

## The Biblical Meaning of Community (from Brisbane Bible Conference, May 22–24, 2015)

### Introduction:

In no other epistle or book of the Bible is the concept of “community” more pronounced or defined as in the Ephesian epistle. Written while in prison (Eph 3:1; Eph 4:1; Eph 6:20), this little book is the overflow of Paul’s letter to the Colossians. There are 55 verses in the two letters that are identical, according to William Barclay.

This was most likely a general letter to all the churches of Asia Minor.

It is the least personal letter of Paul on a human level. It contains no personal greetings or references, though he spent more time in Ephesus than any other location (Act 18:9–11), and gave a special farewell to all the elders there before being imprisoned (Act 20:17–36). And yet, between the individual believer and God, it is the most personal of all the writings of Scripture.

The theme of Ephesians has been debated *ad infinitum*, but I would suggest that a good place to start is “The Community of God.” Throughout the letter, there is a backdrop of the disharmony, disunity, alienation, and cosmic conflict caused by the entrance of sin into the human race. Paul shows how God, in His masterful wisdom, has “*in Christ*” brought harmony out of chaos, as in the original creation (compare Gen 1:1–3 with 2Co 4:6), and thus defeated the schemes of the devil.

We might even say that Paul gives us the theme of Ephesians in the book of Colossians, when he says, “*For it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell, and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross*” (Col 1:19–20). In the wisdom of God, the conflict and chaos of the ages is resolved by the victory of the cross, and by the spiritual community created in Him as a result (Col 3:10). The “*new man*” here in Colossians, speaks not of the regenerate nature, but of the membership in the Body of Christ. (See also Eph 2:15.)

The outline of the book is also instructive. In the first three chapters, we see the unity brought about by the victory of Christ. Then, in the last three chapters, the Church is seen as His instrument in bringing that unity to realization both within the Body of Christ, and then outward to the world. In the Church, Christ has: a Body through which to work (Ephesians 4), a bride who is His helper (Ephesians 5), an army—His band of brothers (Ephesians 6).

When Paul completed the Colossian letter, no doubt like the prophets before him (1Pe 1:10–12), he sat down to study his own inspired text. In it, he discovered the great theme of Jesus Christ as the unifying force of God, and of the Church as a family—part of a greater community of faith.

Beyond these foundational truths, Paul would have uncovered an astounding secret, which God had been at work teaching him in his life. That is, God calls the weakest of people to be the “heroes” of the faith (compare 1Co 1:26–31; 1Co 15:9; 2Co 12:7–10; Eph 3:8; 1Ti 1:15). What this means in practical terms is that truly “the last shall be first” and the weakest of saints

become the strongest! God has a great role for each one of us, and it is not ability—but availability—that God is looking for.

**Note:** It was the book of Ephesians that Dr. James Gray read fifteen times in one sitting, which resulted in the development of his approach in *How to Master the English Bible*.

**Suggestion:** As you go through these notes, do it with your Bible opened, and read each section both before and after making reference to these notes.

## I. Community Defined by God, Eph 3:14–15

*“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 ...”*

These two verses form a “hinge” connecting the first and last halves of the book. The “*reason*” for Paul’s daily prayer, laid out in the first two and a half chapters, will take us all the way back to eternity past. Then, the focus of the prayer will lead us into eternity future where, for the first time, we will meet this wonderful extended family—of whom God is the Father!

### A. The Perpetual Prayer of Paul

The apostle tells us here that he prayed constantly for the saints. To “*bow my knees*” is simply an idiomatic figure for prayer. What is important? The “*reason*” for his prayer and the object of the prayer.

We know that Paul prayed much because he believed in the power and effectiveness of praying (cf., Rom 16:25–27; 2Co 1:3–7; Phi 1:3–11; Col 1:3–4, Col 1:9–13; 1Th 1:2–7).

### B. The Object of Paul’s Prayer

Paul directs his prayer to the heavenly Father, whom he defines here in two specific ways. First, He is “*the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*” Too often, we think of this as a relationship beginning at the Incarnation. However, passages such as Psa 2:12, Pro 30:4b and Heb 1:2 make it clear that this is an eternal relationship.

Secondly, Paul makes it clear that God is also the Father of “*the whole family in heaven and on earth.*” This spiritual community includes saints both living and dead, those now present, and others from the beginning of time, now departed and in His presence in Heaven. This family, or community, is extremely diverse; and members from this present Church Age hold a unique and exalted place in it, as we shall see.

The word Father (*pater*) and family (*patria*) come from the same root, indicating the closeness of the relationship. Finally, it is worth pointing out that this spiritual family “*is named,*” or styled, upon that eternal divine family. The implications of this small phrase may be staggering, but in the simplest sense, every earthly family including a father, mother, and child, are a faint reflection of Heaven.

### C. The Basis of Paul's Prayer

We tend to overlook the phrase “*for this reason,*” and in doing so, we lose the thrust of the entire book of Ephesians. It would be very easy to write a whole series of books on the content of this phrase alone. I will try to briefly present the essence of why Paul prays as he does.

You will notice that this same phrase is found in Eph 3:1. It is as if Paul states his reason, which includes everything in the first two chapters, and then feels the necessity to reinforce it by a quick summary in Eph 3:2–13. What are the spiritual grounds upon which Paul was moved to pray daily? It all has to do with a plan devised in the mind of God before time began. The plan is intricate and involves many parts and players, but it has one objective: to build a kingdom in which a spiritual community thrives.

## II. The Eternal Plan (Eph 1:1–14)

Verses 3 through 14 is one sentence—the longest in the Bible. After the greeting, in Eph 1:1–2 Paul breathlessly presents the climax of the divine plan. Four grand themes stand out, and I will present them as they occur historically—not as we find them in the text:

1. This **plan** contains a grand finale pre-designed (predestined) before history began.
2. The **purpose** of this great plan is the formation of a unique spiritual family having a dramatic calling.
3. The **presentation** of this divine scheme was a “*mystery,*” not revealed until after the victory of the cross.
4. The completion of the plan involves the specific roles and united labor of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, for which each will receive eternal glory and praise.

### A. The Plan

The timing of this amazing plan was “*before the foundation of the world*” (Eph 1:4). It is a plan devised by God “*according to the good pleasure of His will*” (Eph 1:5), “*which He purposed in Himself*” (Eph 1:9), “*according to the counsel of His will*” (Eph 1:11). It is, from beginning to end, a stroke of divine genius!

### B. The Purpose

The goal or objective of this plan culminates in the formation of a new and unique creation, which we call the Church. The defining phrases in this regard are “*in Him,*” “*in Christ,*” and “*in whom,*” which occur ten times in these twelve verses.

At this point, in the description of family, there is no reference to saints of other ages of history. These will be brought into the picture shortly. First, Paul wants every believer to know that we belong to a family chosen by God to possess “*every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ*” (Eph 1:3), which include “*adoption as sons*” (Eph 1:5),

*“the riches of His grace”* (Eph 1:7), *“all wisdom and prudence”* (Eph 1:8), *“an inheritance”* (Eph 1:11, Eph 1:14)—all secured by *“redemption through His blood”* (Eph 1:7) and secured by the seal of the Holy Spirit (Eph 1:13). In other words, this great outpouring of the riches of Heaven belongs only to those who, by His grace are *“accepted in the Beloved”* (literally, “be-graced in the Beloved,” Eph 1:6).

### **C. The Presentation**

This grand objective of the heavenly Father was never revealed to the prophets of earlier times (Eph 3:5). This revelation awaited *“the dispensation of the fullness of times”* (Eph 1:10), and *“the dispensation of the grace of God”* (Eph 3:2), that followed the victory of Christ on the cross and His resurrection. By the word *“mystery,”* Paul means that which is kept hidden from view until the appropriate time for it to be revealed. And what is that great “secret”?

It is found in the phrase *“that ... He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth—in Him”* (Eph 1:10). This is the essence of God’s plan in human history. It is to take a situation of separation, brokenness, and disharmony, and to bring out of it a spiritual community and family. The eternal response to the accomplishment of this great plan will ever be *“to the praise of His glory”* directed to God the Father (Eph 1:2–6), God the Son (Eph 1:7–12), and to God the Spirit (Eph 1:13–14).

Ephesians appears to be a fuller development of what God revealed to Paul in Col 1:19–20, *“For it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell, and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross.”*

### **Historical Background**

With the entrance of sin into the Garden, the original creation was thrown into chaos. Separation from God resulted in spiritual death, by which the rule of life became disharmony and disunity. The evidence of man’s separation from God was seen in division and strife among men.

The entrance of sin brought spiritual death (Rom 5:12), which is the separation of the soul from God. This resulted in the spiritually orphaned souls of men (see Joh 14:18), reacting in anger and violence. We see this pattern repeated worldwide in fatherless homes. From this deep-seated sense of being *“alienated from the life of God”* (Eph 4:18) came division and strife among men.

First, Cain kills Abel (Genesis 4), then Lamech kills another man (Gen 4:23), and the trend continues until *“the earth is filled with violence”* (Gen 6:13). The infiltration and corruption of the human race by fallen angels resulted in a generation of super-corrupted and super-violent mutants (Gen 6:1–4), which God destroyed by the flood.

However, throughout this time, God is at work building a “community of faith,” beginning with Seth, when *“men began to call on the name of the LORD”* (Gen 4:26). This community grows

through the family of Noah (Genesis 6–10). Then, following the rebellion of Babel, God calls Abram to establish “*a great nation*” of faith (Gen 12:2). In the ancient world, Israel was known as the only nation which was “near to God” (see Deu 4:7; Psa 148:14). Paul will refer to this in Eph 2:13 and Eph 2:17.

Through Israel, His chosen (elect) people, God will work to bring three miracles into the human race: the written Word of God, the Savior of the world, and the Church. The whole sweep of biblical history is, therefore, caught up in Paul’s phrase, “*for this reason.*”

### **III. The Beginning of Paul’s Prayer (Eph 1:15–2:10)**

The prayer of Eph 3:14 actually begins in Eph 1:15. It is a supplication to God to make clear to the Church what our possession of “*the riches of His grace*” means, both historically and practically. The spiritual enrichment of the Body of Christ is based on two unexpected developments in history: a new revelation and a new creation:

#### **A. New Revelation**

In Eph 1:15–23, the apostle prays for “*the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him*” (Eph 1:17). As John tells us later, “*the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy*” (Rev 19:10). In New Testament revelation, we have truth “*which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets*” (Eph 3:5).

Paul prays that they (and we) may receive enlightenment so as to understand this new revelation. And the essence of it is “*the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead ...*” (Eph 1:19–20). This new resurrection power is wielded through the ascended and seated Son of God, and is to be made known “*not only in this age but also in that which is to come*” (Eph 1:21), through His Body—the Church. In Jesus Christ, who is the fullness of God, spiritual reconciliation becomes the trend of a new history (Eph 1:23, see Col 1:19–23).

#### **B. New Creation**

This new creation brings to an end the separation and alienation from God and the division among men, which has dominated human history.

Concerning this new creation (Eph 2:1–10), there are three great truths we need to grasp:

1. First, we were formerly spiritually dead (Eph 2:1–3). As such, we were under the power of Satan as “*sons of disobedience*” (Eph 2:2), and were “*children of wrath*” (Eph 2:3), as all men are in the natural state. Paul includes not only Gentiles in this deplorable condition (“*you,*” Eph 2:1–2), but also Jews (“*we,*” Eph 2:3). For, although the nation of Israel was unique in its relationship to God, the benefits and blessings of that spiritual community were entered only through faith.

2. Second, God in His great mercy intervened on behalf of all fallen men (Eph 2:4–7), not only giving us the gift of life, but also “raising us up and seating us with Christ” *“in the heavenly places.”* This exalted status belongs only to those who are *“in Christ,”* that is to say, those who believe during this present Church Age. We have not only become a part of that community of faith stretching back through history, but are made its crowning glory. If Israel is the root of the tree (Rom 11:17–18), then the Church is the flower and the fruit of the tree! As Eve was made out of Adam, so the Church is formed out of Israel.
3. From this comes the third consideration, found in Eph 2:8–10, that these rich privileges come with great responsibilities. The *“gift of God”* of being placed in Christ, and therefore sharing His life, riches, and power, constitutes the Church as His *“masterpiece”* (Eph 2:10, *“workmanship”*)—is designed for a purpose, that is to *“walk”* in His pre-determined (predestined) plan called *“good works,”* which were *“prepared beforehand.”* In other words, God’s gift and calling to each believer was planned before the creation of the world.

Here, Paul introduces the theme of “walking,” which will occupy the main focus of the second half of his prayer (Ephesians 4–6). We each accomplish the will of God as *“we walk by faith”* (2Co 5:7), *“in the power of the Spirit”* (Gal 5:16), according to the light of God’s Word (1Jo 1:7). To summarize, this new creation—the Church—has been given new revelation (contained in the New Testament), so as to execute an entirely new enterprise. That grand objective is that we become the ambassadors of peace (2Co 5:19–21) to a broken world, and the instruments of healing to the souls of men.

#### IV. **The “Reason” for Paul’s Prayer (Eph 2:11–3:13)**

- A. When Paul says *“for this reason”* in Eph 3:1, he is speaking of all the truths laid out in chapters 1 and 2, which are now summarized in Eph 2:11–18. In a word, God has formed a new *“community of faith,”* called the Church, which is made up of both Jew and Gentile. As was said earlier, throughout the Old Testament times, Israel was known as a nation that was *“near to God”* (Deu 4:7; Psa 148:14). For this reason, Israel was the envy of the nations and the target of their hostility and persecution.
- B. *“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ”* (Eph 2:13). Though as Gentiles we were once *“aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise”* (Eph 2:12), yet now, in Christ, God has reconciled us to Himself and made peace by creating a *“new man”* made up of both Jew and Gentile. God has created a new community by regeneration in Christ. This new community is an extension of the former, Old Testament community of believers.
- C. This great *“fellowship of the mystery”* (Eph 3:9) *“which in other ages was not made known”* (Eph 3:5) until *“the dispensation of the grace of God”* (Eph 3:2) now becomes

an exhibit of God's matchless grace, not only to the world, but also "*to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places*" (Eph 3:10).

God has set before men and angels His ideal, and it is a community built on faith, hope, and love. Just as the Church is indebted to Israel for all our blessings, so Israel will ultimately be saved through the provocation of the Church (see Deu 32:21; Rom 10:19). By this means, God creates in the spiritual family one essential element for true community—that of mutual need and interdependence, resulting in "*love for all the saints*" (Eph 1:15).

#### V. Paul's Prayer, Eph 3:16–21

- A. That He would give out of "*the riches of His glory,*" Eph 3:16a
- B. That they "*be strengthened*" by "*His Spirit in the [newly created] inner man*" (2Co 5:17), Eph 3:16b
- C. As a consequence, "that Christ might be at home in their hearts through faith"—the key to all spiritual life, Eph 3:17a
- D. Again, as a consequence that they "*comprehend with all saints*" the scope of "*the love of Christ,*" Eph 3:17b–19a
- E. As a result, they might "*be filled with all the fullness of God,*" Eph 3:19b
- F. These five requests are followed by a doxology of praise to Him "who is able to exceed our greatest expectations," Eph 3:20–21.

*"Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen."*

#### VI. The Conclusion of Paul's Prayer (Eph 3:16–21)

In this short section, the prayer of Paul finds concrete expression in his desire for the Church. This prayer request is the basis for the remainder of the book, and is built around the word "*walk,*" first introduced in Eph 2:10.

- A. The prayer contained here is like a "Jacob's ladder," leading us in an ascending appropriation of God's grace-provisions to a pinnacle of spiritual ecstasy. Each stage in the journey begins with the word "*that,*" each one laying the groundwork for the next. Putting it in simple terms, Paul prays "*that*" we might "be strengthened by God's Spirit," with the result "*that*" "Christ may be at home in our hearts" (not indwelling, but abiding, cf., Joh 14:21–23; Joh 15:4), with the result "*that*" we are "*being rooted and grounded in love*" (Paul's favorite figures of a field and a building), and "*may ... comprehend*" the scope of that love, with the result "*that*" we "*may be filled with all the fullness of God.*" This fullness is Christ Himself (Col 1:19)—which fullness we are to reflect to the world (Eph 1:23).
- B. The doxology which follows (Eph 3:20–21) is an acknowledgment that such an achievement is possible only to "*Him who is able,*" meaning God the Father, to whom

Paul prays (Eph 3:14), “*who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us.*” That power is resurrection life (Eph 1:19–20) by which the Spirit of God works in and through those who believe (Eph 3:7, Eph 3:20).

- C. The indwelling Spirit of God makes known to each believer the riches we possess, as we grow in knowledge and sanctification. These spiritual riches translate into power for living out the fullness of Christ and His love before the world. None of us are perfect examples. In our failures, we demonstrate also to the world that God uses weak instruments to show that the power is of Him, and not of us (1Co 1:26–30).

## VII. The Outworking of the Prayer (Ephesians 4–6)

In the last three chapters, Paul presents a spiritual community living in harmony with God and with each other. In this section, Paul expounds the “walk in good works” theme introduced earlier (Eph 2:10).

- A. It is most important to take note of Eph 4:1–6, because here we have the concrete basis of unity in the spiritual family. The “*unity of the Spirit*” is an accomplished fact established by the united work of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. The “*bond of peace*” is the practical experience of the members of the Body of Christ when we “[bear] *with one another in love.*” The implication here is that we all fail, and all need to both give and receive forgiveness if we are to “*walk worthy of [our] calling.*”
- B. As Paul says in Rom 15:1, “*We then who are strong ought to bear with the [infirmities] of the weak, and not to please ourselves.*” This is actually a spiritual application of an ancient principle that everyone should nourish in themselves the “hero-spirit.” When a youth was considered to be a man he was called a *dromeus*, meaning a “runner.” This was not used in the athletic sense, but in the sense that he had the character to run to the aid of someone in need. This attitude was the foundation of cultivating the spirit of the “hero” (*heros*), which was primarily a willingness to face hardship or danger in order to save someone else.
- C. If you look carefully, you will also see the three great spiritual virtues of “*faith,*” “*hope,*” and “*love*” in Eph 4:2 and Eph 4:4–5. This triad of Christian character is found in close proximity to each other throughout Paul’s epistles. The repetition of the word “*one*” reinforces the concept of “*unity*” which is the basis for “community”—a body or family of people who care for one another and rely on one another. In fact, every “*one another*” command in the New Testament sets forth the “honor code” of the Royal Family of God, further emphasizing the “hero” theme.
- D. As a spiritual community, the family of God is to have a lifestyle that reflects life in Christ. Without going into great detail, the remainder of the book of Ephesians follows six major guidelines:
  1. “Walk worthy” (Eph 4:1–16).

- This is accomplished by living out our oneness with God toward one another.
2. Walk not as the Gentiles (Eph 4:17–32).  
Every day is a “putting off” of “*the old man*” and “putting on the new.”
  3. “Walk in love,” as dear children (Eph 5:1–7).  
Love sacrifices for others, where sin harms others for selfish gain.
  4. Walk in the light (Eph 5:8–14).  
The light of God’s Word is lived out in the fruit of the Spirit.
  5. Walk wisely, carefully (Eph 5:15–6:9).  
Wisdom redeems the time, doing God’s will as revealed to each of us by His Word and the guiding hand of His Spirit.
  6. Walk as warriors (Eph 6:10–24).  
Because of the revolt of Satan, this world is a spiritual battleground. There are no non-combatants in God’s Army. We are to be trained, armed, and efficient in fighting “*the good fight*” of faith (2Ti 4:7)!

#### E. The Community of God

1. The essence of community is the family, which is based on the Godhead, Eph 3:14–15. Whereas marriage is the union of two, family is communion between three or more.
2. The citizenship of the saints, Eph 2:19 (pre-Israel Gentiles, Tribulation saints, etc.)
3. Paul’s prayer has a basis: “*for this reason,*” Eph 3:14, goes back to Eph 3:1. The “*reason*” is found in Eph 2:19–22. Read Eph 2:19 in light of Eph 2:11–18. The Gentiles have been brought into the promises to Israel—not as Israel, but as something greater—a new “*household of God.*”
4. Paul describes this new community in five ways:
  - a. The “*new man*” (Jews and Gentiles), Eph 2:15
  - b. “*One body,*” Eph 2:16
  - c. “*The household of God,*” Eph 2:19
  - d. “*A holy temple,*” Eph 2:21
  - e. The “*dwelling place of God,*” Eph 2:22
5. All of these terms refer to the Church—the family of God who are “*in Christ*” by faith—both Jewish and Gentile believers.
6. These terms apply only to those living in “*the dispensation of the grace of God,*” also known as the age of “*mystery,*” Eph 3:2–5. This is what we call the Church Age—from Pentecost to the Rapture.
7. However, the “community” is greater than the “*household.*” The spiritual community of God includes saints of all ages, “*the commonwealth of Israel*” (Eph 2:12), and all “*fellow citizens*” of God’s kingdom (Eph 2:19).

#### Principles:

1. In God’s ideal of community, there is the greatest possible diversity of people, races, languages, cultures, etc.

2. The basis of unity is in the One who makes their inclusion in the community possible. Jesus Christ is the unifying bond.
3. In the community of God, the law is love (Eph 3:19; Eph 4:3, Eph 4:15–16).
4. In the love of Christ, each member cares for the others as a vital part of his or her own existence. *“Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep,”* Rom 12:15.
5. Read Eph 3:8–13, where Paul declares that God’s concept of community has finally been realized in the Church, and object lesson to angels. In Christ, God has made Himself accessible to all men.
6. One of the great displays of this community, but still much misunderstood, is found in the conduct of the early disciples (Act 2:42–47). Take note of the flow of thought here: doctrine, fellowship, prayers, sharing, joy, and praise.
7. As we each play our part, we become an essential member of the spiritual community, strengthening and nourishing every other member, as we are also built up by them (Eph 4:15–16). None of us has all the answers, or all the strength; our weaknesses and failures remind us of the need to rely on the grace, forgiveness, and love of our fellow-soldiers in what is often a difficult and painful battle for the cause of Jesus Christ, our Savior!

### **VIII. The Great Family Reunion (Heb 12:22–24)**

- A. The author of the epistle to the Hebrews gives us an exciting picture of the whole community of God. I believe what is presented in these verses is more than just a metaphor or symbol. Scripture tells us that we are already seated with Christ in Heaven (Eph 2:6; Col 3:1–4), and that one day we will physically appear with Him there. In Act 28:15, we see that as Paul was led in chains toward Rome, the believers came out of the city to greet and welcome him. In the same way, this passage speaks of a great gathering, described in terms as if we are approaching the heavenly Jerusalem, and those who already inhabit the city come out to receive and welcome us.
- B. Coming as it does after the roster of “heroes of the faith” in Hebrews 11, we have a ready-made list of great men and women we will meet. However, it is important to note the list which the author was inspired to make. From the very beginning, God chose “the weak, the foolish, and the despised” (see 1Co 1:27):
  - The gentle Abel, a shepherd, is killed by the farmer Cain.
  - Then God chooses a reclusive loner like Enoch, who walks with Him right off the earth.
  - Then Noah, considered a crank preacher of unheard-of calamities.
  - Then Abraham, the drifter and tent-dweller, whose wife Sarah doubts God, concocts a scheme for substitute children.
  - Then he moves on to Moses, the castaway baby who becomes a prince and a murderer.
  - Then there is Rahab, the brave harlot, and in Heb 11:32, we have a list of 6 more.

The point is that every single “hero” in chapter 11 is a misfit that would not be tolerated in most of our churches today. Furthermore, each and every one of them trusted God

enough and acted in a way that was beneficial to others. Consider arriving in Heaven to be met by these men and women, who formed the backbone of Old Testament history!

- C. Now consider Heb 12:22–24 as a literal description of what you will one day experience. When a believer dies (although it will be a bit different for those at the Rapture of the Church), he or she will approach the eternal city. Out from the gates of the city come the first group to welcome us—a company of elect angels too numerous to mention. Probably they will greet us with shouts of praise, since angels love to praise God (Luk 2:13–14; Rev 5:11–13).
- D. As we pass through the throngs of angels, we then come to “*the general assembly*,” which could be the saints of Old Testament times. Imagine being greeted by Adam, Enoch, Noah, Abraham—then Eve, and Sarah, Rachel, Rahab and on down through the roster of great men and women who, because of their faith, “*out of weakness were made strong*” (Heb 11:34).
- E. Then we begin to see “*the church of the firstborn*”—members of the Body of Christ. There awaiting us are Peter and the original apostles, and, then, Paul, whose prayer in the Ephesian epistle was all about community and the family of God! Then we see our loved ones who have gone before—still recognizable—but now among “*the spirits of just men made perfect*” (Heb 12:23). I don’t know about you, but how I long to stand in that assembly, perfected forever!
- F. And as we pass on through the greeting, praising, and singing multitude, we come before “*God the Judge of all*,” who because of Christ, has declared us “justified” and “righteous in His sight,” who now is our Father through regeneration. And it is the Father, Author of the plan of salvation, who leads us into the very presence of His Son, “*Jesus [Christ] the Mediator of the new covenant*”—a new covenant of grace for a new community of faith, to inhabit “*new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells*” (2Pe 3:13; Rev 21:1).

*“And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, ‘Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.’ Then He who sat on the throne said, ‘Behold, I make all things new.’”* Rev 21:3–5

This will be the fulfillment of God’s master-plan—devised before history began. A new creation inhabited by a new humanity in the fellowship of the Father, Son, and Spirit—forever and ever!