

the next step

stepping out and following where He leads

".. this is the way; walk in it ..." [Isaiah 30.21]

Leaving a denomination to become an independent church is never an easy or a painless process. Seven years down the line from that day the dust of that departure has, in God's good grace, largely settled: the danger, though, is that we, too, now settle down - and from there it's very easy simply to start to drift.

Over the past few months, therefore, the Leadership Team and the body of elders have been seeking the Lord's clear direction.

The previous series of studies on the church at Antioch was full of both challenge and encouragement. Not the least of the lessons we learned was the importance of taking the 'next step' (as Barnabas did when he went and brought Saul to Antioch); and discovering what happened in the aftermath of that small step has surely instilled a confidence in our hearts that, however small the Lord's 'next step' for us might seem, taking the step issues in significant growth, way beyond what we could ever really countenance.

This new series of studies will help us explore together 'the next step' which we believe the Lord has set before us. Stepping out into the Lord's future for us is both daunting and dangerous - but it's with an excitement born of expectancy that hopefully we will take that step.

On the surface the Lord's 'next step' for us is simple and obvious, for He's not suggesting anything new. Every so often, however, we need to be reminded (as Moses long since recognized - see Deut.31.10-13) just who we are, and what we're about, and how we are to live.

As we work through the biblical basis of this 'next step' and think through its implications, it'll become clear that however 'simple it may seem to be, it's also hugely stretching; and that however stretching it will be, it will also be highly significant.

May we together be very conscious of the Lord Himself saying again to us in these days and through these studies - *"This is the way; walk in it"*: and may we be given grace to take this step of faith, like Abraham of old, who boldly "obeyed and "went, even though he did not know where he was going" (Heb.11.8).

8.

[week beginning Sunday 26th April 2020]

Flourishing! **(Ephesians 1.15-23)**

“.. that you may know Him better ..”

It's in the context of a good, healthy family life that children best grow. And that's certainly true so far as our spiritual growth as Christians is concerned. Paul's desire for the Ephesian believers was that they should flourish in their new found life in Christ: and one of the hallmarks of our life as a fellowship of God's people which we are keen to create and safeguard is just that sort of 'family life' together which ensures that each person does indeed *flourish* in Christ.

After the opening passage (vv.3-14) which is all praise, this next passage is all prayer. We must recognise that such growth and flourishing is always the Lord's gracious doing. We pray to that end. But that work of God in our life as a fellowship is not magic: God delights to use 'means', and it's helpful for us therefore to be considering *how* God causes us to flourish.

Hopefully there'll again be a video introduction to this study under 'Resources/Live streams and videos' on the website.

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1. **Read Eph.1.15-23.** This whole passage gives you a sense of the sort of growth which Paul longed to see in the believers at Ephesus: *spiritual* growth will almost invariably issue in both *numerical* growth and *geographical* growth (as believers go out into all the world).

How would you say you have grown as a believer over the past year or so?

What has the Lord used to bring about such growth?

2. **Read Eph.1.15.** Both the faith and love (which are the outward evidences of the new life which believers have found) are specific: faith *in the Lord Jesus*, and love *for all the saints*.

How did you come to place your trust in the Lord Jesus?

What struggles did you have/have you had/are you having in embracing the Lordship of Jesus?

In what ways can we best cultivate in our life as a fellowship that 'love for all the saints'?

3. **Read Eph.1.16.** One of the persistent features of Paul's life and ministry as a follower of Jesus, from the time of his conversion (see Acts 9.11) was the intensity of his prayer life.

How can we develop a pattern of praying regularly for one another without it becoming simply a routine duty?

Do you know that there are people who pray for you regularly? How might this sort of praying for one another be fostered in the life of a fellowship such as ours?

What are the benefits of thanking God specifically for individuals as you pray for them? (*Try praying now in this way for 5 individuals you know*).

4. **Read Eph.1.17.** This is the first of the three main petitions which Paul brings before God in prayer – the desire that these believers should know God better.

What clues does Paul give here as to how as believers we get to know God better?

In the light of what Paul says here, what should be our priorities if we are intent on each person knowing Him better?

5. **Read Eph.1.18.** Our natural tendency is to live for the 'here and now', rather than the 'there and then': for that reason the second strand to Paul's prayer here relates to the experience and enjoyment of the hope that we have in Christ.

What is 'the hope' to which He has called you, as Paul describes it here?

In what ways does a growing awareness of this hope serve to enrich and strengthen our life as a *family* of God's people?

6. **Read Eph.1.19-21.** Paul desired not only that the Ephesian believers enjoyed the 'personhood' of God the more warmly, and embraced the promise of God the more fully, but also that they experienced the power of God the more truly.

What (if anything!) excites you about the way Paul describes the incomparable greatness of the power of God which is 'for us who believe'?

In what ways will a deepening awareness of the greatness of God's power make a difference to our living?

7. **Read Eph.1.22-23.** It's still the great power of God which is being described by Paul, as he rounds off this prayer with a reference to the absolute authority of Jesus, which he says is 'for the church, which is His body ..'

Compare this with **Matt.28.18-28** and **Phil.2.5-11**: why did it matter to Paul so much that these believers grasped fully the greatness of God's power and the 'headship' of Jesus over all things?

In what ways will our seeing ourselves, not only as the family of God but as 'His (Christ's) body', affect and shape our life as a fellowship?