
The Book of Ephesians

Chapter 1:1-3

Ministry Reading

Opening Reading -- Ephesians 1:1-3

Ephesians 1:1-3

Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ, by the will of God, to the saints which are at Ephesus, and to the faithful in Christ Jesus, grace be to you, and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ.

Ephesians Among the Epistles: A Heavenly Book

It is always instructive to understand the distinctive character of each epistle in its relationship to others. Romans, Colossians, and Ephesians have a certain connection that repays careful thought. In Colossians we get the fullness of the head, and are told that we are complete in him. In Ephesians we get the fullness of the body. Colossians gives us one side of the mystery -- 'Christ in you, the hope of glory.' Ephesians gives us the other -- we are seen as in Christ. In Colossians and Ephesians alike we are directed to look upward, and in both we are looked at as seated in the heavenly places. In Hebrews, written also by Paul during his imprisonment, we are running. Here we are seated. These characteristic differences between the epistles, briefly stated as they are, are found on examination to be deeply consistent throughout each letter.

In Ephesians the Lord's coming is not brought before us. There is a reason for that: we are looked at as already up there, already seated. This epistle has its very unique character, and that character is consistently heavenly throughout.

Canaan as the Type of Ephesians

Considering these three epistles in terms of their Old Testament types, Romans brings us from Egypt across the Red Sea and down to the bank of the Jordan. Colossians takes us down through the Jordan and up the other side as far as Gilgal. Ephesians takes us from Gilgal -- the entry into the land -- and on into Canaan itself. In chapter 6 we encounter the battles in the heavenly places, which correspond to the battles of Canaan, just as the battles with Amalek in the wilderness correspond to what we find in Hebrews and in Peter's epistles.

The common hymn that speaks of 'reaching Canaan's shore' as a picture of heaven is misleading, however pleasant it may be in other respects. Canaan is not typical of heaven. Canaan is the type of what we have in Ephesians: the heavenly position and the warfare that belongs to those who occupy it. This is the book of the heavenly position, and the Spirit of God conducts us there in a practical way throughout its six chapters.

The Assembly at Ephesus: First Love

The assembly of Ephesus was evidently in a very good state at the time Paul wrote this letter. There is nothing of correction in it; it is all very encouraging, and Paul was able to unfold some of the highest and most precious truth in Scripture to them. A quick reading of the whole epistle gives a sense of the elevated and precious character of what he was able to write.

The other epistle to Ephesus -- the letter in Revelation 2, written somewhat later -- carries a very different note: 'Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee,

because thou hast left thy first love.' The implication is plain: they had once had that first love; the Lord would not hold it against them if they had never possessed it. It is not too far-fetched to connect the liberty Paul had to write such high truth to the Ephesians with the fact that first love was in their hearts at the time. He had no need to write, 'I have somewhat against thee.' What a solemn thing it is that hearts can shrivel and become constrained, so that the first love and affection for the Lord Jesus that He is worthy of is no longer there.

Ephesus and Laodicea are not far from each other in the geography of Asia Minor. They are the first and the last of the seven letters in Revelation 2 and 3, and the assemblies addressed are arranged in something like a circular pattern through that region. It is a hard and solemn fall -- from the high ground of Ephesians to the condition described in Laodicea.

The Sovereignty of God: The Governing Theme

Ephesians 1 is a chapter in which one learns to look for the sovereignty of God. The sovereignty of God is one of those high truths that requires a man to be lifted substantially above this world in order to lay hold of it. Down here, one encounters on every side those who exercise some measure of authority -- kings, presidents, rulers, neighbors -- each with some ambition to direct others. The truth is that God is sovereign in a universal and overwhelming way. To grasp that requires rising above the claims of the world upon the soul.

It has been observed that there are no 'ifs' in the book of Ephesians. The conditional 'ifs' of the pathway -- testing 'ifs' of Christian experience -- belong elsewhere. They do not undermine the sovereignty of God, but they are not here. This epistle is about the sovereignty of God, and that is implicit from the very first verse.

Paul's Apostleship and the Active Voice of God

Even the opening words carry weight. Paul is not merely one apostle among many. He is the apostle of the uncircumcision, and his apostleship is connected with the special revelation of the mystery -- the unique position he holds with respect to it. 'Paul, apostle of Jesus Christ '

'by the will of God' -- the saints and faithful in Christ Jesus are where they are equally by the will of God. When the Lord met Paul on the Damascus road, he did not say, 'Now, Paul, please exercise your moral free will to believe on Me.' There was a divine action that took place, and the will of God was exercised there just as much as it was in Paul's appointment as apostle. Paul was by God's sovereign choice an elect vessel -- not only as to his personal salvation, but as to the special instrument he was to be in connection with the truths of this very epistle.

The activity in the opening verses is overwhelmingly God's. 'Who hath blessed us... according as he hath chosen us... having predestinated us... he hath made us accepted... he hath abounded... having made known...' -- it is all activity on His part. One can picture Paul on the road to Damascus just before the light from heaven shone upon him. And then suddenly God blessed him -- and that is our verse 3. The reason God did it is our verse 4: He chose him. As to his apostleship, God predestinated him (verse 5). He made Paul accepted in the Beloved (verse 6). He abounded toward him in all wisdom (verse 8). This is a letter from the man upon whom God shone from heaven, teaching the same truth to those who received it: the same has happened to you. When a soul is saved, the hand of God is there. It is a work that God does, not man.

Saints and Faithful in Christ Jesus: One Class, Not Two

Verse 1 addresses 'the saints and faithful in Christ Jesus.' It should be clear that these are not two classes -- saints and, additionally, a separate group of the

faithful. That is not the point at all. As Darby makes plain in his translation, the verse addresses 'the saints and faithful in Christ Jesus': all Christians are looked at as faithful in Christ Jesus. Practice is another matter altogether. But it is a wonderful thing that God can look at the Christian as faithful. Position is set before us as something that ought to exercise us to answer to it in practice. If a man does not know that he is faithful in Christ Jesus, that may impinge upon his exercise to be faithful in his walk. Position is meant to move us toward conformity to it.

When we come to the expression 'in Christ Jesus,' there can be no dark spot whatsoever. What is in Christ Jesus is without shadow. And when we come to 'accepted in the Beloved,' there can be nothing withheld. These are very strong statements of all that is true of the believer before God -- and it is all bestowed by the sovereign will of God, because it pleased Him to do it. There is no other motive to be found. Why us? Because it was His pleasure and His goodness to do it.

Grace and Peace: Not Idle Words

The salutation 'Grace be to you, and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ' is not mere convention. When a letter begins 'Dear Sir,' the word 'dear' has often lost all its meaning -- it opens foreclosure notices and legal threats with equal readiness. These words are not like that. To have grace and peace sent from such a source as God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ is a remarkable thing. The apostle's heart was at one with the Father and the Son, so that there is, in sending this greeting, a threefold cord: God the Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, and an apostle who wrote these things -- all together in the grace and peace conveyed to the saints. These are not idle words.

It is worth noting also that 'mercy' is absent from this greeting, while it appears in epistles written to individuals. Grace and peace are appropriate when an epistle is

written to the assembly as such. The Spirit is not mentioned in the greeting either -- not because He is unimportant, but because He is the defined Person indwelling us, operating within us; it would not be fitting to speak of this as coming from One who is already present within the assembly.

God and Father: Two Aspects of Blessing

Verse 3 presents God in two ways: 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.' He is the God of the Lord Jesus Christ -- particularly as He views the Lord as man -- and He is the Father of the Son of His love. Both aspects are for us. Everything that God is in respect of Christ comes out as blessing for us.

This is not without purpose. These two ways of presenting God in verse 3 answer directly to what follows in verses 4 and 5 respectively -- a correspondence that is very helpful and that will be taken up more fully in connection with those verses.

After the salutation, both Ephesians and 2 Corinthians begin similarly: 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.' Both epistles begin from above. They do not start with the problems of the saints; they start at the top, with God Himself. What a different starting point this is from what one might expect -- and how high it sets the tone for everything that follows.

Every Spiritual Blessing in the Heavens

He has 'blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ.' That is, every one of them. There is no spiritual blessing in the heavens in Christ that we do not have. Not one is lost, not one is withheld, not one is to be discovered later as something we might have missed. God has given us every spiritual blessing in the heavens in Christ, and they are all ours.

Everything is connected with being in Christ. If one puts a mark beside every occurrence of 'in him' or 'in whom' in this chapter, the marks accumulate rapidly.

Everything is tied to position -- the position of being in Christ. To be in Christ is to be before God as Christ is before God. That is the place He has brought us into before the Father: the place of the Beloved One. We are taken into favor in the Beloved, which means Christ's place is our place. Everything is connected with that new position.

The Old Testament knows nothing of what it means to be in Christ. This is resisted, ignored, or downplayed by many, but it is a vital truth. To be in Christ is to be connected with the heavenly sphere and to be seated there in Him. As 1 Corinthians 15 puts it, 'As is the heavenly One, such are the heavenly ones.' Many prefer not to be heavenly. But this is our position and our calling.

Heavenly Blessings Distinguished from Earthly

It is important to remember that not every spiritual blessing is a blessing in the heavenly places. To be born again, for example, is not a distinctive heavenly blessing. Old Testament saints were born again. Millennial saints will be born again. The great multitude of Revelation 7, who have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb and come out of the great tribulation, are blessed with spiritual blessings -- but not with spiritual blessings in the heavenly places in Christ. There are blessings common to all saints in all ages. The distinctive Christian blessings are the ones that belong to a heavenly people, sealed by the Holy Spirit and united to the head in heaven.

Israel, by contrast, is looked at as seated in earthly places. The prophets are full of this -- Jerusalem is the place, and blessings will flow out from it to the nations in the millennial day. Those are real blessings. But they are earthly blessings connected with earthly promises. Our proper blessings are the distinctive heavenly blessings belonging to those who are in Christ, sealed with the Holy Spirit, and united to the ascended head.

The Heavenly People of God

What is sometimes called 'Darby's doctrine of the two peoples of God' is in fact the teaching of Scripture. There is a heavenly people and there is an earthly people, and these distinctions matter enormously for the understanding of Scripture. The Bible does not use the precise phrase 'heavenly people,' just as it does not use the word 'Trinity' -- but the Trinity is no less the teaching of Scripture for the absence of the term. In the same way, the heavenly people of God is what Scripture clearly teaches, whether or not those exact words are found there. Those who object understand perfectly well what is meant; they simply do not want it.

The system that insists on one people of God from Adam to the end of time and merges all saints into a single entity called 'the Church' always produces the same result: the higher is brought down to the lower. It never works in reverse. The heavenly is lowered to the earthly sphere, and in the process a great many of the beautiful distinctions of Scripture are lost -- distinctions that are only preserved when one holds the difference between the earth and the heavenlies, and between God's earthly and heavenly purposes.

Blessing Without Covenant

One further observation on verse 3 is worth making. There is no covenant attached to it. It is simply a blessing -- flowing from the heart of God, with no conditions, no legal language, no place to sign. It is a great free gift from the heart of God.

Those who hold to a covenant theology argue that God's blessings are all covenanted blessings and that God always acts within the framework of a covenant. But this verse stands as a corrective to that. God is free to act in pure grace, outside of any covenant. To insist that all His blessings must be channeled through covenants is to place a constraint on Him that Scripture does not place

there. It presents a sadly diminished view of God.

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Lord willing.