not look to their own nature and strive to act accordingly. Rather, they listen attentively to the call of the Lord, and strive to be obedient to one in whose wisdom and love they trust.



The highest freedom experienced by disciples of Christ is to be his slave, to allow him to live in them and to find in the freedom given by Christ an opportunity to be 'through love, slaves of one another' (Galatians 5:13). Christians experience a radical and liberating change of perspective: 'If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation' (2 Corinthians 5:17).

In this new creature, humility is a basic virtue. Everything now is possible, not to the one who is most self-sufficient, but 'for one who believes' (Mark 9:24). The self is no less important, but perfection for the self is a flowering of the gifts of the Spirit, and the way to this perfection is in self-giving, after the example of Jesus, and by the power of his Spirit. 'Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it' (Luke 17:33). Humility as a Christian virtue is a sharing in the life of Jesus, the child of God, and in the intimacy of his trust in his Father.

Paul believes that it is Christ who is living in him and in the Christians to whom he is writing. He wants them to let this special trusting dependence of Christ on his Father find expression in their lives too. Then they would have no difficulty in looking up to others, delighting in their gifts, looking after their interests. Humility for a disciple of Christ has nothing to do with belittling self. It is the recognition of oneself as a child of God and a trust that one's self will be created by God's love.

## ‘with meekness’ (πραΰτης)

The virtue of ‘meekness’ shows itself in the bearing of burdens with strength and gentleness without giving way to impatience.

It occurs in Zechariah 9:9, which is quoted by Matthew in relating Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem riding on an ass (Matthew 21:5).

Jesus speaks of himself as being ‘meek and lowly of heart’ (Matthew 11:29)

and includes this virtue among the beatitudes: ‘Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth’ (Matthew 5:5).

**‘with magnanimous love’ [μακροθυμια]**

In describing what love does, Paul begins with the verb μακροθυμew, perhaps best translated ‘Love never stops caring’ (1 Corinthians 13:4).

This is listed by Paul among the fruits of the Spirit (see Galatians 5:22).

The focus is on our sharing patiently in God’s magnanimous love by persevering in doing good and not allowing ourselves to be put off by opposition or suffering. It features as a description of the Lord in the credal statement found in Exodus 34:6 and repeated in Numbers 14:18, Psalm 86:15, Psalm 103:8, Psalm 145:8, Nehemiah 9:17, Joel 2:13, Jonah 4:2.

It is a sharing in the passionate and persistent caring of God that is revealed most persuasively in Jesus ‘loving me and giving himself for me’ (Galatians 2:20).

‘making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace’ (Ephesians 4:3).

‘Making every effort’ translates σπουδάζω, which is an eminently practical word. Paul is calling on them to have more than good will. They are to do everything that is practically necessary for the maintenance of unity. The unity is not one of external conformity. It is unity of ‘spirit’: a sharing of faith, hope and love, and the thoughts, attitudes, and sentiments that flow from such a communion.

‘making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace’ (Ephesians 4:3).

The unity of spirit is, indeed, a ‘**unity of the Spirit**’, just as the peace of which Paul is speaking is the presence of Christ in their hearts and in their communities, for ‘**he is our peace**’ (2:14). Paul is not asking us to create unity or to make peace. The unity that is the fruit of peace is a gift given by God. He is asking that we do all we can to conserve it. There are obvious parallels here with Paul’s call to the Colossians (3:12-15).

## Ephesians 4:4-6

There is one body  
and one Spirit,  
just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, [1:18-19]  
one Lord,  
one faith,  
one baptism,  
one God and Father of all,  
who is above all and through all and in all.

‘For us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things  
and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ,  
through whom are all things and through whom we exist’ (1 Corinthians 8:6).

## There is one body [1:23; 2:16; 3:6]

Paul gives the basic grounds for unity. He begins with the ‘one body’. Paul is speaking of ‘the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all’ (1:23), the church in which Jews and Gentiles have been reconciled to God ‘in one body through the cross’ (2:16), the church in which ‘the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel’ (3:6).

Paul exhorted the Corinthians to keep in touch with the other Christian communities (1 Corinthians 1:2). One thinks of his constant attempts to keep Jews and Gentiles together, and of his collection for Jerusalem, which was also related to this concern for unity. Paul never thought of the communities as being unrelated. How could they be when Christians are ‘baptised into the Messiah’ (Galatians 3:27; Romans 6:3)?



## There is one Spirit

This is 'the promised Holy Spirit' whom both Jews and Gentiles have inherited (1:14), the Spirit through whom both Jews and Gentiles 'have access to the Father' (2:18), the Spirit who gives to the church its life and its unity (4:3)

Thanks to Jesus' life-giving Spirit, we are living in the communion of love which he shares with the Father: 'It is no longer I who live. It is the Messiah who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, loving me and giving himself for me' (Galatians 2:20).

When we welcome in faith this gift of God's grace, we find ourselves with a new principle of life, and we are made able to bear fruit in love (Galatians 5:6). We have been 'set free', for 'where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom' (2 Corinthians 3:17).

All members of the church share 'one hope' (ἐλπίς).

In non-Biblical Greek ἐλπίς means 'estimation' or 'expectation'. We should have a sound basis for our judgment of what the future might hold for us.

In the Greek translation of the Hebrew Psalms and prophetic writings ἐλπίς translates words expressing 'trust' and 'taking refuge'. The focus is on God as the one in whom we place our trust.

In the New Testament ἐλπίς retains the idea of trust, but with the focus on the future. We could define it as a trusting confidence now in regard to the future – a trust based on one's faith in God. Trusting that God is faithful we are sure that what God has promised will happen and we can leave the future peacefully to God and focus now on love.

## ‘There is one Lord’ – ‘the Lord Jesus the Messiah’ (1:2)

The title ‘**Lord**’ is used of God as Saviour. When the Hebrew scriptures speak of ‘the Lord’ they are speaking of God who appeared to Moses in the burning bush and who sent Moses to liberate the people from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 3:13-15).

It is this mysterious and divine aspect that is highlighted here by Paul. He is identifying this ‘Lord’ as Jesus, the risen and exalted Messiah. To have God’s name is to exercise God’s power. Paul is claiming that in exercising kingly power, Jesus is the one through whom God has chosen to save. As he says elsewhere: ‘in the Messiah God was reconciling the world to himself’ (2 Corinthians 5:19).

## ‘There is one faith’

Through faith we welcomed God’s offer of love. It is through faith ‘in him’, that we were ‘marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit’ (1:13). ‘By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God’ (2:8). It is ‘through faith’ that Jesus dwells in our hearts (3:17).

We reflected on ‘faith’ in the 4th presentation (slides 5-13). It speaks of listening to God, heeding God’s inspiration, and acting accordingly. The verb especially focuses on the dynamic movement of our actual relating with God. Far from being a speculative, cerebral thing, faith is essentially practical. It is fundamentally about action.

To speak of ‘faith’ is to speak of the truth about God’s self-revelation through his activity in the world, reaching its climax in God’s self-revelation in Jesus. It is to speak of the decisions we make, and the lifestyle to which we are committed as a consequence of taking this revelation seriously.

Jesus is portrayed as having perfect faith. He always acts towards God as Son, in perfect trust and obedience. In doing so he reveals who God is for us and how we are to respond to grace. He is our 'leader in faith' (Hebrews 12:2).

We have faith when, in accordance with who we are as creatures totally dependent on God, we listen to Jesus' word and open our hearts to receive the sharing in his intimate life of love with the Father which he offers us. To do so we will need to trust him. We will also need to live faithfully the life he offers us, not independently, but as people who are 'born of God' (John 1:13), like branches which draw their life from the vine to which they remain attached (John 15:1ff).

There is one God and Father of all,  
who is above all and through all and in all.

The final and ultimate basis for unity is monotheism: there is only 'one God'. It is to this God that we all have access 'through the Messiah ... in one Spirit' (2:18). This one God is 'the Father of all', who 'created all things' (3:9).

This one God is 'above all', transcending all created being.

This one God is 'through all', 'the Father of glory' (1:17) whose power and beauty radiates through the whole of creation and whose love comes to us through all that he has made.

There is one God and Father of all,  
who is above all and through all and in all.

In a special way, God has ‘blessed us in the Messiah with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places’ (1:3). This one God is ‘in all’, immanent in everything and holding everything in existence. This is true in a special way of those who are ‘members of the household of God’ (2:19), who have been ‘built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God’ (2:22), who are being ‘filled with all the fullness of God’ (3:19).

Note the order which Paul follows in these verses. Our immediate contact is with the **church**, with Christians whose lives inspire and attract us. In this church, we experience the **Spirit**. The Spirit leads us to faith in the Risen **Jesus** and to baptism into his body. It is through him that we are led to the **Father**.

We find the same Trinitarian structure in Paul's words to the Corinthians (I Corinthians 12:4-6):

There are varieties of gifts,

but the same **Spirit**;

and there are varieties of services,

but the same **Lord**;

and there are varieties of activities,

but it is the same **God** who activates all of them in everyone.



## Ephesians 4:7

7Each of us was given grace according to the measure of the Messiah's gift.

To the Romans Paul wrote: 'Think of yourself according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us' (Romans 12:3-6).

The special focus of his statement here in Ephesians is on Christ as the one who gives the gifts.

## Ephesians 4:8-10

Therefore it is said 'When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people' (Psalm 68:18).

1. The psalm speaks of the king receiving the spoils of war.
2. The Rabbis applied it to Moses returning with the Torah.
3. Paul uses the text to speak of Christ pouring out gifts for his people.

(When it says, 'He ascended,' what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.)

Paul sees Jesus' descent into the grave and his ascent into heaven as reflected in the psalm. However, his main focus is on the gifts given to us by our risen and exalted Lord, and it is to these that he now turns.