

GOD WITH US

Part 10: EARLY LETTERS

Message 21 – Ephesians

Spiritual Blessings in Christ

Ephesians 1

Introduction

Paul spent many years in Roman prisons because of his testimony that Christ was the promised Jewish Messiah, and the God and Savior of the world. During these years he wrote the prison epistles: *Ephesians*, *Colossians*, *Philippians* and *Philemon*. Ephesus was the 3rd largest city in the Roman empire, and the leading city of Asia Minor, the richest region of the empire. It was a center for commerce, tourism and a hub of religious ideas. In Acts 19 we read of Paul's powerful ministry he had in Ephesus. Acts 19:11,12 records that "*God did extraordinary miracles through Paul*" preaching, teaching, healing the sick and those possessed by evil spirits. In Acts 20:31 we learn that Paul spent 3 years in Ephesus, his longest stay in any city, because of its influence in the region. He spread the gospel, with churches being planted in Ephesus, Colossae, Philadelphia, Laodicea, Smyrna, Sardis, Pergamum. The religion of the Greek female goddess Artemis (Diana) was centered in Ephesus (along with 50 other religions). Worshipers of Artemis came from all over the world to the temple of Artemis, one of the 7 wonders of the ancient world, and silver replicas of Artemis and her temple were sold to eager pilgrims and tourists. Ephesus was also the center for the practice of pagan magic and the occult in that day. It was a key place to bring the message of salvation through Christ, yet, it was one of the most difficult places. After much success spreading the gospel there, Paul was forced to leave after the union of silversmiths rioted, protesting that Paul was destroying their industry which was dependent on selling their silver souvenirs.

Paul's letter to the young believers in Ephesus is filled with a lofty and detailed description of the privilege and power of being a believer in Jesus Christ. This was (and still is) a crucial treatise that teaches a believer in Jesus Christ important truths about: the eternal plan of God, the blessings that follow believing in Christ, the state of all humanity before a Holy God and the power of the Holy Spirit in the life of one who surrenders daily to the Spirit. The letter also

includes example of praise and powerful prayers that believers can literally use word for word in their own prayers.

Acts 19, 20 and the Letter to the Ephesians helps us to appreciate Paul's deep knowledge of and devotion to Christ. And, Paul's passion for the whole world to understand how different Jesus Christ, God's Eternal Son is, from the Greek gods, philosophies and other world religions. He explains the plan of salvation in Christ, and how to daily enjoy Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit.

In this part of the commentary, we will focus on just Chapter 1 of the letter.

Spiritual Blessings in Christ: 1:1-14

Paul spends most of ch.1 enumerating a long list of blessings that come to the believer through the person and work of Christ. Note how he used the word "blessed" three times in this opening line:

"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 . . ." (1:3).

1. Chosen to become holy and blameless before God.

"For He chose us in Him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight . . ." (1:4).

We have discussed the tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility (Romans 9-11). Here, the emphasis falls on God's sovereign choices, made before the world began. He determined to draw people to Himself and to make them "holy and blameless" in His sight. The word "holy" here is the same Greek word elsewhere translated "saint" (or, "true believer"). To put it simply: God decided that He would turn sinners into saints.

If you are a believer in Christ, you are "holy and blameless" in God's eyes. You may not feel that way; but this is your true position in God's sight. Our life this side of heaven is our opportunity to live out this true position, even as we struggle against our old sin nature. Once we get to heaven, the struggle will be over, as God's work of perfecting us will be completed. As for now, it is "game on" for God's children to live out their true calling.

“Blameless” is an incredible truth because in the human realm we all blame others and are blamed by others. Yet, if we have placed our faith in Jesus Christ who took all of our shame and blame upon Himself, as ‘the blameless One’ as our substitute, being judged by His Holy Heavenly Father, amazingly the Father declares believers “*blameless*”.

2. Adopted by God’s pleasure.

“In love He predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with His pleasure and will . . .” (1:5).

There was a place in Ephesus where unwanted babies were left in a pile to die from exposure. At times, slave traders would come by and pick out abandoned infants to be raised as slaves. Paul says to the Ephesians: God has come along and adopted us, not to become slaves, but to become His very own children. According to His pleasure, He adopts us, takes us home, raises us, and confers on us the full rights of a natural born child. It is the person and work of Christ that makes our adoption possible.

3. Lavishly graced with grace.

This next section is worth translating literally from Greek:

. . . to the praise of the glory of His grace, with which He graced us in the beloved (1:6) . . . the riches of His grace, which He lavished on us (1:8).

God has lavishly graced us with grace. He has overwhelmed us with grace. Grace is when God gives you what you do not deserve. Later in this same book we’ll come across this amazing grace passage:

“For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast” (Ephesians 2:8,9).

GRACE is the most central truth of N.T. Christianity. God takes guilty sinners and totally immerses them in His overflowing grace, which comes to us in Christ. It is a blessing to live each day graced with grace. There is no sin that is a match for God’s amazing grace. Truly, it is the concept of God’s GRACE that makes Christianity different from every other religion or philosophy in the world.

Usually the most difficult person to apply grace to is yourself, because you know your own weaknesses and failures better than anyone (except God). Thus, it is important to learn the art of gracing yourself! If God does not condemn you, why should you live with a self-imposed spirit of condemnation hanging over your head? Just as God commands you to forgive others, even as He has forgiven you (Ephesians 4:32), so you should forgive yourself even as He has forgiven you. If you have learned about God's restoring grace in a women's Bible Study at Oak Pointe Church called 'Gracestation', you will learn to say, "GRACE to ME! And, GRACE to YOU!" We can ALL adopt this freeing expression.

4. Redeemed and set free.

"In Him we have redemption through His blood . . ." (1:7).

There were some 6 million slaves in the Roman Empire. Many Christians were either slaves or former slaves. Thus, Paul's readers would have resonated with the terminology here. There were several different words used for redemption in the N.T. The term used here, meant to "release after purchasing." The idea was you pay the ransom price, take the slave out from the market, and then you release the slave to freedom. They are completely free from the old bondage, the old life; free to live a new life. That is what God did for us.

What was the price paid to secure our ransom and our freedom from the bondage of sin? We have "*redemption through His blood.*" This is why the cross of Christ is so central to our faith. The shed blood of Christ on the cross was the payment of the redemption price. "*A life for a life*" was the famous line spoken for the ransom of the little girl in the film 'Man On Fire' with Denzel Washington.

5. Forgiven!

". . . the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace, which He lavished upon us" (1:8).

To "trespass" is to step over the boundaries with God; to break His laws. The word "forgiveness" here literally means "*to take up and send away.*" My trespasses have been taken up and carried away, forgiven, according to the riches of God's grace that He has lavished or poured out upon me. Where did God carry my trespasses to? Perhaps Psalm 103 gives us the answer:

“As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us” (Psalm 103:12).

All of your transgressions (past, present and still future) have been completely forgiven. Through Christ they have all been removed from God’s book of records. You don’t have to live with that constant burden of failure and guilt. You can just lay it at the foot of the cross and take the forgiveness that is fully yours, and get on with it. 1John1:8-10 teaches that as we walk in the light of God’s love, we need to remember that we do still ‘sin’, or ‘transgress’. God’s command is to CONFESS or ADMIT to ourselves, to God and to others that we have and do sin. Yet, to know that ‘in Christ we are fully forgiven’ is truly “Amazing Grace”. And not only that, but you can extend that same kind of grace to other people who offend you, because you yourself have been forgiven. That’s a good way to live. Forgiven, and forgiving. Forgiveness is a huge blessing from God.

6. Awakened to God’s overall plan.

“With all wisdom and understanding, He made known to us the mystery of His will according to His good pleasure, which He purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ . . .” (1:9,10).

This is a complicated little section, but let’s focus on the key idea: “God has made known to us the mystery of His will.” Paul is saying that we, as believers, have been granted insight into God’s grand plan of salvation for humanity. We are “insiders” with true knowledge of what human history means, what our place is, and how the story will end. We know that history is “His-story.” All of God’s plans for the world revolve around the centrality of Christ.

Not only am I an “insider” in terms of knowing what God is doing; I also now know that I have a role to play in the story. In ch.2 Paul writes: “We are His workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (2:10). God already has plans for things He wants to do with you. Are you asking Him to lead you in those steps that He has prepared for you to walk in? Find a way to participate and to serve, trusting God to lead you as you move forward in your unique time and stage of life in your story.

7. Received an inheritance.

“Furthermore, because we are united with Christ, we have received an inheritance from God, for He chose us in advance, and He makes everything work out according to His plan . . . (1:11)

In Ephesians, Paul mentions our inheritance 4 times. In other passages, Paul speaks of how we are heirs with Christ. *“The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him” (Romans 8:16,17)*. In some mysterious way, we as believers will share in the inheritance that the Father has given to His Son, Jesus. And what is the Son’s inheritance? It is *everything in the created realm*. According to Scripture, everything has been made *through Him and for Him (Colossians 1:16)*. Jesus has been appointed as *the heir of all things (Hebrews 1:2)*. Jesus Himself said this: *“The Father loves the Son and has given all things into His hand” (John 3:35)*. Thus, we must somehow come to grips with the fact that as children of God, our inheritance is tied up with *Jesus’ ownership of everything in all of creation!* Peter opens his first epistle talking about the character of this inheritance:

“. . . to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you . . .” (1:4).

Most people will not accumulate much wealth in this world. Only the few will manage to pile up riches here on earth. But Jesus said that the truly “rich” people are not those that store up treasures on earth, rather, in heaven (Matthew 6:19-21). Whenever you enthrone Christ in your heart, whenever you use your time, talent and treasure to serve and honor Him, whenever you forfeit this world’s rewards to gain the next world’s rewards, you are wisely living in light of eternity. You are living in light of your true inheritance . . . which is everything!

8. Sealed with the Holy Spirit

“In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation—having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise . . .” (1:13).

Here is the process from the human side: You *hear* the message, you *believe* in the message, then you are *sealed* in Him with the Spirit of promise. Yes, God chooses you (v.4), but you also have to make

your choice to believe in Him (v.13). And once you place your faith in Christ, God doesn't leave His work in you at risk. He puts His seal of protection on you, the Holy Spirit. In Roman times the seal was a mark of security and ownership. Because of this seal, you are secure in your salvation from the moment you believe until the day that Christ takes you home to receive your incredible inheritance.

“Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set His seal of ownership on us, and put His Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come” (2Corinthians 1:22).

So many Christians live in constant fear that they might lose their salvation. Salvation is secure, not because of what we do, but because of what God does. God puts His seal of ownership and security on us from the moment we believe. And God's seal cannot be broken. It is such a blessing to be secure in Christ. God's seal is both an assurance of His love AND a motivation to love Him back in return.

9. Destined to be with God, forever.

“. . . who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory” (1:14).

The word “pledge” here is another fascinating word. It has the idea of a down-payment, or a deposit. In modern Greek this is the word for the engagement ring given to a bride as a promise of the wedding day. What more fitting visual to end this great series of blessings than that? God gives to you the engagement ring, the pledge and symbol of His allegiance and the guarantee of His love. We are destined to be with our Savior and to enjoy Him forever.

Prayer for Enlightenment 1:15-22

Paul ends this 1st chapter with a prayer that these believers will grasp the depth of God's love for them, as revealed in these blessings.

“I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know Him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the

saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe” (1:17-19).

- *That you may know Him better.* Knowing God “better” is the cry of Paul’s heart for every believer. To grow to intimately know the *Tri-Une God- Father, Son and Holy Spirit*, is a life-long journey. Keep asking for this for yourself and for those you know and love.

- *The hope of His calling.* In the N.T., “hope” is not “wishful thinking.” Rather, “hope” is “*a sure prospect for the future.*” Paul is praying that people will realize the sure prospects that have been laid up for them by the Father, through Christ.

- *The glory of His inheritance.* Once again, the idea of our “inheritance” stands out. Paul wants people to realize the wealth they have been granted, in and through the person of Christ. When we realize our true “net worth” in God’s estimation, we need not worry so much about our earthly net worth, knowing the true extent of the inheritance that awaits us in heaven, as co-heirs with Christ.

- *The greatness of His power.* As we noted above, Ephesus was a place that abounded in other religions as well as the practice of pagan magic (which was centered around the idea of hiring a magician to exert “power” over your opponent). Paul wants the believers to know and to experience the resurrection power of Christ in their lives, a power that far exceeds anything else on this earth.

Discussion Questions

1. Of all the spiritual blessings listed in ch.1, which one(s) stand out to you the most? Why?
2. Discuss the importance of the idea that all of these blessings come to us “in Christ.” Go back through Ephesians 1:1-14 and count how many times the phrases “in Christ” or “in Him” or “through Him” occur.
3. How does Paul’s praise to God and passion to declare these many blessings inspire and emotionally move you?
4. How do you draw on the power of the Holy Spirit in your own walk with Christ? What steps do you take to make sure you are connected to His power?