

I don't remember if I learned it from some of the more thoughtful Sunday School curriculum that the old Southern Baptist Sunday School Board used to put out or if I discovered it when, at age 16, I began to prepare my first sermons, scouring the old 12 volume "Interpreters Bible" for insights that would make my remarks seem less callow. Somewhere fairly early on though (I'm quite certain it was before I went to seminary), I became aware that good Christian men and women held radically different opinions about who wrote certain books of the Bible, when, why and to whom they were written, and just which differences in the old manuscripts were mistakes or interpolations and which were the original wording, if such still existed. I also figured out (pretty quickly I think, although this might have taken me until my seminary days) that no matter how much scholars squabbled over such things, it did not appear in the slightest to detract from their regard for what has reached us as Holy Scripture, nor from their ability or any competent preacher's ability to draw life-changing lessons from a disputed passage.

So as we begin our summer review of the book of Ephesians, I want to say right up front that not all scholars agree that Paul wrote this work, nor that it was written as a letter, nor that it was originally meant for Christians in Ephesus. Frankly, I don't see that it matters much and, when push comes to shove, neither do most of those scholars. What does matter is that the book of Ephesians that has come down to us stands after nearly 2000 years as a remarkable summation of Pauline theology and an exalted piece of devotional literature which has enlivened Christians' thoughts and lives over those two millennia. For the sake of simplicity, I'm going to call the author of the book Paul and assume it was written as a letter to the Ephesians. In fact, I think the connection with the city of Ephesus sheds some light on the letter as a whole and in particular on some things in our passage this morning, so I'd like to start by talking for a minute about Ephesus and life there at the time of Paul.

The city of Ephesus no longer exists, save as a collection of ruins, but at the time of Paul it was the most important city in the Roman province of Asia, the westernmost section of Asia Minor, modern day Turkey. Like Seattle, Ephesus was a port city, bustling with enterprise and commerce, its brisk trade bringing business and culture from all around the Roman world. Some of the business that was done in Ephesus would be unthinkable today. The Columbia Encyclopedia says that during the time of Paul, Ephesus was the very center of the world's slave trade. We also know from the story of Paul in Ephesus found in the 19th chapter of Acts that Ephesus, like Seattle, was known for its highly skilled artisans. Just as there is a world-renowned tradition of art glass in Seattle, the silversmiths of Ephesus were a celebrated, and therefore rich and powerful, group. The silversmiths' trade centered on images connected to the famed Temple of Artemis, or Diana, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Worship of this local fertility goddess, assumed into the Greek and then the Roman pantheons, dominated religious life in Ephesus but, like any port city then or now, travelers and immigrants, both slave and free, brought philosophies and cults from all corners of the known world. We will see how Paul reacts to this milieu in his writing today and at further points of our study together.

Our passage for this morning can be a challenging one to investigate. To begin with, translation poses some problems, as verses 3-14 in the original Greek are actually one long sentence! Scholars have reacted to this dense, serpentine writing with a mixture of horror and appreciation. The oft-quoted German scholar, Eduard Norden, wrote that this passage was "the most monstrous sentence conglomeration... that I have encountered in Greek." Frederick William

Danker wryly observed, “As a syntactical salmagundi, the marvelous spiral of Ephesians 1:3-14 is probably without rival in Greek literature.” Others are more generous. The French scholar, Charles Masson wrote, “One is struck by the fullness of the language, its liturgical majesty, its perceptible rhythm from beginning to end.” I’m glad that some of our modern English translations have captured this sense of majesty and rhythm, particularly the Jerusalem Bible, although I read this morning from the New Revised Standard which does a little better job with clarity of expression.

But what would cause Paul to write such a complex and convoluted opening? In part, I think, Paul is echoing what was for him a very familiar form, the Hebrew *berakah*, or blessing. These ritual praises of God are still an important part of Jewish practice. Wendell Frerichs says, “Modern Jews are encouraged to bless God a minimum of 100 times a day for specific ways in which God has blessed them.” The *berakah* was and is often written as one complicated sentence, as witnessed in the first of the Eighteen Benedictions from the modern synagogue service: “Blessed art thou, O Lord our God and God of our fathers, God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob, the great, mighty and revered God, the most high God, who bestowest loving-kindnesses, and possessest all things; who rememberest the pious deeds of the patriarchs and in love will bring a redeemer to their children’s children for thy name’s sake.” Benedictions of this sort contemporary with Paul that were found at Qumran are even longer, so this form that causes such mixed feelings among modern translators was clearly an accepted mode among the worshippers of Yahweh in the first century.

The rushing, tumbling flow of Paul’s intricate language indicates something beyond mere adherence to form, however. Paul’s blessing of God for all that God has done for us clearly springs not just from a sense of ritual duty but also from a real sense of joy. The creators of the Revised Common Lectionary clearly had this sense of the celebration of God’s goodness in mind when they connected this passage with Psalm 24 and with the Old Testament reading for today, II Samuel 6, where David “danced before the Lord with all his might.” Verna Dozier wrote for Sojourners magazine, “There is no dancer in the epistle, but the majestic rhythms of the prose lift our spirits so we can dance.” I’ve included the translation from the Jerusalem Bible as an insert in your bulletins this morning and I encourage you to take it home and find some time this week to read it aloud. I hope you find, like Verna Dozier and me, that it makes you want to dance.

Form and language aside, what makes this extended introduction to Paul’s letter to Ephesus worth our time this morning? If, as many commentators say, Ephesians is a summary of Paul’s theology, then this passage may be seen as a summary or the thesis of the book of Ephesians. In blessing God, Paul enumerates all of the reasons why his readers should join him in praising “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” In this one long Greek sentence, these 11 English verses, we find a brief rendition of all that God has done for us.

First, of course, Paul takes the very Hebrew form of the *berakah* and brings it firmly into the realm of the New Covenant. God, who has been remembered for centuries as the God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob, is now praised as God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The mighty works of God in the lives of the patriarchs, the redemption of the children of Israel from bondage in Egypt, have been fulfilled in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Again and again in this passage, we see Paul’s understanding that God’s actions on behalf of

humankind are focused and completed “in Christ,” “in the Beloved,” “in him.” In Paul’s affirmation that God, through Christ has blessed us, the Baptist scholar Carey Newman sees the fulfillment of the first promise that God made to Abram, Genesis 12:2-3, “I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing... in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.” Now, Newman writes, “Christ is both the means and the sphere of God’s work.” As the *berakah* praised God for blessings bestowed in the past, Paul now brings into play his understanding of the work of Christ, which simultaneously has both been accomplished and is being accomplished. Although the individual Christian, in Ephesus or Lynnwood, will only experience the completion of Christ’s work within themselves at the end of their earthly existence, nevertheless, within the framework of Christ, the work is finished and God may be, is to be praised for blessings bestowed.

Paul writes that God “has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.” Paul doesn’t praise God for blessing the Ephesians with material riches, comfort and success, probably because this wasn’t true. We know from Acts 19 that there was a great deal of opposition towards the Christians in Ephesus. Many of them likely suffered economically and physically because of their new faith. In his farewell to the leaders of the church in Ephesus in Acts 20, Paul warns them that “grievous wolves” will afflict their flock. Certainly the Ephesians dealt with official persecution and with the lure of easier philosophies and material gain. Like us, they were living in a material world (and how many of you, by the way, remember that was the title of an album and song by ex-Beatle George Harrison long before any of us had heard of Madonna and MTV?) but the material world is not where the Christian holds citizenship or finds hope. We belong to the heavenly places and the key blessings God has bestowed on us are spiritual. By this Paul isn’t referring to the individualistic, private spirituality that is pursued by so many seekers today who focus on their own inner, hidden life, but rather to the gifts of the Holy Spirit, of which Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “the greatest of these is love.” God has blessed us with love and as we love God and our neighbors, so we manifest that most precious of all gifts. In the New English Bible, verse 4 is rendered, “In Christ, God chose us before the world was founded, to be dedicated, to be without blemish in his sight, to be full of love.”

In verse 5, we find another of those concepts that would have had especial force in the Greco-Roman world to which Ephesus belonged. I think I’ve mentioned from this pulpit before that the Hebrews had no equivalent of adoption. In the Roman Empire, an adopted son was given full share of the honor and assets of his father’s estate. For Paul to assert that we believers, through Christ Jesus, are the adopted children of God was a remarkable idea for Jewish and Gentile believers alike. Even though the Jews were God’s chosen people, to be adopted as God’s children was an infinitely more intimate and powerful relationship and one that they now shared with believers from all nations. Likewise, the idea of redemption in verse 7 would have been potent for all the believers in Ephesus. Again, for the Jewish believers, there would have been echoes in this word of the deliverance of their ancestors from Egypt. In that great hub of the slave trade, however, the word redemption would have also had a more commercial meaning – the price to be paid by a slave or on a slave’s behalf in order to gain her or his freedom. Those spiritual blessings of which Paul spoke liberate the follower of Christ from slavery to brokenness and sin and elevate the believer to life as a beloved child of God.

When Paul writes of the wisdom and insight to be found in the blessings of God and of God making known to us the mystery of his will, he was writing in terms that would have had deeper meaning for the Ephesians and may, in context, connect more strongly with us. Amid all of the philosophies and religions that swirled in Ephesus were many that promised special hidden knowledge and wisdom to their adherents, mysteries that could not be revealed to anyone but the elite. This sounds very much like the claims of today's theosophical societies and scientologists. But Paul counters these claims with the declaration that the blessings of God in Christ for every Christian include all wisdom and insight and a knowledge of the mystery of God's will. In Christ, our minds and hearts are opened to the mystery of God's great plan: that all things in heaven and earth will be gathered up into Christ, finding perfection and fulfillment in him. In Christ, all things will be brought into harmony, not just a spiritual elite will be blessed but all of creation. There is no snobbish exclusivity in the Beloved Community of God but rather an open invitation to join in the universal destiny of love and joy with the Creator and Redeemer.

In that tension I mentioned before between what is accomplished in God's sight and what we have yet to experience, Paul turns to words of promise and fulfillment in describing what God has done for us. Many translations of this passage use the word "inheritance" in verse 11 to describe what we have received in Christ. This same Greek word was used in the Greek version of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Septuagint, to refer to the division of the Promised Land among Israel's families and to each individual Israelite's lot or portion in particular. In fact, since Israel is described in Deuteronomy as "God's portion," Andrew Lincoln suggests in his commentary on Ephesians that this verse should be translated "We have been chosen as God's portion." Ultimately, whether we understand the verse to be saying that Christ is our inheritance or we are God's inheritance, the meaning is the same. In the future which was inaugurated by Christ's death and resurrection, believers are inextricably bound to our gracious Creator. The promise of God through the prophet Jeremiah is reiterated: "I will be their God and they shall be my people."

This promise is further made tangible for the Ephesians, and for us, with Paul's use of metaphors of commerce. In verses 13 and 14, Paul tells us that when we had heard the word of truth, the Good News of our salvation, and had believed in Christ, then we were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people. To be marked with a seal, then and now, connotes ownership and protection. According to Eldon Woodcock, the seal of the Holy Spirit both authorizes us as God's heirs and certifies our status with God as well as "sealing" us for God, making us ultimately inaccessible to the powers of evil that might beset us. The Ephesians would have seen every day slaves branded with their owner's seal. No one could claim to be ignorant of his or her status; no one could tamper with them without repercussions from their owner. For Paul, the presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer marks us as belonging to God. We are empowered to act as God's heirs, with the power of God's love. When we allow the seal of the Holy Spirit to shine in our lives, there can be no doubt whose we are. And the Spirit shields our souls from spiritual death, from which Christ set us free.

Similarly, the phrase "pledge of our inheritance" also derives from the business world. The word variously translated as "pledge" or "guarantee" was the ordinary commercial term for a down payment or a first installment – that advance payment which formed part of the purchase

price as a guarantee that the remainder would be paid in due time. Just as the down payment is a small portion of the money that will pay for an item in full, so is our experience of the Holy Spirit, that “pledge of our inheritance,” a small foretaste of what life in the realized Kingdom of God will be. As our lives are now made fuller with the faith, hope and love that the Spirit brings us, so much more rich will our existence be in the completely immediate presence of God which is to come and so much more will we be able to praise God’s glory.

In light of our studies in recent weeks, it is also worth noting, I think, how the idea of the Trinity pervades this passage. Blessed be God the Father, the origin of every blessing we experience and the one who has chosen us as his people since before the foundation of the world. Blessed be Christ Jesus, the Beloved Son in and through whom all blessings are given, our Redeemer through his work on the cross who also works to redeem all of creation. Blessed be the Spirit, for it is in her character that our “spiritual blessings” of faith, hope and love come and it is she who marks us with God’s ownership and stands as our in-dwelling guarantee of the fulfillment of God’s great and loving purpose.

As we look back over this remarkable passage, I am struck once again by how the wisdom and skill with which God gifted Paul enabled him to relate the spiritual blessings of life in Christ to images connected with the most everyday human activities. Business people, look how reliable God is, sealing what is rightfully God’s own, guaranteeing our future with a down payment of the Spirit that moves our hearts. Scholars and seekers, all wisdom and insight are to found in Christ, the key to the mystery of God’s will. We are God’s adopted children forever, the slaves whom God has freed from bondage, redeemed through the blood of the Son, who became the Passover lamb for all humankind and all of creation. Look what God, through Christ has done for us! And blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. May God’s glory be praised. Amen.