

Ephesians 1:13-14
(Ezekiel 36:22-38; John 14:15-31)
“What the Spirit Has Done”

Introduction

We come this morning to the final section of one of the great sentences of the Bible, a prayer of thanksgiving and praise that uses over two hundred words and covers twelve verses in our Bibles (1:3-14), a prayer that exalts and glorifies God for what he has done to redeem us from bondage to sin and death and unite us to his Son. In studying this sentence over the past few weeks, we have followed the underlying Trinitarian structure of this sentence, as Paul praises, in turn, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, for our salvation.

At the heart of this letter – a letter that is all about our vocation, our calling as God’s people – is the outworking of our calling within the larger context of God’s covenant promise that his people would be the source of blessing to all the people of the earth. That is why Paul, in the second half of chapter two, speaks of the crucial importance of tearing down all barriers between Jew and Gentile, as we become one new reconciled humanity in the Messiah. God called Abraham to be the source of blessing to all the nations of the world. That vocation was inherited by Israel, which was to be “a light to the nations.” While Israel as a nation failed in its calling, Israel’s Messiah fulfilled the mission in his life, death and victory. So now, Paul, who had once been a proud, ethnocentric Jewish religious leader and despiser of all those who did not follow Torah, Israel’s law, finds his life vocation in declaring that Israel’s Messiah is the world’s Messiah, who has destroyed the power of sin and death and is creating in himself a new humanity for the healing of the nations.

And that is also why, in the two verses we are studying this morning, the verses that address the work of the Holy Spirit, Paul changes from first person plural to second person plural: from “us” to “you.” Up until now, Paul has been speaking autobiographically of himself and of those whom he calls, “we who were the first to hope in Christ” (1:12), in other words, the original Jewish followers of Jesus. Now he includes his Gentile readers, and says, “In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit” (1:13).

If we miss this, we will miss what, to Paul, was the great unveiling of what he called a few verses earlier, “the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (1:13). Any time that we allow ourselves to look down on other people, whether through the lens of racism or tribalism or nationalism or classism or the arrogance of wealth and power, we step back into the realm of bondage to the sin and brokenness from which the gospel aims to set us free. Look with me at the way Paul works this out in these final two verses.

Body

1. The Spirit has been promised to God's children: "... the promised Holy Spirit" (1:13).

It is easy to miss this. When I first outlined the text, I missed it. But in referring to the Spirit as promised, Paul wants to remind us of a theme that runs through the Scriptures. In fact, in the Greek word order of this text, Paul writes of "the Spirit, the promised, the holy." Why does this matter? Because it is God's gift of his own Spirit, also known as the Spirit of Christ, that makes our lives so completely new that Jesus referred to it as being "born again" and being "born of the Spirit" (John 3:3f). Both Peter and John use this same language in their letters.

The Spirit was always present (e.g., Genesis 1:2), and yet God promised that the Spirit would be given in a new and powerful way that would write his Word on his people's hearts and enable them to follow him in truth (Ezekiel 36:27). It is the Spirit who joins us to Christ and makes us one family in him. So this is not a promise for a few very mature spiritual giants, but the promised possession of all of God's children, and when given, begins to change everything. Jesus said clearly that, just as we give good gifts to our children, so too our Heavenly Father gives his Spirit to those who ask (Luke 11:13). But how do we receive the Spirit?

2. The Spirit comes to us in the preaching of the gospel: "In him you also when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit" (1:13).

Paul says that the Spirit comes to us when we hear "the word of truth, the gospel of [our] salvation, and believe" in the Christ, God's Messiah. It is a theme of Scripture, as Paul writes elsewhere, that "faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17). We must never diminish what the Scriptures honor, namely God's appointed means of grace, and the hearing of his Word is one of the chief means God uses to bring about faith, which causes us to look away from ourselves and look to Christ for our life and salvation.

No people in history have had the kind of access to God's Word in different translations, as well as access to commentary to help us understand its meaning, whatever our level and capacity for learning. Apart from the Spirit, the Word remains a dead letter, a channel without water, just as the Spirit apart from the Word is like a river without a channel. But when the Spirit moves through the Word, lives are transformed, families and communities changed from the inside out. Are you daily exposing yourself to the Word of truth, the gospel of your salvation?

3. The Spirit seals us as being in Christ: “In him you also when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit” (1:13).

In the ancient world, a seal was a mark of ownership. It served the same function as a cattle brand. It made it clear who owned something or someone. The key is that it was not an inner experience, as understood by a few very fine commentators such as Martyn Lloyd-Jones and the great Puritan, John Owen. Both saw the sealing of the Spirit as a second work of grace, what the book of Acts describes as a mighty filling of the Spirit. The problem with this interpretation, as nearly all other commentators point out, is that it is not even closely related to what was meant in Paul’s day by a seal.

So the point to be taken is that here Paul describes something visible, something seen by others that marks us out as belonging to Christ. It would have to be related to how we live and love, a transformation of behavior, such as is recorded in the book of Acts and in the early history of the church, that causes the surrounding world to say, “See how they love one another – there is not a needy one among them.” The first Christians were known for their seemingly profligate love for everyone, even their enemies. Just as Jesus cried out from the cross, “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34), the first martyr, Stephen, as he was being stoned to death, cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:60). It is the seal of the Spirit’s presence and work in a life being transformed by grace.

4. The Spirit guarantees our inheritance: “... who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it” (1:14).

The word here translated “guarantee” is often translated “down payment.” It has both meanings and speaks both of the Spirit giving us a foretaste of what is coming when at last the Lord makes all things new (e.g., Revelation 21), and of the presence of the Spirit as our assurance now that “he who began a good work in [us] will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6).

If the Spirit’s seal is a visible mark to those around us that we belong to the Lord, then the Spirit’s guarantee is an inner assurance to keep us steady and confident in the face of whatever may come. This is why Paul, elsewhere, encourages us to self-examination: “Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? – unless indeed you fail to meet the test” (2 Corinthians 13:5). What we are looking for is the evidence of a new way of thinking about Jesus, a new way of loving one another, and a new way of gratefully keeping God’s commandments (e.g., 1 John 5:1-3).

5. This inheritance has a two-fold purpose: “... our inheritance ... to the praise of his glory” (1:14).

Once again, just as in the previous two sections of this prayer where the Father and Son are praised, this final section closes with the reminder of a two-fold vocation: Our inheritance joins us both to the mission of God and to the worship of God. The mission begins with the sealing of the Spirit, marking us, for all to see, as belonging to the Lord. From that point on, we are either helping or hurting the mission of God, by the way we speak, by the things we do, and especially by the way we love or fail to love, by the way we act on behalf of those around us or fail to do so, and by whether or not our lives are marked by what Paul elsewhere calls the “fragrance of the knowledge of [Christ]” (2 Corinthians 2:14f).

In other words, we are not the only ones meant to taste something of the future through the indwelling Spirit of God. We are also to give those around us a taste of the age to come. People should know something of the truth and love of Christ simply by knowing his people. They have every right to expect that, and if we are increasingly pariahs in our own culture, it may not be because we have stood boldly for truth, but because we have been obnoxious culture warriors. Remember that it was those whom the religious people of Jesus’ day despised and would not eat or be seen with who ate and drank with Jesus. To the degree that we are becoming like him, those same kinds of folk will be drawn to us.

And all of this is “to the praise of his glory” (1:14). The follower of Jesus, the child of God, the true disciple, lives in a rhythm of worship and mission, each one flowing into the other, each causing the other to increase. The greater our worship, the more engaged we will be in the mission of God. The greater our involvement in God’s mission, the more joyfully and gratefully we will worship him.

Conclusion

There is certainly more to be learned from this tremendous single-sentence-prayer of gratitude and praise that has occupied us these past four Sundays. But this may be enough to encourage us to realize more truly than we ever have before why God deserves to be worshiped and blessed because of how richly he has blessed us in Christ. If we are God’s children, then it is because his Spirit has brought us into union with his Son and with one another, and all that is his is now ours. Why should we fear whatever may come? For nothing “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:39).