

Vast, Unmeasured, Boundless, Free: Our Resources In Christ

God Ever Blessing, Ever Blessed

Ephesians 1.1-6

8.7.16

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To the saints who are at Ephesus and who are faithful in Christ Jesus: ² Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, ⁴ just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love ⁵ He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, ⁶ to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

This is the first sermon in a short series. In the fall, we plan to look at the Third and Fourth Books of Moses (Leviticus and Numbers) but I sensed it was a RIPE OPPORTUNITY for us to look at this chapter.

Some writers have noted that THIS letter (to the church at Ephesus) IS the most comprehensive summary of essential Christianity ever written. It's a very dense, compacted statement. In the Greek language St. Paul used, verses 3-14 is one sentence. That's 202 words in one sentence – a lot of modifiers and clauses and ideas packed into ONE sentence. It's very concentrated.

And THIS first chapter of Paul's Letter to the Ephesians is ALL GOOD NEWS...no imperatives...nothing for US to DO...only NEWS OF WHAT GOD HAS DONE.

That's why I thought it was timely for us to look at it because I need good news in my life...our congregation needs Good News (some folks suffering and struggling) and even our nation facing a variety of tensions and the uncertainties of an election year, virus scares and terrorism...we need an antidote.

And THIS vaccine...this booster-shot of Good News concentrate... it will make you "heavenly minded" BUT it was also the key that made the early Christians deeply engaged and influential in the world. Some religious and spiritual people become so "heavenly minded that they're NO EARTHLY GOOD"...BUT THIS chapter can make you so heavenly minded that you can't help but do REAL earthly good...it was that way for the early Christians. They knew who they were.

A few weeks ago when we were looking at Acts we said that a Christian is someone 1) continuing, 2) together 3) in Jesus Christ. In the next few weeks we explore what it means to be IN Jesus Christ. Today, # 1) Introit and #2) Doxology

I hated to USE those words (introit and doxology) because they're churchy words...they're elements in a liturgy or worship service. Introit is the entrance INTO worship and DOXOLOGY is a song that ascribes glory to God... but that's it, today: introduction and burst of praise.

The Letter delves into some huge themes/ideas and most of them are introduced right here at the start.

Paul uses a standard greeting but it's not just a form or a nice custom – he means every word. Let me unpack a few of these very loaded words/ideas.

He refers to them as “saints”... It's how he thought of them...and of everyone who receives the Good News. It wasn't a word meant for the super-serious or the very accomplished members of the church; it applied to all of them.

It means a holy person; someone set apart from the common; someone belonging to God. And the next words make clear how a person GETS INTO THIS VERY special category, “i.e. those who are faithful” and a better translation would be “believing in Christ Jesus.” (See where this same word is clearly contrasted with being unbelieving: 2 Cor 6.15; 1 Tim 4.10,12; 5.16; 6.2; Titus 1.6)

They are believers or receivers of grace... they're recipients of the “great peace treaty” that God makes with His people – “grace and peace” from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Grace is a huge word in this letter and in all of Paul's writing. It's favor with God based on what Jesus Christ has done. The acronym is well known but good, “God's Riches At Christ's Expense” (GRACE)

The point IS: GRACE MAKES SAINTS – it's not that we show super serious discipline or earnestness/devotion but that God's favor comes to us in the Person and Work of Jesus Christ...God communicates His grace and love to us IN Christ...and we get it, we receive it, we breathe it in by faith...by trusting.

We are acknowledged to be saints by grace...not by our deserving but by God's GIFTING. Have I done enough to qualify for the status of saint? ANSWER: NO, NO, a thousand times NO!

Jesus Christ clears the bar...and I AM GIVEN THE GOLD MEDAL... as a gift NOT AS A REWARD FOR MY DOING BUT AS A REWARD FOR HIS DOING...I get what He deserves... HE WORKED FOR IT AND I GET THE CREDIT...it's graced to me; gifted to me...

I did nothing to earn or deserve it...Jesus paid it all. Jesus Christ footed the bill...and I received it by simply TRUSTING AND DEPENDING ON HIS GIFT – that's what Paul means by grace – it's free; a gift.

And here's where it gets really interesting...well, much more than interesting...

WE MAY THINK: "ah-ha! The only thing I had to do was to be smart enough to choose Jesus Christ! And then God did the rest...I had to make one good decision and then God paid my debts...then, God put my guilt on Jesus Christ and God credited all the beauty of Jesus Christ to ME ...I made the decision and God responded to my wisdom...my need...my heart... I opened the door...

I chose Jesus and THEN God gave me His grace"... BUT THAT'S NOT THE ORDER AS PAUL SEES IT...He's an Apostle (QUOTE) "by the will of God". Big THEME!

It's not that Paul said, as a child, "When I grow up, I wanna be an Apostle!" It's NOT that he was top of the class at Apostle School – it's not something HE CHOSE...it chose HIM! God chose him.

And this idea is oft repeated... "by the will of God"... "according to the kind intention of God's will" (or "God's good pleasure" in other translations)... (v.4) "just as God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world"...(v.5) "In love He predestined us to adoption..."

Uh oh! I see what you're doing here, T.J.! You are shamelessly getting all ...Presbyterian on us! You are brazenly focusing on these ideas ABOUT WHICH Christians disagree... stirring up controversy and disunity... you're being sectarian!

Well, really, the LAST thing I want to do is stir up division among Christians... and IF we use these mysterious words to become doctrinaire or arrogant or to become theologically, philosophically sophisticated ...then...shame on us...YUCK!

But Paul DID use these words...they weren't invented by John Calvin... they were written by a man who was "an apostle by the will of God"... i.e. they were given to us BY GOD HIMSELF...not even really by Paul...

So WHAT really DO these words mean? AND Second, what (if not controversy and division) WHAT should we do with them?

Well, what they mean is that grace...is really ...grace. Paul is making it all very clear to us: sinful, guilty, fallen people cannot fix themselves...can NOT use willpower or determination to rescue ourselves.

Paul didn't rescue HIMself...you...if YOU are IN Christ, you were there from long before you ever chose to be...in fact before you were born or even the earth was born.

The Good News is actually better than you think! God is NOT in need of my decision or of ANYTHING I can bring to the table...He is NEVER wringing His hands and worried about anything... He is EVER BLESSING – EVER BLESSED.

He gets all the credit for my salvation... if I am in Christ, represented BY Christ and my neighbor is NOT IN Christ, not believing, not counted holy, NOT (at least yet) NOT a recipient of grace...IT IS SIMPLY NOT BECAUSE I DID SOMETHING, WANTED SOMETHING, willed or wisdomed my way in... IT IS ALL OF GRACE...all of God...

I only chose HIM because HE FIRST CHOSE ME... and I realize that raises HUGE PHILOSOPHICAL questions... like why didn't God choose everyone... but Paul did NOT get lost in those questions/speculations... HE LEFT WIDE BERTH for mystery (uses the word in v.9)... Paul doesn't get lost in theoretical argument... Paul got lost in WONDER LOVE AND PRAISE.

The introit fades into doxology...the very mention of grace and the ABSOLUTE GRACIOUSNESS of grace... the introductory comments turn into praise for Paul. He's left with his mouth open...and his pen goes WILD (202 words in one sentence!) and IF he has any question for God it's only, "Why ME, Lord?!"

The phrase that really captures his sentiment is found in v. 6, "to the praise of the glory of His grace which God freely bestowed on us in the Beloved."

This is a clue as to the meaning of everything... the Ever-Blessed God, eternally self-sufficient and in need of nothing...infinitely joyous...existing in Three Persons... the Father looks into His own infinitely beautiful image as reflected in the Beloved Son... and out of THAT ADMIRATION OF INFINITE BEAUTY, all things come into being... Blessed and Blessing!

And in order to demonstrate the beauty of His mercy and grace... God the Father puts my guilt on the Beloved... Jesus Christ absorbs and atones for what separated me from God...

I would be counted blameless and holy and adopted because the Beloved was marred and shamed and counted guilty IN MY PLACE...

The God who shot all His arrows of love at MY HEART...but they never pierced this heart of stone... that God of grace at last put Himself in the BOW... and in the Beloved Son shot Himself into this world and into our hearts...

If you get it...you'll say, "Why me, Lord?!" and you'll WONDER at grace...you'll want...little by little... more and more to be, in practice, what you've been declared and destined to BE... to BE like the Beloved.

It'll be your song...you'll delight to sing about it...even if you don't sing very well (maybe esp. if you don't sing very well) a JOYFUL noise...

That we should admire the grace of God and the God of grace...“to the praise of the glory of His grace” (vv. 6, 12, 14) - the revelation of God's darling attribute – this is the meaning of the Universe!

It's much more than interesting... it's enthralling... And when you get a sense of it...when grace becomes glorious and weighty to you... Then worries melt away...pain...temptation...even death they all become little (light and momentary as Paul would call them – 2 Cor 4.17) – life becomes doxology...a participation in the joy of God.

We need (esp. in light of present tensions and troubles) we have great need to soak in this ...to hear this News...this grace...to receive it... revel in it... to hear the beckoning Voice say, “Take and Eat”

The Communion

8.7.16

I'm jumping ahead to the end of the series when I say this...but the chapter is a kind of INVENTORY of all that is ours by FAITH...in and because of Christ... count your blessings... they are infinitely greater than you've imagined!

And the final section (vv. 15ff) will find Paul praying, “I pray that your eyes would be open to see just a fraction of what's yours...then everything else would be the small stuff!”

And that's really what we're doing now...coming to get an experience...more than just a sound of grace...but a taste... Here, God's grace becomes more tangible...touchable...tastable...

We are coming...facing our own neediness...we have “achieved low self-esteem” (as the bulletin quote says) and we are looking to grace.

We're putting all our confidence in the grace of God in Jesus Christ...we're looking for new grace... looking for an eye-opening...to experience in a new and deeper way, the deep, deep love of Jesus.

Vast, unmeasured, boundless, free – come with no excuses, no self-justifications, no works – put faith to work of Christ and rest in His deep, deep love.

I began to understand it under surprising circumstances. While working a few years ago on an essay about Alcoholics Anonymous, I attended some AA meetings around the country. There I met some desperate, and remarkably eloquent, people who found themselves in the grip of an addiction (Puritans would have called it a sin) from which they had sworn a thousand times to free themselves, but which they had never really escaped. One Saturday morning in a New York church basement I was listening to a crisply dressed young man whose every word and gesture gave the impression of grievously wounded pride. He talked at length about his faultlessness and his determination to avenge himself upon the many people who had traduced him. While he was speaking, the man sitting next to me – a black man of about forty, in dreadlocks and shades – leaned over and whispered, “I used to feel that way too, before I achieved low self-esteem.”

This was more than a good line. For me, it was the moment, I understood in a new way the religion I had claimed to know something about. As the speaker bombarded us with phrases like “taking control of my life,” “believing in myself”, “toughing it out,” the man beside me took refuge in the old Calvinist doctrine that pride is the enemy of hope. What he meant by his joke about self-esteem was that no one can save himself by dint of his own efforts. He thought the speaker was still lost – lost in himself, but without knowing it.

- Andrew Delbanco, *The Real American Dream: A Meditation on Hope* (Harvard University Press, 1999)