

HOW BLESSED ARE WE?

Paul's letter to the Ephesians was John Calvin's favorite New Testament writing. Some of you don't know whether that is a good recommendation or the kiss of death. But then, how many of us realize that there is nothing in the entire world of Protestant Christianity, or all of its offspring, which does not owe a huge debt to John Calvin? Of course, Calvin was not trying to be the source of anything. Like Paul, he was trying to reveal the source – which was Christ.

In any case, Calvin thought Ephesians was a marvelous wellspring of Christian truth and insight. He was not alone in his appreciation. Many have seen Ephesians as the full flower of Paul's thinking. Many of the seeds of what Paul himself had been teaching seem to have come to full clarity and conviction in this letter. J.A. Robinson (Joseph Armitage Robinson, Dean of Westminster and of Wells, who himself wrote a commentary on Ephesians) said it was, "The crown of St. Paul's epistles."

As always, details and opinions and questions swirl around the backdrop and context of this writing. We will talk about some of that in upcoming Wednesday Night Classes, when we have more time for such considerations. Ephesians is really boring, at least in the early chapters, until we start to see what Paul is actually talking about. But if we ponder and stay with it, slowly it emerges as the mind-boggling unfolding of what Paul has been trying to proclaim to us all along. We suspect that more dimensions of the Message were opening up for him too.

The Scripture reading for this morning and for next Sunday will be the same. Today is Communion Sunday, and I think it is appropriate for us to be reminded of the blessings we receive as individuals who are loved by Jesus, and loved by God. That is profound indeed, and in many ways beyond what we have fully comprehended or trusted or taken unto ourselves. Next Sunday we will look at how this same passage blows the walls and ceilings off of everything our world has ever known or believed. And not just for us – for everyone. We do need to set the scene a little for next Sunday's sermon, so if you can make it to Wednesday Night Class this week, or get to the website and read the text before next Sunday, you will have a much better chance of hearing what Paul is really saying.

One of the things that tends to be true in normal churches is that you cannot grow very far or build on anything very much. Institutions and organizations (through no fault of their own, we should add) tend to preserve perspectives and traditions more than they explore new ones. Who wants to go to a church that says, “Hey, nobody knows or believes anything anyway.” Some of the mainline churches in our country have tended to sound that way, and people have flocked to them in twos or threes and stayed for a week or two. So preserving the Bible, for instance, and repeating the same major concepts and proclamations, is one of the things an institution is supposed to do.

But beyond that, many churches do not expect their people to remember very much or very clearly beyond a few days. Add to that a very sporadic attendance pattern for most people in this frenetic and overbusy culture of ours. Preaching, for instance, is very different in our time than it was in New England a hundred years ago (or in any time prior to that). Sermons, along with whole worship services, have grown shorter and shorter, and fewer in number. Each worship service today tends to be a self-contained unit. Like it or not, life does not happen that way. When we try to pretend it does, we only get very shallow comprehension and occasionally a good “one-liner.”

I have struggled for years to get a little further beneath the surface of the Christian Message and proclamation, mostly by means of study groups and retreats, but also by using sermon series, even if the audience was not consistent in attendance. It was always a struggle, and even a fight, to see if a church would turn into a congregation instead of just being an audience. My point is: Every church to which I was called started out very disappointed with my preaching. The sermons were dry, boring, irrelevant, and incomprehensible – people said. I was certainly not immune to this criticism and sad disappointment. Yet I was just coming from a previous parish that had been thanking me for being an honest, exciting, interesting, compelling preacher.

So was I to abandon everything I cared about and go back to the pabulum that the new congregation was wanting? It would have saved a lot of trouble, I can assure you. But within six months or so, lots of people were discovering that the sermons were not as boring as they had at first thought. Others had by now left the church before finding this out (which I always regretted and grieved over), but to my amazement, new folk were also starting to show up. This happened to me seven times.

Point being? *The New Church*, at least from my perspective, must keep trying to get beyond the shallows that most churches in our time are willing to stay in. Most of you agree or you would have already departed. But that also means that people in *The New Church* must continually track the message beyond one class or sermon. This is already possible with our website, and it will get easier to find the classes and sermons you may have missed. If you heard the message in only one class or sermon, either I didn't have much to say, or you are missing part of it. Many pastors are trying to pick up new people. That's a faithful choice. They are supposed to do that. So they preach to reach the visitors – the people who are not yet very interested or committed. Years ago I received different guidance. I never preach to reach the people who don't care and are not committed. That is *your* assignment, if you wish to accept it. I preach and teach to the most convinced, committed, dedicated people I can imagine. If you are not one of them already, you will have to scramble to keep up.

Now we are heading into Paul's letter to the Ephesians. I already put out some essential background in a class about Elijah and Jezebel. That was because Ephesians does not ring for us if we do not know the background of Elijah. Hopefully we can draw a few more threads together this coming Wednesday. If, after that, you don't understand why Paul is so elated he can hardly contain himself, then so be it. Either I could not speak it, or you could not hear it. Well, that also has happened from time to time, but we will hope not this time.

How blessed are we? "*The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.*" Who is doing this blessing? God is. Paul never stops being Jewish (neither does Jesus, for that matter). God is the true source and the principal actor – always. Christ Jesus is God's top agent, and the One through whom God is doing what God is doing. But unlike many Christians in our time, Paul never thinks that Jesus has superseded God, or turned into God, or invented God. Jesus *reveals* God. And Jesus Himself is always pointing to God, obeying God, thanking God, and giving God full praise and allegiance.

Nevertheless, from a normal human point of view, some things are questionable about this proclamation. No public-relations consultant would have allowed Paul to phrase things this way. Spiritual blessings? Who wants spiritual blessings? If you don't want to talk about physical

blessings, forget it. I want more money; better sex; a more appreciative boss; a more understanding mate. I want a better golf game; a better car; a nicer house; children who are as grateful to me as I am to God. Oops! I think we just crossed some kind of a line there. Anyway, if we are not going to talk about any of these real things and real blessings, then you are just wasting my time.

But Paul is hopeless apart from spiritual dimensions. So he will not let it go. Blessings in heavenly places? Who gives a rip about heavenly places? Anything that does not help us with the “here and now” – or at least promise that it soon will help us with the here and now – well, forget it!

It has become fashionable, in many churches, to downplay comments about heaven, unless of course we immediately assert that there are many applications regarding the hope and promise of heaven that are available right here and now – on earth. I like the point too. I am aware that Jesus often connected the two realms. *“Seek ye first the kingdom of heaven, and all these things shall be yours as well.”* (Luke 12:31) *“There is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive many times more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life.”* (Luke 18:30)

Okay, I’ve got it. Some of the blessings and promises do intersect our realm and apply in the here and now. Our religion is not just about “pie in the sky, by and by.” Of course, I do have to seek God’s Kingdom *first* to find this out. I have to give up house or wife or children for the sake of the Kingdom of God to find this out. But is this multiple choice? You can have the house and I get to keep the wife and kids? Or maybe I should keep the house and kids and you can have the wife. Does it really work this way? Or is there a deeper principle behind this? Pursuing the Kingdom with all our heart and soul, sometimes we discover that certain things are in the way, blocking the Path and the purpose. And if we stay faithful and obedient to God, some things will be taken from us, despite all our efforts to find a way to keep it all together. Well, that’s a little too deep for me. Tell you what, you can have the kids and I’ll keep the wife and house. The kids haven’t paid any attention to anything I’ve said for at least two years anyway.

There is almost always some kind of catch with Jesus’ promises. Or maybe it is not a catch; maybe Jesus just tells us the true principles because that’s how things really work. In any case, we do not have to

wait for eternity to find out that God's Kingdom is real and available, even here and now. But here and now is nevertheless a long, long way from the whole story.

Paul knows (and never forgets) that this is a temporal and, if you will pardon the reminder, broken realm. Jesus seems all too terribly aware that His Kingdom will not be realized on this earth; that Palm Sunday will carry a fearful flaw in its earthly design; that His true identity and our true allegiance will not be fully realized in this realm. So Paul's hope operates here, and it shines through many of his incredible deeds and efforts here. But Paul also carries a much larger hope. It is one of the blessings that lights his life. "Every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places" may sound a bit awkward to us, but Paul wants us to know he is talking about realms and realities bigger than this one. We can mock it all we wish, but Paul has met the Risen Jesus on his way to Damascus, and he knows there is more to come – far more than this earthly realm can contain. That lights his life far beyond anything he knows or does or cares about here. That hope blesses him continually. Please, dear friends, let it bless you as well.

"God chose us in love before the foundation of the world." In this way, we are predestined. We have no reason to go into any of the questionable byways of a later double-predestination doctrine. That is not where Paul is or what Ephesians is talking about. Paul is saying that our destiny has been part of God's plan from the very beginning. How does Paul know this? A process of logical deduction: God has a plan. Our future is not just by accident or happenstance. So Paul believes that Jesus has always been part of God's plan, even before the world was created. Therefore we are part of the plan too. I have no way to know if Paul is correct about this. I don't much care one way or the other, as long as I am part of the plan now. But I don't really quarrel with the logic. If God is omniscient – knows all things – then it is logical that God knows all that was and all that will be. But logic is not as certain as we sometimes pretend. If God also gives us free will, that introduces a long string of variables. If it is truly free will, how can God predict our endless moods and choices without controlling them? Omniscience demands it, but perhaps free will countermands it. We do know that human logic sometimes merely takes us into the realms of the absurd. The old conundrum: Can God make a rock so big he cannot lift it? Stalemate. The finite mind can find its way into more errors than we like to imagine.

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So Paul is trying to be logical and theological. But I don't much care about how right he is about the details he attaches to his conclusions. I care about his experience, starting with the encounter on the Damascus Road. That's what really started Paul on the WAY of believing that God in Christ Jesus really loved him, and even loved the Gentiles too. Maybe Paul is right about all the fancy theories regarding "before the creation of the world." But don't ask me; my finite mind cannot process information about "before the beginning." But I can and do cut in on the real Message. Paul's point is that God has always loved us, has always intended to save us, has always longed to adopt us as true children of the Kingdom. Knowing that is a huge blessing. It puts all our fears into a different light. Even the "dark night of the soul" cannot get very dark, or stay very dark for very long, if we know and remember this blessing. (I have had my own dark nights, and am not trying to minimize anybody else's. But it is God's light that breaks our nights, and brings us back to Life.)

"We have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our sins." Were you raised Catholic or Lutheran? If so, you probably just now found your mind reverting to old patterns and explanations of how Jesus saves us. Or maybe you *like* the old equations. That's okay. But I remind the rest of us that Paul does not take us back to blood sacrifice as the secret of our salvation. That is tacked on later. The secret of our salvation is that God loves us. The secret of our knowing this to be true, and how deep the love goes, is the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Some of us will insist on remembering that the blood on that Cross was not God's doing – it was man's doing. We killed Jesus because we and our kind cannot stand who Jesus is, what He is like, and what He is revealing. Such light casts incredible shadows. Light is judgment on darkness, and there is no help for that. Nevertheless, God did not kill Jesus. That is sheer projection. The animosity, rebellion, mistrust, fear, and rejection between humans and God are all on our side. And the denial that goes with them has kept our race enslaved and stymied and twisted through all the generations of our time on earth. Jesus came to free us, but somehow most of us, with Satan's help, have found ways to twist it all back around to the way it was before Jesus came. We cannot get past the denial by blaming God for everything, though that is always our first choice. We can only get past the denial by working "the steps." If you don't speak the language of AA, the steps are: remorse, confession, repentance, accepting forgiveness, penance – and once

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this far, others follow. I know; most people in our time don't speak this language either. So they are stuck with their denial.

In any case, Paul knows the blessings of redemption and forgiveness. Redemption gives us back our worth. Well, perhaps a "worth" we never knew we had in the first place. Forgiveness gives us a chance to start over – without all the baggage of the past. How much would any of us give for real forgiveness? Like with the pearl of great price, all that we have? What good is trying to start over if we cannot find release from the past? Only, all that we have, in this case, is not enough. What manner of authority does it take to give us a fresh start? Certainly no authority on earth that we know about can do that. Maybe a court of law can exonerate us, but that's only for a few things that have come to light – and even then, only if we didn't do them.

Jesus Christ, on the authority of God, forgives our sins. He did before the crucifixion too, you might remember. He knew His own identity, He knew the power of God, and He knew the truth of God's love for us. *"Which is easier: to say 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say 'Rise and walk'?" But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins, I say to you, 'Rise and walk.'"* (Luke 5:23-24) You see? The power does not come from the Cross. The Cross only reveals how deep and wide and high this authority really is. The Cross reveals that we cannot go anyplace or be anyplace where Jesus cannot or will not reach us. But Jesus was forgiving sins throughout His ministry, not just after the crucifixion.

In the lore of Christendom, forgiveness rips away the veil from our eyes. Without the veil, we can see God's mercy and grace for what they really are. Then all life is fresh and new again. We can see the Kingdom all around us again (or for the first time). And our vision of God's love for us, why we are here, and what our lives might accomplish is clear again before us. Some people think that forgiveness is only a way to avert some impending punishment. What a picayune little piece of the truth that is! Forgiveness opens the eyes of the blind so they can see God's glory again. Does that not include all of us?

Even so, the end is not yet in sight. We see only a little piece of it – the little portion that we can see from this partial and imperfect world. This is certainly more than enough to keep us going, to light our lives – to make us truly grateful to God for all of our days here. But it is only for openers. The Kingdom is glorious beyond our imaginations.

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So Paul is famous for his analogies. And one of his best is found again in this very passage. It also, happily, makes the very point we have just been talking about. See if you catch it.

Paul loves the imagery of our adoption. And in his mind, we are being adopted by God – that is, adopted by our true Father. And our true Father happens to be wealthy beyond all imagination or comprehension. What does God own? What does God owe? All attempts to fathom such wealth or wisdom or love or power simply fizzle out. As the old Hindu prayer begins: “O Thou, before whom all words recoil”

And yet this is the very Parent who is adopting us. In fact, it has already happened. We have already been adopted. That is the Gospel. That is the “Good News” in Jesus Christ: We are the adopted, and God is our adopted Father. And Jesus is therefore our adopted brother.

Now, of course, the analogy breaks down, in a way. But that doesn’t bother Paul. Nor should it bother us. Just keep tracking it: If we are adopted – by any understanding in Paul’s day (in the customs and ways of the Roman Empire, to be more precise) – then we are legally heirs. Since God never dies, that is the flaw in the analogy. But undaunted, Paul moves on to our inheritance. And he redeems the analogy by insisting that we receive our inheritance in the next realm.

Well, we flat-out cannot imagine such a thing. But Paul wants us to imagine it anyway. So suppose you have been adopted by an earthly parent and you know that the inheritance is roughly twenty-five trillion dollars. You know that is your legacy – that is what is coming to you. There isn’t any doubt about it. But you cannot use this legacy quite yet. You cannot use it directly to get anything you want, or to help others, or to start a business, or to do whatever it is that you think would be fun, important, vital, or helpful right now. You haven’t come into your true inheritance quite yet. But there is still a huge difference between knowing who you are – and that you have a huge inheritance waiting for you – and thinking you are still a pauper with no future and no hope. That difference changes the way you think and feel about everything, especially the way you think about yourself.

Paul teases and tantalizes us with the promise – because, as he truly believes, it is all true and real. It is all sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is already guiding and protecting us. The Holy Spirit is the guardian sent to watch over us and help us until we come into

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our inheritance – until we “acquire possession of it” (in Paul’s words). Would we be eager for that day? Would we be making any plans? Would we change any of our ideas about the possibilities and the potential that await us? That is where Paul leaves us at the end of this passage.

How blessed are we? The Holy Spirit is with us. Jesus is with us. God is with us. And in a very short time now, we are about to acquire our inheritance. “*To the praise of his glory,*” Paul says. To the praise of his glory. Yes, I should think so. How about you?