

We may have a problem. This is my third sermon on Ephesians, and in two weeks we have covered three verses. At this rate we'll be reading Ephesians in 2015. What's going on? It's a fair question. I would say this. I want you to read and reread Ephesians over the course of your life, and I want its truth to be clear in your mind, and I want that truth to shape the way you experience God and the Church and the world we live in. For you to get that comfortable with Ephesians, I am going at a leisurely pace in order to remove obstacles that might obscure its truth.

Why is that truth important? Because from the earliest days of Christianity down to the present day followers of Christ have seen the Bible as more than a human book. It is a human book, but the Church has seen the hand of God at work in this book; it is also a divine book. It is a unique revelation of God and His purpose for the Church and for the world for all time. I don't want you to miss it.

So, I try to remove obstacles, and I can't be hasty about that. Stay with me. Be patient. Don't miss a Sunday. I'll be sure you see the big picture, and we will stay focused on the truth of Ephesians.

## The Church

We saw last Sunday that Ephesians 1:3 makes a promise to the people of God. God **has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ**. We saw that **the heavenly realms**, a beautiful sounding name, are not a beautiful place. It's not heaven. It's more like the "Cosmic 'Hood." It is a dangerous realm of evil forces that make war on the Church and on all human flourishing. And these forces are not far away from us. They are right here, right now. They fragment. They betray. They kill. They are not all-powerful. They can be resisted, but they can't be eradicated – not yet and not by us! They are like a force of nature – like a tornado, hurricane, earthquake, wildfire, gravity, or genetic mutation. But nature, even when it destroys, does not destroy on purpose. **The spiritual forces of evil** destroy on purpose.

The promise to the people of God that opens Ephesians is that God has given us spiritual blessings that are designed to bless and not curse, to build up and not tear down, and they are more than a match for the **spiritual forces of evil** that threaten human life. It is only natural to ask, "What are these spiritual blessings? How do we take advantage of them?" The rest of Ephesians answers those questions. Let's get started in Ephesians 1:4.

I don't want to keep you in suspense. The first spiritual blessing is the Church. And you say, "You've got to be kidding!" I kid you not. And you say, "Really? Is the Church the best God could do to fight the evils of the world?" Wait a minute! What kind of question is that? Do you know what that question means? It means, "Are you the best God can do? Why would God waste His time on knuckleheads like you?"

That's crazy talk. Put yourself in God's place for a minute. If you were going to save the world from everything that had gone wrong with it, would you just bypass the people everything had gone wrong with? Who else in this world did God have to work with but knuckleheads like us? The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ got into this liaison with us with His eyes wide open. The truth of Ephesians begins with the commitment of God to His unlikely saints, His people, His Church.

But how do we know that the apostle was talking about the Church? We find the answer once again in the personal pronoun **us**. **He chose us. He predestined us.** We know from the last two Sundays that it refers back to verse one where the apostle called the Ephesian Christians **saints**. We now know that Paul used a loaded word. Any time you see the word **saints** in the Bible, it means the beautiful, maddening, global community that now claims two persons out of every seven on the planet.

### **The Church's Eternal Roots**

Okay! The apostle was talking about the Church. But how could he say that the Church is a spiritual blessing? Plenty of people say the Church is a failed experiment. It surely looks like that some time. I will never deny the Church's failures. I will always affirm that the Church is indispensable to the salvation of the world. I will rejoice that the forces of hell will not prevail against the Church. I will say that the Church is the most important community in the world. How can I say that? Listen to Ephesians.

Listen first to the language of verses 4-5. **He chose us before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will.** Just look at the accumulation of intentionality in these verses: **chose, before the creation of the world, predestined, in accordance with his pleasure and will.** The Church was not an afterthought. The Church was not the best God could do in a bad situation. It was His settled plan from before Day One to bring the Church into existence.

If you are tempted to dismiss the Church as a failed experiment, how do you square that pessimism with the accumulation of God's intentionality to make the Church a spiritual blessing that is more than a match for **the spiritual forces of evil** that threaten human life? Let us dispel the mesmerizing, secular enchantment that surrounds us like a fog. Let us wake up to who we are. Let us affirm that the Church is indispensable to the salvation of the world, because God determined it would be so **before the creation of the world.**

Listen next to the language of love in verse 5. **In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ.** The tenderness and intimacy of God with the Church are on display here. Verse five begins: **In love he predestined us.** How often do you hear love and predestination put together like that, especially in the fierce and futile debates we often have about election and predestination? Verse five goes on to say that God predestined us **to be adopted as his sons.** Can you not feel the tenderness of God in that act? The divine initiative before the creation of the world to create the Church was not a cold mandate being handed down by an indifferent, distant Magistrate. The language of love in verse five evokes the single greatest summary of the meaning of Christianity: **God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son that whosoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life.** (John 3:16)

From the creation of all things in Genesis to the new heaven and the new earth in Revelation the Bible tells a love story. The meaning of the whole story began to come clear with the appearance of Jesus Christ and the creation of the Church out of **every tribe and language and people and nation.** (Revelation 5:9) But what became clear to the sluggish soul of Man very slowly over time was a clear determination of love in the Father's heart **before the**

**creation of the world.**

If you are tempted to dismiss the Church as a failed experiment, how do you square that pessimism with the love of God for the Church? Let us dispel the mesmerizing, secular enchantment that surrounds us like a fog. Let us wake up to who we are. Let us rejoice that the forces of hell will not prevail against the Church, because the forces of hell are no match for the love of God.

Listen finally to the language of verse six: **to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.** The eternal accumulation of intentionality and the Father's love did not remain unexpressed. **The One he loves** brought eternity into time. The eternal purpose of God was for Christ to save the world. The eternal purpose of God was for Him to do that by His birth, life, death, resurrection, ascension, and Second Coming. And He did it.

If you are tempted to dismiss the Church as a failed experiment, how do you square that pessimism with Jesus Christ, who carried out the Father's purpose and embodied the Father's love in order to create the Church? Let us dispel the mesmerizing, secular enchantment that surrounds us like a fog. Let us wake up to who we are. Let us say that the Church is the most important community in the world, because God is invested in His Church.

**He foils the plans of the nations; he thwarts the purposes of the peoples. But the plans of the Lord stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generation.** (Psalm 33:10-11) **Therefore . . . stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.** (1 Corinthians 15:58)

**The Daring Vision of God**

I have so far tried only to root in the character of God the apostle's teaching that the Church is the first spiritual blessing that is designed to bless and not curse, and to build up and not tear down, and which is more than a match for the **powers of this dark world and the spiritual forces of evil**, which degrade and destroy. But there is something else here. We read it, and we can't believe our eyes. It shocks us. We dismiss it as an irresponsible use of language.

Verse four says: God **chose us**, (the Greek word Paul used actually says *elected us*.) God **predestined us**, says verse five. It's important to note what God chose us to do and what God predestined us to do.

Verse four: **He chose us before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.** He did not say, "He chose us to go to heaven." Verse five: **In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ.** He did not say, "He predestined us to be saved, much less to be damned." The word **predestined** is used in only one passage outside Ephesians, Romans 8:29-30: **Those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son.**

If you want to believe that before the creation of the world God made a list of people who are going to be saved and another list of those who are going to be damned, no one can stop you, but you never read that in the Bible. It's not there. The proper doctrine of election and predestination is not about the eternal fate of individuals. It is about the Church. God chose a

community of faith, the Church, to be His adopted sons and daughters, holy and blameless in his sight, and to become more like Jesus Christ.

That is just what we can't believe. That's what shocks us. That's what we dismiss as an irresponsible use of language, because that is precisely where the Church has failed to do. As I said before, I don't deny the Church's failures. I do deny that the failures tell the whole story. I wish you could see this as a daring vision of what God intends the Church to become, partially in this age and completely in the age to come.

If you can make room in your soul for that vision, it will set you as free as a bird in a treetop. The curious thing is that people who have been set free don't see it as a freedom to do anything they can get away with. *Au contraire!* Their freedom wakens in them a hunger and thirst they've never had before **to be holy and blameless in his sight**. As that hunger and thirst for righteousness grows in our souls, we discover we can resist the **powers of this dark world and the spiritual forces of evil**. We will grow strong to defeat the addictions, compulsions, and desire to please other people, which rob us of joy and demean us in our own eyes. Millions of Christians, many of them right here in this congregation, experience that; but they don't make the headlines.

### **Worship**

How do we respond to this first spiritual blessing? Verse six says that it leads us **to the praise of his glorious grace**. And words fail. Our effort to utter such praise will always be "a raid on the inarticulate with shabby equipment, always deteriorating." (Eliot, *East Coker*) It doesn't matter. The apostle has pointed us in the right direction, and our loving Father is pleased with his adopted child's effort to stammer the praise of his grateful heart.

The theme of our praise is His grace. The biblical meaning of grace is always God's favor freely given to the unsuspecting, undeserving sons of Adam and daughters of Eve. That would be us. I once heard a person complain that God was being egocentric to require the praise of mankind. The ironic thing was that the person who made the complaint was an actor. Who more than an actor appreciates the thunderous applause that crowns an evening at the theater? The really egocentric thing would be for the cast to disdain the applause. God is humble enough to receive our praise. Let us be humble enough to give it.

### **Take Aways**

Since Ephesians reveals that the Church is the apple of God's eye, let's make April "Read Ephesians Month." No matter what else you are reading, read or listen to Ephesians at least two times each week between now and May 5 and at least once between now and May 5 read or listen to Ephesians all the way through at one sitting. Reading Ephesians like that puts us all on the same page, it prepares you to hear my sermons on Ephesians, and it helps make the Bible an open book for you.

We added something to our reading last time. Each time we read Ephesians from now through May 5, let's use that time to praise God for all His blessings, material and especially His spiritual blessings in Christ. "Count your blessings; name them one by one, and it will surprise you what the Lord has done."