

“Paul, Jailhouse Theologian”
Ephesians 1:1-14
January 11, 2015

INTRODUCTION:

We’re beginning today a study of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, a letter he wrote while in prison in Rome (4:1). It seems that Paul’s imprisonment was something of a problem for the Ephesians. This church had a close relationship with Paul, due to the fact that he had spent 2 years in Ephesus while planting the church. They loved Paul and had undoubtedly prayed for him during his long imprisonment. He had been imprisoned at least three years and possibly as many as five by this time. In spite of their prayers for Paul, he was still in jail and they were beginning to get discouraged. We know that because of what Paul writes later in this letter. **“So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you”** (3:13). Like all of his letters, Paul is not writing this as a theological treatise, but as a letter with a pastoral purpose. That purpose was to help the discouraged Christians in Ephesus.

The first thing Paul is going to do with them, which we are going to see in today’s passage, is to remind them of some theology. Paul believed that good theology could save people’s lives. After the normal greeting, he starts right off with a statement about God. **“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places”** (1:3). Do you notice the Trinitarian emphasis of the verse? If we understand the word “spiritual” to refer to the Holy Spirit, which I think is Paul’s meaning, we have all three members of the Trinity present here. Paul starts with God, not self. I am struck by the difference between the way Paul encouraged discouraged people and the way it is normally attempted today. We try to encourage people by talking about people. We talk to them about what they are thinking or what they are feeling and try to get them to change wrong thinking or wrong feelings. There’s nothing wrong with that in itself, but everything by itself. And it’s not where Paul started. He started with God. I think we would be wise to follow his lead. He had extensive experience in battling discouragement, and it was theology that saved him. We learn in elementary school that the phases of the moon are nothing more than the earth casting a shadow on different parts of the moon. When the self grows large, it does precisely that, hiding the glory of God, which is what we most need.

I. God the Father

Paul begins by blessing God the Father because he has blessed us. There are some remarkable statements in this verse. Notice first the tense of the verb. God has blessed us. It is a completed action that has already happened. And

he has blessed us with every blessing. If God determined today to bless you further, he would be unable to do so for the simple reason that we have already been given everything he has to give us. This is indicated by a phrase that occurs repeatedly throughout this section, but is easy to miss. God “has blessed us **in Christ** with every spiritual blessing.” Just in these first 14 verses, this phrase, or the similar phrase “in him,” referring to Christ, occurs eleven times. It refers to the wonderful doctrine known as union with Christ. It means that we are so closely joined to Jesus that we get to share everything with him. Paul is going to say later in this letter that marriage is an illustration of this union.

When Wendy and I got married, what was hers became mine, and what was mine became hers. One of the things that was hers that became mine was a car loan. Something of mine that became hers was a savings account, part of which was used to pay off the car loan. But something else of hers that became mine was a car that was about ten times better than my 68 VW bug, a car with so much rust that you could see the pavement below you through the floor of the car. Similarly, because of our union with Christ, we share everything with him. He has taken on the debt of our sin. It became his debt that he paid. And we received all the riches Jesus deserves. That’s why Paul can say we have every spiritual blessing already. We have it because it rightfully belongs to Jesus, but through our union with Christ it becomes ours. If this one truth could be worked deep into our hearts, it would change so much in our lives. We would approach life with a sense of fullness and security, rather than emptiness and neediness.

Paul goes on to unpack some of these spiritual blessings we have from our heavenly Father. First, **“he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.”** God did not start loving you when you were born, but as far back as can be imagined. Before the foundation of the world was set by God, as described in Genesis 1, God chose you. If you don’t accept the doctrine of election, you forsake a great deal of comfort that God intends you to receive. For one thing, the Bible teaches throughout that God’s choice of us is not conditional on anything we might do. He chooses us simply because he loves us, not for anything we might bring to him. That makes his love secure. The stated purpose of our election, that God chose us to be holy and blameless before him, implies that God works to make us what we are not by nature. In our nature, we are not holy and blameless before God. Our only hope for getting there is simply that God chose us to do so before the foundation of the world. Paul saw no conflict where some see it today, between God’s election of us and our choice of him. Notice verse 13, where he says that we were sealed with the Holy Spirit when we heard the word of truth and believed it. It is simply that God chose us before we chose him. And it was only because he first chose us that we would ever choose him.

Verse 5 contains that other controversial theological word, predestination. **“In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ.”** Again, if we refuse to accept this doctrine, we forfeit much comfort and security. To be predestined means just what the word says, to have one’s destiny predetermined. And if God is the one predetermining it, we can know that it will happen. In Romans 8, Paul says that we are predestined to be conformed to the image of Christ (8:29). Here, he says that we are predestined for adoption as sons.

I read this week a story of a young mother who was staying with her parents for several days after the birth of her first child. This young mother made the comment to her own mother how it was surprising that her new baby had dark hair, since both she and her husband were fair-haired. The baby’s grandmother said, “Well, your daddy has black hair.” “But, Mama,” replied her daughter, “that doesn’t matter because I’m adopted.” With an embarrassed smile, her mother then said words that brought great comfort to her adopted daughter. “I always forget.” So it is with our adoption as God’s sons and daughters. It is so thorough that we have what the Bible calls “full rights” of sons. It is as if God has forgotten we are adopted and treats us like sons by birth.

II. God the Son

Paul continues his survey of our blessings by moving next to some of what we have through the second member of the Trinity, our Lord Jesus. He begins with our forgiveness. **“In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace”** (v. 7). Through the powerful blood of the Lamb, we have redemption and forgiveness. I recently came across an early sermon by Charles Spurgeon on the text “Whosoever believeth in the name of Jesus Christ shall be saved.” Spurgeon says,

Weary sinner, hellish sinner, thou who art the devil’s castaway...robber, thief, adulterer... I speak to thee as to the rest. I exempt no man. God hath said there is no exemption here. “*Whosoever* believeth in the name of Jesus Christ shall be saved.” Sin is no barrier; thy guilt is no obstacle. Whosoever, though he were as black as Satan, though he were guilty as a fiend—whosoever this night believes, shall have every sin forgiven, shall have every crime effaced, shall have every iniquity blotted out; shall be saved in the Lord Jesus Christ, and shall stand in heaven safe and secure.

Notice too that this forgiveness we have is said to be **“according to the riches of his grace.”** It has been pointed out by others that there is a difference between saying “according” to his riches on one hand and “out of” his riches on the other. Would you rather have a gift out of the riches of Bill

Gates or according to the riches of Bill Gates. He could give me a nice \$50 ballpoint pen and such a gift would obviously be given out of his riches. But if a man with his amount of wealth wanted to give according to that wealth, a much larger gift would be required. God gives according to his riches.

Beginning in verse 9, Paul introduces a topic that is a significant theme in this letter and throughout the New Testament. He says of this theme that it is a mystery, which means that it is something previously unknown. What is that secret that God reveals to us? It is the purpose he has in this current age. We are told here what God is up to, and what he is up to is **“to unite all things in him [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth”** (v. 10). The assumption is that things are not united in Christ now. There is a world that has rebelled against their Creator and that no longer submits itself to him. There is an unseen world of fallen angels that Paul mentions more than once in this letter. But God is working to restore all things to their rightful place under Christ, and he is using the church to do so. A phrase I ran across a few years is one that captures well what is taught in this passage and this letter. The church is called to be “an outpost of the coming kingdom.” We are to live in such a way that we show people what the kingdom of heaven is like and what the King of heaven is like. Much of Paul’s exhortation during the last three chapters of this letter is oriented around this purpose. But this statement about God uniting all things in Christ is also aimed at imparting optimism and hope to his readers who are fighting discouragement. Imagine that you are a big Ohio State football fan, but you are not going to be able to watch tomorrow night’s game. So you record it and tell everyone you know not to let you know the outcome. But someone lets it slip and you hear that your team won the game with a score in the final seconds. That’s all you know. As you watch the game, you marvel at how it unfolds. Your team is down by three touchdowns in the third quarter, and it looks like there’s no way they’re going to win. But you remember the outcome, and instead of your team’s big deficit being a cause of discouragement, it becomes an intriguing story. Both Paul and his Ephesians readers were in the same situation, down by a large score with things not looking very promising. But Paul reminds them that we know the outcome. All things will be united in Christ. We are on the winning side, and our Lord will prevail. What’s more, we have a critical role to play in his victory.

III. God the Holy Spirit

Good theology saved Paul’s life, and he knew it could save the Ephesians from their despair. But good theology cannot do this if it is merely known and not experienced. It must be internalized if it is to do us any good. How does that happen? Paul is going to say in the passage we’ll look at next week that we experience our theology in prayer. But it is also the case that no amount of knowing good theology and no amount of praying good theology would do any good were it not for the ministry of the third member of the Trinity, the Holy

Spirit. He is the seal of God's work. A seal is a mark that authenticates ownership. It is like a brand that is put on cattle, but is internal instead of external. Through the Holy Spirit, God puts his mark on us internally, by which the things of God become real to us.

CONCLUSION:

I rode the Ferris wheel for the first time when I was six years old, and the memory is still vivid in my mind. It was at a small county fair, and I was accompanied by two neighbor girls who were a couple of years older than I, and much more experienced Ferris wheel riders than I. They assured me it would be great fun. As the seats were being loaded, things went smoothly. But then the operator of the ride let out that long handle and kept it out. As we were ascending on the backside of the wheel, it wasn't so scary. At that point, you can still see all the massive steel structure of the Ferris wheel, and some security is gained by looking at that. But when you reach the top, everything changes: all that steel disappears beneath you and all you see is open air, from a distance that seemed like a mile high to a six-year old. And then there's the centrifugal force that seems to want to launch you out from the center at the worst time, when you're at the top of the circle. My response was to start screaming. The girls sitting on either side of me tried to get me to be quiet, warning me that the operator would stop the ride and make us get off, which sounded like a good idea to me at the time.

Perhaps you're here today and you feel much like I did on that Ferris wheel so many years ago. There seems to be no security left and you feel like you are about to be launched into some great abyss. Maybe you're screaming on the inside. I want you to know that God is in control. Paul has taken us here from eternity past to eternity future. You have been on God's mind from eternity past, and you will be on his mind throughout eternity future. And for Jesus' sake, because you are in Christ, he will never ever let you go. That means that you don't have to go to bed at night with your soul screaming because things seem to be going nowhere in your life. Even if it seems that way right now, God is in control and he loves you.