

Ephesians 1:3-14
(Psalm 103:1-18; Luke 10:21-24)
“To the Praise of His Glory”

Introduction

If I asked you this morning what is your vocation (or “calling”), what would you answer? Paul wrote this letter as a reminder, especially to Gentile Christians, of our primary vocation, if we are in Christ Jesus. Ephesians consists of six chapters: The first three chapters were written, Paul says, “that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe” (1:18-19). Our hope should rest, Paul insists, not in the changing circumstances of life – remember that he was writing from prison (3:1, 4:1) – but in our vocation, our calling, as members of Christ’s body. The final three chapters then describe the difference that such a calling should make in the way we live our lives. So Paul writes, “I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk [i.e., “to live”] in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called” (4:1).

As we turn to this rich, complex, linguistically challenging opening sentence, we must acknowledge that no two commentators agree on how exactly the passage should be structured for study. Although in our English translations, our text (1:3-14) is neatly and comprehensively divided into clear sentences and paragraphs, in Paul’s original Greek, these twelve verses are actually one long, uninterrupted sentence of over two hundred words, with clause heaped on top of clause. There are clearly a number of themes running through the text, themes that serve to prepare us for what is coming in the rest of the letter, and I hope in the next few weeks to look more closely at several of those key themes.

But this morning, I want simply to take this text as what it primarily is: An expression of deep and profound worship, in which Paul blesses the Lord for blessing his people. He wants Gentiles especially to understand the wonder of God’s grace in including us within his chosen people. He gives a sweeping picture of salvation history, and patterns it around the unique role each divine Person of the Trinity plays in the salvation of the world. So this morning, we will simply follow a threefold division of the text in Paul’s celebration of Father, Son and Spirit.

One note before we begin. Sometimes we try to be holier than the Bible and insist that God deserves our praise simply for who he is in himself, regardless of what he has done for us. But the Bible does not ask that of us, and for good reason. The only way that we know one another’s character is by hearing one another’s words and observing one another’s deeds. If I think that you are kind, it is because I have observed over time a pattern of kindness in your words and actions. So, too, the Bible calls us to bless the Lord for what he has said and done for his people.

Body

1. Blessing the Father for securing our past (1:3-6):

It is the Father “who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places” (1:3).

This is, frankly, incomprehensible to us. The Bible gives us glimpses and life gives us tastes of the joy, the fullness of life and love, the glory of what awaits the children of God. But when Paul tells us that the Father has blessed us in union with the Messiah, the Christ, *with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places*, we know that we have stepped beyond what we could ask or imagine. C.S. Lewis wrote in *The Weight of Glory*,

It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.

It is the Father who “chose us in him [that is, in Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him” (1:4).

It has always been the Father’s will for us, not that we should go on living as we lived before we met Jesus, but that we should now be following him into ever increasing wholeness and maturity. We are new people in Christ, and we should never make the Gospel of grace an excuse for living self-centered, disobedient, ungracious lives. The fact that we still struggle and are not yet what one day we shall be is no more an excuse for spiritual complacency than our imperfection in any endeavor should keep us from pressing on toward excellence.

The unbiblical notion celebrated in some evangelical circles that using his grace as an excuse for sin and displaying our sin as a way to exalt his grace is not new. Paul’s response to such thinking was emphatic: “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?” (Romans 6:1-2).

It is the Father who “predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will” (1:5).

God predestined us, not to be his slaves, but his children. He has adopted us in Christ and made us his own. We are now part of the family and are thus to

be about our Father's business of finding and bringing home other lost brothers and sisters. This is at the heart of our vocation. Predestination is not about God loving us and not loving others. God chose Abraham to be a blessing to the nations. He chose Israel to be a light to the nations. He chose us in Christ so that though us the nations might hear the good news that God has offered to all an amnesty signed in the blood of his Son, who has joined us to himself and himself to us, and who will at last make all things new in the glory of his Kingdom – a Kingdom that will never end.

All of this, Paul writes, is "to the praise of his glorious grace" (1:6).

Worship is not primarily about our musical or liturgical tastes, although we enjoy worship more when those line up. But worship derives its value in one thing alone: the worth of the One whom we worship. We all worship something or someone. Most are polytheists who worship several gods. Such worship degrades us and devalues the object we have put in place of God. But worship of the One true God ennobles the worshiper and brings glory and joy to God. How are we to keep our worship always in "spirit and truth?" By doing what Paul does here: by rehearsing the mighty saving deeds of the Lord, his grace and glory toward us whom he has made his children.

2. Blessing the Son for securing our present (1:7-12):

It is in Christ, that "we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses" (1:7).

Now Paul turns to second person of the Trinity, our Lord Jesus the Messiah. In him, we have freedom from everything that once enslaved us. To redeem a slave meant to purchase him from slavery. In Christ's death, a perfect life was offered in place of our broken lives, and death could not hold such a life in its sway. In him, we are "ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven. Who, like we, his praise should sing?"

If you are in Christ and are still walking around consumed by guilt over things that you have confessed and repented of, let the love of Christ embrace you. Let go of the past. John Stott used to say that, if you think your sin is too great to be forgiven, you either have too high a view of your sin or too low a view of Christ's sacrifice. In Jesus Christ, you are forgiven – old things passed away, all things become new.

It is in Christ that we have "wisdom and insight" to know "the mystery of his will ... a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in [Christ]" (1:8-10).

You are not merely forgiven of sin and set free to follow Christ. You have been given wisdom and insight to know God's plan for the redemption of

human history. And his plan is to unite all things in Christ. All that is at war, alienated, broken apart, will be renewed and reconciled in Christ. This does not merely refer to humans. God is renewing the cosmos, He made it as his habitation, as a vast and glorious temple for the display of his glory, and one day we shall see it as it was before human rebellion triggered entropic doom. Christ will declare from his throne, “Behold, I am making all things new” (Revelation 21:5).

It is in Christ that “we have obtained an inheritance” (1:11).

In him, all the promises of God are assured, “every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places” (1:3). We do not yet see the height and breadth and depth of what is promised in the love of God, but we know that all shall come to us in due time, for our lives are bound up in Christ’s life, and we live in the hope of what will be revealed in the Day of the Lord.

All of this, Paul writes, is so that we “might be to the praise of his glory” (1:12).

And so, we worship the Son along with the Father, and sing songs of praise and offer prayers from hearts that are being refreshed by his life at work within us.

3. Blessing the Holy Spirit for securing our future (1:13-14):

It is the Holy Spirit who seals us as being in Christ (1:13).

Our confidence comes from this: our present experience of the presence of the Holy Spirit at work within us. A seal shows ownership. The work of the Holy Spirit within us should make clear to everyone whose we are. If anyone would be surprised to hear that you are a Christian, then you probably are not, in fact, a Christian. Because a Christian is someone who has been born again, born of God’s Spirit and is now beginning to turn toward Christ, to learn from him, and to follow him – however slowly and haltingly. There is definitely a new direction, or there is no evidence of new life, and thus no ground for assurance of salvation. One of the marks of God’s children, according to the apostle John, is that “we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome” (1 John 5:3). We are not yet what we shall be, but neither are we what we once were.

It is the Holy Spirit “who is the guarantee [or down payment] of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it” (1:14).

The Spirit of God is, in the life of the child of God, the presence of the future, the reality of “the life of God within the soul of man,” in Henry Scougal’s memorable phrase. Paul calls the Spirit “the guarantee,” which could also be

translated, “the down payment,” toward the promised inheritance of “every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places” (1:3). And so, even now we taste and see something of what is coming for those who are in Christ.

It is the Spirit who convicts us of sin and creates within us a desire for the things of God. It is the Spirit who enables us to see the things that are passing away, things that once promised so much, so we thought, and yet which always disappointed, as the empty promises of an age that is passing away. It is the Spirit who places within us a desire for the Lord, and the growing confidence that in Christ we have the intimacy and meaning and love that we once looked for in all the wrong places. It is the Spirit who enables us to rest in the work of Christ and yet press on toward the upward call of God in Christ. It is the Spirit who grants us, even now, the reality and power of eternal life.

And, again, all of this is “to the praise of his glory” (1:14).

And so, we worship the Spirit of the living God, who is now – in this present age – God with us, Immanuel.

Conclusion

What of you this morning? Does any of this make sense? Does it ring at all true to your experience? Or is it a song in a language you have yet to learn? When we read, “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,” does something deep within you say, “Yes, thank God!” or does it make you wonder what in the world the apostle is talking about and why anyone should care?

Let these be diagnostic questions about your spiritual vitality. Are you alive in Christ to the Kingdom that will never end, or still enamored with the kingdoms that are passing away? Do you know the love of God, love that reached out to you from before time? Do you know the freedom of those who have been redeemed from bondage to sin and shame, and the confidence of those who have been adopted as children of God? Do you have the comfort of knowing that God’s Spirit is in you and is the down payment of all the promises of God, your glorious inheritance in Christ?

If so, then bless the Lord with all that is in you. If not, then cry out to him to send his Spirit to you and begin to reveal to you the depth of his love and the riches of his grace in Christ Jesus. Nothing could possibly be more important. And the day will surely come for each of us when nothing else will matter.

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