

St. Augustine's

Sermons

Calgary, Alberta

January 13 2008

The Rev. Jonathan Gibson

The Double Blessing

8:30 am, Holy Communion

10:30 am, Holy Communion

The Text: Ephesians 1:1-14

1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus: 2 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Spiritual Blessings in Christ

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, 4 even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, *that we should be holy and blameless before him.* In love 5 he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, 6 to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. 7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses according to the riches of his grace, 8 which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight 9 making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ 10 as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

11 In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, 12 so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. 13 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, 14 who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

Introduction

European Gothic Cathedrals, date from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. I heard last week that some of them have complicated mazes laid into the floors. These mazes, appear from an earthly perspective to be chaotic and aimless. If you could take the roof off of the cathedrals and rise to an impossible height above, up where medievalists understood God might be looking down upon the cathedral, there would be a very different perspective. What from an earthly point of view appears a formless, tortuous and agonizing puzzle for the one walking in it, inscribes the figure of a rose when seen from God's point of view. Medievalists had an understanding of everything dissolving into great cosmic harmony and dance. And yet it was not a naïve dance, somehow dismissing the complicated maze of history through which all the faithful must walk. Rather it celebrated that in the midst of life's tangled web, there is a greater order and purpose often hidden to us, but known to God.

J.R.R. Tolkien was influenced by this medieval world view. In one of the most moving scenes of *The Return of the King* we see Gandalf the White in

conversation with the Hobbit Pippin.¹ They are looking out towards Mordor from Gondor as the climactic battle of Middle Earth has begun. If you have seen the movie you will remember this scene:

ANGLE ON: GANDALF and PIPPIN sit on stone steps . . . Both covered in sweat and grime, bone-weary from fighting, spirits and hearts bruised . . .

PIPPIN looks towards the WOODEN GATES at which a NUMBER of SOLDIERS continue to build a BARRICADE . . .

PIPPIN (quiet)

I didn't think it would end this way . . .

GANDALF looks at the SMALL HOBBIT

*GANDALF
(gently)*

End? No, the journey doesn't end here.

PIPPIN looks up at GANDALF, questioningly

GANDALF (cont'd)

¹ It needs to be noted that this scene does not appear in the book as it does in the movie. However, Peter Jackson the director, Fran Welsh and Phillipa Boyens the screen writers, captured the character of Tolkien's writing in what they depict here.

*Death is just another path, one that we all
must take.*

*ANGLE ON: GANDALF looks down to see PIPPIN
looking up at him with fear in his eyes . . .*

*GANDALF (cont'd)
(remembering)*

*The grey rain curtain of this world rolls
back and all turns to silver glass . . .
(to himself)
and then you see it . . .*

ANGLE ON: GANDALF breaks off, lost in reverie . . .

PIPPIN

What, Gandalf? See what?

GANDALF

*White shores ... And beyond . . . A far green
country under a swift sunrise.*

*PIPPIN stares up at the OLD WIZARD'S FACE,
softened, quiet and full of peace . . .*

PIPPIN

(quiet)

Well, that isn't so bad.

GANDALF
(gently)
*No . . . No, it isn't.*²

Here is the Maze one more time. In the midst of a tortuous battle where all may very well be lost, Gandalf helps Pippin to see the Rose.

This understanding of life is far older than the thirteenth century. Indeed it goes all the way back to the New Testament and St. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians. I see this letter as the crown jewel of the New Testament Epistles. It gleams with iridescent splendour because Ephesians' perspective begins with looking at the world, and indeed the universe, from heaven and not from earth. And yet it is also candidly honest in talking about life in this world where we are in a battle against unseen spiritual forces in the heavenly realms.

As we study Ephesians from now until the middle of June I hope to walk with you through this so-called Gothic Maze so that together we may discover the Rose of Grace in the midst of the Battle we wage while in this world.

Today I want to give you an overview of chapter 1, verses 1-14 and then next week we will return to these verses, especially three to fourteen and study them in more detail.

² Script for Lord of the Rings: Return of the King found at The Internet Movie Script Data Base:
<http://www.imsdb.com/scripts/Lord-of-the-Rings-Return-of-the-King.html>

As we delve into these verses I want to share with you a quote by Dr. John Mackay, who was from 1936 to 1959, President of Princeton Theological Seminary. In the introduction to his commentary on Ephesians he writes:

I can never forget that the reading of this Pauline letter when I was a boy in my teens exercised a more decisive influence upon my thought and imagination than was ever wrought upon me before or since by the perusal of any piece of literature. The romance of the part played by Jesus Christ in making my personal salvation possible, and in mediating God's cosmic plan, so set my spirit aflame that I laid aside, in all ecstasy of delight, Dumas' Count of Monte Cristo which I happened to be reading at the time. That was my encounter with the Cosmic Christ. The Christ who was, and is, became the passion of my life. I have to admit without shame or reserve that as a result of that encounter I have been unable to think of my own life or the life of mankind or the life of the cosmos apart from Jesus Christ. He came to me and challenged me in the writings of St. Paul. I responded. The years that have followed have been but a footnote to that encounter.

Here is the testimony of someone whose life was profoundly influenced by this letter, because in it I think he so clearly saw the Rose. There is no letter that so succinctly lays out for us God's purpose for the Universe, as made known to us in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. When its words become as ingrained

within your soul, as those inlaid mazes within Medieval cathedrals, you will be changed. You and I will hopefully then realize all of life as a footnote to Jesus as we encounter him fully in this masterpiece of theology and Christian ethics. Theology is the study of God. Christian Ethics is the study Christian behaviour.

Ephesians balances theology and ethics beautifully. In chapters one to three it concentrates on theology. The language is so thoughtfully considered as the Apostle gives us an understanding of the Trinity unparalleled in any of his other letters. After having considered theology in chapters one to three, he then moves on to consider who we are to become, because of who God is and clearly enunciates how we are to behave as disciples who live in the Grace of Jesus Christ.

Therefore we could say that Ephesians answers two questions: In chapters 1-3 the question St. Paul answers is:

What is God's ultimate purpose for his Universe as made known to us in Jesus Christ?

In chapters four to six he answers the question:

Who are we as disciples to become because of this ultimate purpose?

Section 1:

So let us begin by looking at these opening fourteen verses of Ephesians 1. What I want to show you

today are two things. First of all I want to show you why the worship of God the Father through Jesus Christ is govern who we are as Christians. I then want to show you what Paul tells us about how our faith in Christ enables us to know the seven-fold blessing that Paul enunciates in Ephesians 3-14.

I want us to read verse 3: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places".

This verse shows us why we are to worship the Father. To bless someone is to show them favour and worth. We express to God His infinite and ultimate worth through worship. Worship is not only what we do when we gather on a Sunday, although it definitely includes corporate worship. Beyond this, to worship God means that we see him as the one to whom we are to give glory and worth at all times. In Colossians 3.17 St. Paul says "And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."

Paul is able to give this directive because of what he knows to be true about God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. You need to notice that in these verses Paul says nothing speculative. He writes with a full assurance that what he is teaching us about God in these verses is based on the Revelation God has given to us of Himself through Jesus Christ. Because

Paul knows this to be true he is able to say that in all of life the Father is to be blessed and Jesus' name honoured through how we as Christian disciples live.

St. Paul was a God saturated man. For him God was first, second and third in his life. Those who are disciples of Jesus Christ are learning to do the same. We are to be intoxicated with the glory of God, something Paul implies in Ephesians 5 when he says:

18 And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, 19 addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, 20 giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Here is that same thought again. What a wonderful thing it is to be filled with the Spirit and in this world to sing and make melody to the Lord. Such an attitude is to be cultivated by those who are Christians. There is no where else in Paul's writings than in Ephesians, where he repeatedly makes this point. It is as if he wants to secure this thought in our minds as we secure a screw by turning it again and again until we bore fully into the wood. Frequently throughout this letter you find the repeated phrase that everything occurs "to the praise of God's glory."

That everything occurs to the praise of God's glory means that God's people should be so struck by the wonder of what has happened for them and to them

in Christ, that their hearts reflect without limit and without their being able to prevent it -- the praise and the glory and the blessing of God.

Paul will show us in Ephesians that God has done such remarkable deeds that, if we once understand them, if it once breaks upon our intellects what it is that God has already done for us, what is already true of us right now, there will be nothing that we can do but stand in absolute awe and amazement, and say, "You mean that is true of me, Lord? I am overwhelmed! That all I can do is sing "To God be the Glory" That is what God is after. That is what he wants to produce -- that sense of awe and amazement which causes us to stop and give thanks to a great and glorious God who has given us every spiritual blessing.³

Section 2:

Once we better understand what these Spiritual blessings are, our souls are like a well stoked fire that is a flame with joy at the wonder of God and what we can know and have because of Him.

Paul was not only a God saturated man, he was thoroughly Christ-centred in his theology. For the Apostle there is no theology apart from Jesus and therefore the blessings he will present to us are only possible because of Jesus. You will notice that in these verses there is a repeated reference to Jesus

³ Ray Stedman: *Our Riches in Christ: Discovering the Believer's Inheritance in Ephesians* (Discovery House Publishers, Grand Rapids, MI, USA. 1972) page 7

Christ. Every time the Christian is referred to, it is always in relation to Jesus.

1. Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus
2. To the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus:
3. Who has blessed us in Christ
4. He chose us in Him
5. In love he (God the Father) predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ
6. He has blessed us in the Beloved.
7. In him we have redemption through his blood,
8. Making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ
9. In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will.
10. In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him,

One of the things I hope for myself and for you as we study Ephesians is that we will become even more deeply amazed with Jesus. May we never tire of this name and may we never come to the end of being consumed with love for him because we know the blessings which he makes available to us.

What are these blessings? There are seven of them presented to us here. We are going to look at them

in more detail next week but for now let me just gather them up for you.⁴ Notice that:

1.4 "he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, *that we should be holy and blameless before him.*

That is Number 1: It goes back before the beginning of time, before the foundation of the universe. The second:

5. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will

What a fantastic thing that is! We are members of the family of God, made to be partakers of the divine nature. Third:

7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses according to the riches of his grace, 8 which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight

Think of that! Our guilt is removed, utterly gone. Four:

9. making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ 10 as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

⁴ I was helped by Ray Stedman on this. *In Our Riches in Christ...* he outlines the seven-fold blessings on pages 8-9.

We have been taken into the secret councils of the Almighty. He has unfolded to us what he plans to do, what he is going to accomplish in the future. We have been told something of the details of this plan. Then look at Number 5:

11 In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, 12 so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory

That is why we are gathered here this morning. God has appointed us to be a demonstration of all these great truths, to live for the praise of his glory. Look at the sixth:

13. 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,

All that, you see, comes as a part of the work of the word of truth. And then the last:

14 who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

Those are the things that make life worthwhile. Without these great facts, life is unbearable, desolate, dull, boring, and we can hardly stand ourselves or each other. This is a list, if you like, of the incompetencies of people. People cannot provide

these. No political party can introduce them. They come from God, and God alone -- God at work. No one else can give them to us. It is absolutely impossible that we ever should achieve them by ourselves. They are the gifts of God. His blessings to us made possible because of Jesus Christ.

Do you see why as Christians it is never enough for us to say just "God" It is too imprecise a name. If we are to understand and appropriate the blessings of God then we are to be those who are fully alive to Jesus Christ. He alone is the one who reveals the Father.

I can hardly wait to get into these verses in more detail so that we can more fully see the importance of Jesus.

Conclusion

So in conclusion I want to ask a question. What do we call those people for whom the worship of Jesus is central because through him they are coming to know more fully the splendour of his blessings? Or to put it differently What kind of people know the Double Blessing of Worship and Grace? For the answer, look at the end of verse 1: They are Saints. To you see what this means? Saints are not first and foremost good people. No they are people who are learning to trust in our good and loving Father in heaven and His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. So often when people use the word saint it is used in relation to the person called a Saint. It focuses on their character. This is not the understanding we have

here. A saint, as understood by Paul in Ephesians is a person whose life is found in Christ and through Christ we love to Worship the Father.

A saint is someone who is faithful in Christ Jesus. The sense of this adjective, 'faithful, means "exercising faith'. To illustrate this consider the case of Thomas the Apostle. You will remember that in John's Gospel we are told he refused to believe the testimony of his fellow disciples who told him they had seen Jesus after His resurrection. Thomas said he would not believe unless he saw for himself that mark of the nails and put his finger in the wounds. Then the Lord appeared to Thomas and told him to do what he, Thomas, had said. Thomas fell at Jesus' feet and said "My Lord and my God". Remember how our Lord gently rebuked Thomas and said: " Do not disbelieve, but believe... Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."⁵ The word translated "faithful' in our text from Ephesians is the same word Jesus uses in John when he says to Thomas "believe". It means to be full of faith to exercise faith.

So here is the thing. To be a Saint means that as we walk through the maze of this world we are able to catch glimpses of the Rose because as we learn to worship the Father we are discovering the riches of His blessings to us in Christ as we see life more clearly from the perspective of heaven.

⁵ John 20:27 & 29

Such is the message of Ephesians and may it become ingrained within our imaginations as we begin a detailed study of Paul's teaching next week.

Prayer

Once again, our Father, we pray that you will take away the dimness from our vision, the dullness from our understanding, and help us to comprehend these great themes which have changed the history of the world again and again as people have grasped them. Save us from the folly of taking them for granted or of giving them no attention. But help us, Lord to think deeply and seriously about these great statements, to understand that this is the way that you are acting, this is the course of your movement through history. Lord, help us by your grace to rejoice, to lay hold of your provision, and to be responsive instruments in your hand; in Jesus' name we ask, Amen.

