

C. S. Lewis wrote an article 70 years ago called “On the Reading of Old Books.” He said: “It is a good rule, after reading a new book, never to allow yourself another new one till you have read an old one in between.” (*God in the Dock*, 201-202) His main reason for saying that makes sense: “Every age has its own outlook. It is especially good at seeing certain truths and specially liable to make certain mistakes. We all, therefore, need the books that will correct the characteristic mistakes of our own period.” (ibid, 202)

Reading old books in our case does not mean going all the way back to 1995. Lewis would tell us to read G. K. Chesterton from 100 years ago. He would send us back to Jane Austen 200 years ago, and John Calvin 500 years ago and Lady Julian of Norwich 800 years ago. Given our regrettable reading habits, I am not optimistic about Lewis’s proposal, except in one instance where we can actually do something about it.

I propose we go back 2000 years and more to an old book and read it for all it’s worth. I mean the Bible. Copies are lying around churches, homes, and hotel nightstands, and the Bible has gone viral on smart-phones and tablets. Millions of English speaking people, who balk at picking up Jane Austen, John Calvin, or Athanasius (whoever he was), will with encouragement pick up a Bible and have a go at it.

Well, we are having a go at it together. We have been reading and trying to grasp the meaning of the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. I have been deliberate, not to say glacial, about it, because its vocabulary is new to many of you. It’s not hard; it’s just new, and getting used to it takes time. That vocabulary in turn enables us to grasp the apostle’s meaning. Here is a summary of his meaning through Ephesians 2:5.

The Argument Thus Far

God made the decision to create a community on earth He could call His people. He made that decision before He created the world, and love prompted Him to make it. Jesus Christ carried out His decision by emancipating His followers from guilt and lies and estrangement from God and constituting them as God’s chosen people, the Church. As a result, God began to unveil **the mystery of his will**, which is **to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ**. Those are some of our spiritual blessings in Christ, and they make the Church more than a match for the spiritual forces of evil that make war against the Church and against all human flourishing.

Paul knew his teaching baffled the Ephesians, who were new converts to Christianity. He also knew they needed help that only God could give. So, he prayed for them to know God better by knowing the hope God called them to, the riches of God’s people, the Church, and the power of God at work on behalf of the Church.

On behalf of the Church and of all creation **God placed all things under his feet** (under Christ’s feet). Christ rose from the dead and is authorized to exercise God’s power anywhere on earth in any way that His love and justice deem wise. And the Church is to embody the full meaning of Christ for human life.

Ephesians 1 is a magnificent summary of the meaning of Christ. But Paul didn’t stop there. If he had, the hardheaded realists in the congregation would accuse him of having his head in the clouds and being out of touch with reality. Ephesians 2 is as real as it gets. It opens with a watershed article of belief about human nature: **As for you, you were dead in your**

transgressions and sins. Dead is the crucial word. To be **separate from, excluded from, foreigners to, and without** God and His purpose is spiritual death. That is humanity's natural state.

God has to create His chosen people out of people who are **dead in transgressions and sins**. Love prompted Him to mount a costly rescue operation. Jesus carried out God's decision by His death on the cross.

In union with Christ, we are joined to the people of God in covenant with the living God, and we have an enduring hope. We are alive. We came to life when we believed in our hearts that God raised Jesus from the dead, said publicly, "Jesus is Lord," and were baptized into His name. The Bible calls the entire process – from God's decision before the world began to the death of Christ to the most recent baptism and forward to the New Jerusalem – salvation. Jesus Christ has saved us from spiritual death.

Tackling Tough Issues

That brings us to Ephesians 2:6-7. **And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.**

As you innocently read your way through the Bible and come to a passage like this that baffles you, you have three choices. All of them are honorable for devout Christians to make. Choice #1: Ignore the passage and move on to what you can understand. Life is too short to solve all mysteries, even all mysteries of the Bible. Choice #2: Ask someone for help. If you are wise, you will ask several someones for help. Extra eyes and ears may not solve the mystery for you, but they will likely keep you from doing something dumb. Choice #3: Ask help from our Christian ancestors. The Church has been reading Ephesians for centuries, and listening to that collective wisdom is both wise and rewarding.

This passage baffles us for two reasons. It is hard, and it is offensive. Verse 6 is hard to understand when it says: **God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ**. What on earth does that mean? Christ is there. I am here. How can I be seated with Him? Verse 7 is mildly offensive. It suggests the unthinkable: we are not the center of God's attention. The verse says God has something in mind in the coming ages for people and purposes we know nothing about.

Seated with Christ

Well, let's tackle first what we don't understand. Verse 6: **God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ**. I will offer you an interpretation of this difficult verse, and I'm going to start by taking my own advice from last Sunday. When faced with a hard passage, good Bible study asks first if Paul helps us know what he meant from what we read in the surrounding verses.

He does, starting with verse 6, where he mentioned something we have talked about before: **the heavenly realms**. It's easy to think Paul meant heaven. He didn't. **The heavenly realms** are where the conflict between good and evil take place. How do we know that? Look at Ephesians 6:12. **Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers,**

against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. There's our phrase, and it doesn't sound like heaven. It describes a realm where evil forces operate that pose real danger to us right here, right now. They fragment. They betray. They kill. **The heavenly realms** are where the conflict between good and evil take place.

Oh! Listen! I have to say one more thing about this conflict, or we are going to exit this passage and miss what is important like a teenager cleaning his bedroom. Is any human drama more fundamental than the conflict between good and evil? The source of evil is powers we can't see. The apostle calls those powers **rulers, authorities, powers of this dark world, and spiritual forces of evil.** It is the nature of evil to corrupt all things human. We see it in addiction, violence, poverty, and abortion. But evil tries also to corrupt institutions: government, media, the Church, education, and marriage.

I hear people talk about overcoming cruelty, violence, and poverty as if it were just a matter of having enough money, brains, and manpower. That's naïve. They don't know the nature of evil. It can crush your idealism like a bug. Paul did not elaborate on evil as I have done; it was not his purpose. I had to do it. Otherwise, we would read verse 6 with no more interest that we read the list of ingredients in a loaf of bread.

The relentless pressure of evil makes us sit up and take notice of something else the apostle told us about **the heavenly realms** in Ephesians 1:19b-21. **That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms** (there's our phrase again), **far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.**

This passage places Christ right in the thick of the conflict between good and evil. Not only is He in the thick of it, verse 21 says He is **far above all rule and authority, power and dominion** that make war against the Church and against all human flourishing. Jesus Christ is supreme over the spiritual forces of evil.

The crucifixion of Jesus bears witness to the power of evil. It also bears witness to the power of the love of God to save us from evil and defeat it. But it is His power and His love and we in union with Christ, not our money, brains, and manpower!

Back at last to Ephesians 2:6: **God . . . seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ.** And I still want to say, "Paul, my teacher, my brother, what did you have in mind? I know you said that when Christ was seated at God's right hand, it means that He is supreme over the spiritual forces of evil. But does being seated with Christ mean that the Church is supreme over the spiritual forces of evil? Or does it mean that the Church has decisive help in the conflict between good and evil, because we belong to the one who is supreme over the spiritual forces of evil."

That's an interpretation we can live with. Look! You may disagree with me, and that's okay. We will still be fast friends. But I'm going to the party with that interpretation. We the Church have decisive help in the conflict between good and evil, because we belong to the one who is authorized to exercise God's power anywhere on earth in any way that His love and justice deem wise. When we come to Ephesians 6, you will see how the help we enjoy prepares you **to take your stand against the devil's schemes . . . and after you have done**

everything, to stand. (Ephesians 6:11, 13)

The Coming Ages

I have spent a lot of time on something Paul merely mentioned in passing. He and we will come back to this spiritual conflict throughout chapters 4-6 and especially in Ephesians 6, but his real interest in Ephesians 2:6-7 was God's purpose, which he talked about in verse 7: **in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.**

This verse has in mind a grand purpose that gives each generation of the Church a part to play in the salvation of the world. God's purpose includes us and transcends us. Verse 7 suggests that transcendent meaning, when it says **in the coming ages.**

It means the coming ages of earth. God acted decisively in Christ, and what He did in Christ was not confined to first century Palestine. He demonstrates **the incomparable riches** of what He did in Christ in every age. Paul lived in the age of the Caesars. The Church would live in the Dark Ages, the Middle Ages, the Age of Reason, the Revolutionary Age, etc. In all these ages God demonstrates **the incomparable riches** of what He did in Christ, and He will demonstrate them in every age until **the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever.** (Revelation 12:15) In order not to bloat this sermon with needless rhetoric, let me give you one example of how this happens.

The 20th century ushered the world into a new age. Trench warfare, genocide, the bombing of civilian populations, even with atomic bombs, Auschwitz, the Gulag, and much more reached a climax with the Second World War. Two mainstream scholars, John Dillenberger and Claude Welch published a book in 1954 called *Protestant Christianity*. They made this remarkable statement: The Second World War "revealed the Christian church to be the only actual world community." (295)

While secular governments were killing people off by the tens of millions, the power that raised Christ from the dead was quietly at work uniting people across national and ethnic lines through their faith in Jesus Christ and adherence to the Church. God demonstrated again **the incomparable riches** of what He accomplished in Christ.

Take Aways

Let's take three courses of action in response to what we have heard. First, let's take the prayer of Ephesians 1:15-20, and for one more week put it in your own words or use it like it is, and then pray it several times a week. Pray for yourself, your family, for BVBC, and for the whole beautiful, maddening, Church that is spread throughout the wide world.

Second, ask yourself, "How would I treat BVBC, if I loved it the way Christ loves the Church? What could I do to help BVBC mirror Christ better?"

Third, you might want to take time to read or listen to Ephesians 6:10-20 this week. It will give you more context for understanding the conflict between good and evil that Ephesians has in mind, and it will prepare you for your participation in that conflict.