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Ephesians 1

OPENING GREETINGS (1:1, 2)

In the opening verses, Paul identifies himself and his audience and offers benedictions of grace and peace common in the early believing Assembly. Although the words “in Ephesus” are lacking in some manuscripts and much debate has been made about the possibility that the letter was intended to be circular rather than specifically for the Ephesians, Richard Lenski’s *Commentary on the New Testament* notes there is grammatical reason to believe these words were in Paul’s original letter.¹ It is also possible that because the letter addresses no particular error or problem or person in Ephesus that it was passed around to the surrounding churches.

VERSE 1

“Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God”

As was Paul’s custom, he begins by identifying himself. As an apostle of Jesus Christ, he is a sent one. On the Damascus Road, the Lord Jesus arrested him, changed his heart, and commissioned him to proclaim the Good News to all nations. That mandate never left Paul’s heart. Everywhere he went, he knew he had been sent, and his objective was to talk about Jesus. As John was the herald to prepare the way for the Messiah, the apostles became the heralds to proclaim Him to the ends of the earth.

This apostleship was by the will of God. Paul had bucked the wind of the Spirit prior to his conversion, but now he rode that wind. His lifework was no longer according to self-will but according to God’s will. He went

¹ Lenski, Richard C. H., *Commentary on the New Testament*, introduction to Ephesians.

against the flow of culture, against the buffeting of persecution both from the Gentiles and the Jews, but he went ever with the will of God.

We see this explicitly on his second missionary venture into Galatia. He thought to go further into Asia, but the Holy Spirit prevented him. He thought to go into Bithynia, but again the word from the Spirit was negative. That night he had a vision of a man in Macedonia calling for help. Immediately he concluded that “the Lord had called us to preach the gospel to them” (Acts 16:10). Paul’s apostleship was constantly directed by the clear and wonder-working will of God.

“To the saints who are in Ephesus, and faithful in Christ Jesus”

As noted in the introduction, not all the Greek texts include “in Ephesus,” and some commentators suggest the letter may have been intended to be circulated among the churches in Asia Minor.

In any case, Paul wrote this for the saints and faithful in Christ Jesus, and it has continued to warm the hearts and guide the lives of believers in every age. In the Greek, there is one article for both nouns that follow, so that more literally, this is for “the saints . . . and believers” who are in Christ Jesus. Followers of Jesus are “saints,” holy ones, set aside for God’s purposes. They are believers—they believe Jesus is the Messiah, and they order their lives by this reality. Their faith is not merely a mental assent or a creedal confession but a way of life.

Furthermore, they are “in Christ Jesus,” a theme that runs richly through all of Paul’s letters and reflects our spiritual union with Jesus.

V E R S E 2

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Here we have the greeting customary in Paul’s letters: “Grace and peace.”

As grace typically precedes peace in Paul’s writing, so it is in our experience. God’s grace “that brings salvation” (Titus 2:11) rescues us from the

ravages and disquiet of sin, reconciles us to our Maker, and brings us into the land of shalom. God's peace is not so much the absence of conflict and noise as it is the peace of harmony, of well-being, of abiding in God's presence, often in the midst of conflict or turmoil.

Grace and peace stream from the triune God. As the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit live in unending and perfect peace, they are the source of all life in all its fullness.



AN ASSEMBLY IN CHRIST (1:3-14)

In this opening section, Paul launches into a detailed and lofty description of God's intention to gather an Assembly of believers in His Son. The long sentence and the combination of words and phrases give the impression that Paul writes in the wonder of revelation with glory and truth overwhelming him, leaving him almost breathless as he tries to put into words the mystery that has been revealed to him.

It is noteworthy that his focus is on the collective Assembly. The objects of the verbs are plural. The Father has blessed *us* (v. 3), chosen *us* (v. 4), predestined *us* (v. 5), accepted *us* (v. 6), redeemed and forgiven *us* (v. 7), and made the riches of His grace to abound toward *us* (vv. 7, 8).

We live in an age when individuality is king, and we are prone to interpret Scripture through me-centered lenses. With this mindset, many people see salvation as primarily a personal experience and consider church to be optional. As Joseph Hellerman writes, "Our individualistic culture encourages us to assume that God's main goal in the history of humanity consists of getting individual people saved. Salvation is all about what God has done for *me* as an individual."

Paul puts front and center the glorious work God is doing for the church, those being gathered in Christ. We certainly do experience God's saving work as individuals, but by this we are brought into the grand salvation of the collective Assembly in Christ. As Arthur Gish explains,

“Salvation is not only what God is doing in my life but even more what God is doing in *our* midst. God wills to have a people, not just individual believers.”²

This section is structured around three similar phrases exalting God’s glorious grace:

“To the praise of the glory of His grace” (v. 6)

“That we . . . should be to the praise of His glory” (v. 12)

“To the praise of His glory” (v. 14).

The three phrases are set in the three dimensions of time—the first in the past, the second in the present, and the third in the future. Furthermore, each member of the Trinity is in focus in the successive phrases—the Father chose us to the praise of the glory of *His* grace, that we who first trusted in *Christ* should be to the praise of His glory, and we are sealed with the *Holy Spirit* of promise, who is the guarantee of our inheritance unto the praise of His glory.

VERSE 3

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ”

Paul’s spiritual eyes are fastened on God, and the first word from his mouth is a word of praise: “Blessed!” The Greek word *eulogetos* is rich with joy, goodness, and gratitude. Various forms of the word appear three times in short succession. “Blessed (adjective) be the God . . . who has blessed (verb) us with every spiritual blessing (noun).” The blessed God, who overflows with all goodness and deserves all praise, lavishes His gifts all over creation, so that the earth is “full of the goodness of the LORD” (Psalm 33:5). But He especially pours out blessings on those who have come into His Son.

Paul’s burst of praise is to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will develop the theme of the heavenly family in the chapters to come, exploring the wonder of Gentiles coming in as sons and daughters. This

² Gish, Arthur, *Living in Christian Community* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers) p. 23

gracious privilege flows from the One who fathered His Son into our world. Blessed be the Father! His firstborn is our Lord Jesus Christ!

“Who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing”

The blessings poured on the believing Assembly began in the upper room when God poured out His Holy Spirit—who “proceeds [continuously] from the Father” (John 15:26) and consequently, is still pouring forth. With Him comes every spiritual blessing. “Every” is a comprehensive word, stretching across the spectrum of our needs and from the beginning of the church until the end of time.

When the early believers were filled with the Holy Spirit, they received life, divine gifts, power, wisdom, joy, words, direction, protection, and the ability to do God’s will. This was the beginning of the stream of spiritual blessings that has been the experience of the believing Assembly ever since. Every testimony of grace and provision among believers since that time bears witness to this glorious reality: He has blessed us with every spiritual blessing!

“In the heavenly places”

This is the first of five times Paul uses the phrase “in the heavenlies.” (“Places” is typically added in English translations.) The believing Assembly lives simultaneously in two realms. When we believe in Jesus, we come alive to God, who is Spirit, and to the whole spiritual realm.

Our lives are not split, as we are prone to think, between material and spiritual or secular and sacred. Rather, the two realms come together so that we are at the same time physical and spiritual beings and all of life is simultaneously lived on the earth and “in the heavenlies.” As we till the soil and exchange in the marketplace, we are attended by angels and directed by the Spirit and participating in God’s great plan to restore and reconcile all creation to Himself.

As the heavenly realm far overshadows the material realm, so spiritual blessings exceed material blessings, not as being separate from them, but

as including and yet far beyond them. When we eat and drink, we sit at our Father's table, no matter how humble our circumstances. We breathe our Father's air, walk on His grounds, and use materials He has provided. All that we do in this physical world is infused with His presence and blessings, which means that every part of our lives is simultaneously a spiritual experience, and every moment in His will can be a worship experience.

“In Christ”

Scarcely any phrase in Paul's writings is more easily overlooked and yet more pregnant with truth than this: “in Christ.” Over and over, he uses it—in Christ, in Him, in whom. The realities that attend it in the first chapter alone are worth listing here. In Christ we are—

- » Blessed with every spiritual blessing (v. 3)
- » Chosen before the foundation of the world (v. 4)
- » Predestined to adoption as sons (v. 5)
- » Accepted (v. 6)
- » Redeemed (v. 7)
- » Forgiven (v. 7)
- » Recipients of His abounding grace (v. 8)
- » Gathered (assembled) (v. 10)
- » Given an inheritance (v. 11)
- » Sealed with the Holy Spirit (v. 13)

By God's saving grace, acting on our faith, we are brought into Jesus. That is, we are joined with Him in a spiritual union. As Paul wrote to the Corinthian believers, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new” (2 Corinthians 5:17). Coming into union with Jesus is life-giving, status-changing, record-purging, and identity-reconfiguring. From the moment we enter into Jesus, all that we are and do is determined by our union with Him and His Assembly.

VERSE 4

“Just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world”

Union with Jesus is union with the Chosen One. Jesus is the Elect, “rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious” (1 Peter 2:4). Through faith in Jesus, we come into His own election as the Chosen One and thus become the elect.

Note here that the recipient of God’s work is the collective Assembly rather than the individual believer. God chose *us*, predestined *us*, and made *us* accepted. Those who believe in Jesus by God’s grace are brought into union with Him, and this believing Assembly then shares in His life, in His acceptance with the Father, and in His election. Although we come individually, we enter a corporate identity and share the blessings of the Assembly that is being redeemed.

Commenting on this wonderful reality, Robert Shank writes,

The election to salvation is only in union with Christ. . . . Christ is *the* Elect, the one Mediator between God and men . . . in whom alone men are elect and outside whom no man is elect. In the face of many affirmations of Holy Scripture, it may in truth be said that Christ, who is our Life (Col. 3:4), is Himself the Election. Instrumentally and comprehensively, the election is Christocentric.

Obviously, the corporate body of the elect is comprised of individuals. But the election is primarily corporate and only secondarily particular. The thesis that the election is corporate, as Paul understood it and viewed it in the Ephesian doxology, is supported by the whole context of his epistle.³

Even as in God’s good and perfect foreknowledge the Lamb was “slain from the foundation of the world” (Revelation 13:8), so in that same foreknowledge, He chose the redeemed Assembly before the foundation of the world.

³ Shank, Robert, *Elect in the Son*, (Springfield: Wescott Publishers) 1970, pp. 44, 45.

“That we should be holy and without blame before Him”

This is the outcome of our election—chosen to be holy and without blame. The believing Assembly is made holy both immediately and progressively, first by the benediction of God (declared holy and set apart for His good purposes) and then by the Holy Spirit, who fashions us ever more into God’s likeness.

In our union with Jesus, we likewise become blameless. That we should be blameless before Him whose righteousness is absolute is amazing beyond words, for surely there is none righteous (Romans 3:10). Yet just as surely, He is completely able to present us faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy (Jude 24).

To be without blame means that no charge against us can stand. The slanderer knows our past sins (as he habitually reminds us to discourage us), and we remember them as well. The awareness of our sins and shortcomings is perhaps our greatest hindrance to believing that we can be blameless before Him. But just as no one can counter God’s verdict that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23), so no one can countermand His declaration that in Christ we are declared righteous. “Who shall bring a charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us” (Romans 8:33, 34). Is it any wonder that the saints who are without blame before Him cry,

Worthy is the Lamb who was slain

To receive power and riches and wisdom,

And strength and honor and glory and blessing! (Revelation 5:12).

“In love”

Such love surpasses human description and comprehension. God blesses us in Jesus, chooses us in Jesus, and counts us blameless in Jesus because in Jesus we are loved. The Father shares His love for His Son with those who are united with His Son.

The Greek text is ambiguous here: the phrase “in love” could go either with the words before or after. Because Paul’s sentence continues without a breath, it likely applies to both. God has chosen us to be holy and without blame before Him in love, and in love He has predestined us to adoption as sons. Most recent translators prefer the second construction.

Lenski, however, says “in love” refers to our love, not God’s love.⁴ That is, we are “holy and without blame before Him” by virtue of our love. He points to Matthew 25, where God’s people are commended for clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, and visiting the sick (vv. 34-36). This interpretation seems to depart from Paul’s focus on what God has done for us.

VERSE 5

“Having predestined us to adoption as sons”

Again, the plural object “us” is the corporate group of believers. God’s plan that began before He made the world included not only Jesus’ work to redeem us and His sovereign choice to unite believers with His Son, but also included bringing us into the divine family. Born in sin, now we have been adopted as His children!

God preordained our status. In His great heart of love, He determined to make us His children when we were yet unborn.

“By Jesus Christ to Himself”

The Father brought us to Himself through the agency of His Son. The Son shares His own status with the church. Because He is the only begotten Son, when we are in Him we are likewise sons and daughters. The Father’s indwelling Spirit bears witness to this glorious reality. “For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, ‘Abba, Father’ ” (Romans 8:15).

⁴ Lenski, Richard C. H., *Commentary on the New Testament*, comments on Ephesians 1:4.

“According to the good pleasure of His will”

This is the first of two phrases modifying God’s gracious action of adopting us. The Father is pleased to claim us. This was His gracious plan. He did not wring His hands in desperation when Adam and Eve sinned. He already had the plan for their redemption in place. The Son was committed to the cross before the Father fashioned Adam from the clay and Eve from Adam’s rib.

God was not coerced by any outside person or force. Of His own will He chose to make a family of sons and daughters through His Son.

V E R S E 6

“To the praise of the glory of His grace”

This is the second phrase modifying God’s gracious work, and it is the first of three times Paul uses it (see vv. 12 and 14). The phrase points to the purpose of all that God has done in Christ. He chose us to be holy and predestined us to be His children in His Son to exhibit His glory, here specifically the glory of His grace.

The context is in the eternal past, before He made the world. The key word is “before.” What God has planned—if we can stand back and stretch thought and imagination to this astounding “before”—resounds to His glory. Here is a God who is not taken by surprise with the Fall. Here is a God whose wisdom knows no puzzlement or complication too great to solve. Here is a God whose very nature is love. Here is a God whose disposition toward His creatures is gracious and kind, a God who acts on our behalf even at terrible cost to Himself. The only fitting response is to fall at His feet and declare His glory! Paul will continue this theme through the first half of his letter.

“By which”

That is, by His grace, that gracious favor acting in our behalf, making His resources available to rescue us from sin’s ravages.

“He has made us accepted in the Beloved”

Once again Paul names a blessing of being in Christ—we are accepted. The Greek word translated “accepted” is a verb form of grace. He has graced us in the Beloved; that is, He made us gloriously pleasing. We have a gracious favorableness with Him. Note the tie to the former phrase. What God has done for us is “to the praise of the glory of His grace,” by which He freely graced us in the Beloved.

Paul uses “the Beloved” for Jesus to emphasize the strength of the blessing. This was the term the Father used to validate His Son’s messianic anointing: “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17).

To further explore the wonder of this blessing, we have only to ask, “How was Jesus, the Beloved, accepted with His Father?”

Jesus did the Father’s will flawlessly. He lived among us in perfection of righteousness. He accomplished exactly what the Father sent Him to do. His record was spotless, His performance impeccable. He was “obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross” (Philippians 2:8). Everything the Father asked Him to do, He did, and He did it right. His whole life was gloriously pleasing to the Father—the only human who has ever lived such a life.

Our acceptance with the Father, then, does not depend on our performance to earn it, but on the performance of His Beloved Son Jesus. Grasping this astonishing truth would save us much anxiety, shift us from worrying about our failures, and free us to proclaim this wonderful Saviour to others. Knowing that we are accepted in the Beloved does not make us careless about our performance but frees us from trying to earn our acceptance by it.

We follow in Jesus’ steps. We seek to do the Father’s will in our time and place and in our specific calling. We yearn to obey faithfully and do good for God’s glory. But in all our doing, however well we do it, we know that we need the perfection of Christ to make us accepted. We do good as a lifetime exercise of adoring worship, but we glory in the fully acceptable

performance of Jesus on our behalf. We have the blessed assurance that our eternal acceptance with the Father will come through our union with the Beloved Son, whose acceptance with the Father is absolute.

VERSE 7

“In Him we have redemption”

The Son needed no redemption. But we did. We turned away from God, went down the long road of disobedience, and became the slaves of sin. No one can escape from that debtor’s prison. No price we can offer will suffice. But in Jesus, and only in Jesus, we have redemption.

As with all analogies that describe our salvation, we must be careful not to take redemption beyond the meaning intended. At some point every analogy breaks down. To ask, “To whom did the Father pay the redemption price?” for example, makes no sense.

The point is that like those held captive by a foreign master, we were helpless to buy or earn our freedom. What Jesus did in His death and resurrection secured our release. We have been “bought at a price” (1 Corinthians 6:20), an unimaginable price, and we owe everything to the One who gave His life for our redemption.

“Through His blood”

The price for our redemption was the life of the Son of God. Blood contains the ingredients of life. It is the means by which the body is fed and nurtured. God said through Moses, “‘The life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul.’ Therefore I said to the children of Israel, ‘No one among you shall eat blood, nor shall any stranger who dwells among you eat blood’” (Leviticus 17:11, 12).

What all the sacrifices and all the blood of the animals could not do through centuries of the sacrificial system, Jesus did by His one sacrifice.