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## THE SPIRITUAL BLESSINGS OF THE EPISTLE TO THE EPHESIANS

THE Epistle to the Ephesians seems to have been a circular letter, intended not only for the local Church at Ephesus, but also for a number of other Churches which had already come into existence in the populous province of Proconsular Asia. During Paul's stay in Ephesus the Gospel had spread throughout the province, "so that all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks" (Acts xix. 10). When Paul told his readers in his Epistle to the Colossians that they should also read "the epistle from Laodicea" (Col. iv. 16), he was doubtless referring to the Ephesian letter, which would be going around from church to church throughout the province, and would reach Laodicea, only a few miles away, about the time the Colossians received their own letter.

This wider destination of the Epistle accounts for the general character of its theme. It concerns the whole Church of Christ and not any particular section of it. It has in view all Christians everywhere without reference to their local or temporal circumstances. Of all the New Testament epistles its tone is the most exalted and its outlook the most sublime. Coleridge's reference to it in his *Table Talk* as "one of the divinest compositions of man" marks the peculiar quality of its atmosphere. It deals with heavenly things and breathes a heavenly air.

### I

The Apostle strikes his key note in the third verse, and he begins his message like a psalm of praise: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ." Having thus begun with an ascription of praise to God for the spiritual blessings of the Church, he cannot stop. From that point to the end of the fourteenth verse he sweeps on in one continuous and sustained sentence. The King James version puts periods at the end of verses 6 and 12, where pauses occur in the thought; but in the Greek there are no such full stops and the Revisers have removed them. Through phrase after

phrase and clause after clause, Paul goes on describing these blessings, till his inspired and illumined thought has traced the whole movement of God's redeeming grace from its origin in the Divine mind to its final consummation. He begins in the eternal past with God's choice of us in Christ "before the foundation of the world", and he ends in the eternal future with "the redemption of God's own possession". Between these two eternities stretches a series of spiritual blessings in one unbroken chain.

These blessings are described as being "in the heavenly places in Christ". What does Paul mean by "the heavenly places" or "the heavenlies" (*τὰ ἐπουράνια*)? It is a peculiar expression, used four other times in the course of this epistle (i. 20, ii. 6, iii. 10, vi. 12), and nowhere else in all the New Testament. It cannot mean heaven as a future state of being, for in Paul's mind it refers to a present as well as an eternal existence. It may be defined simply as "the unseen world". It is the realm that lies outside of time and space, the super-sensible world. It is the sphere of ultimate reality as over against this present world of man's abode which is but the sphere of relativity.

When Paul wrote he was in Rome, a prisoner in chains (Eph. iii. 1, vi. 20). All around him, where his bodily presence was, the world of the Roman Empire was manifestly present in visible, tangible reality. But the Apostle's whole mind was occupied with a far more real world than that. It was the world which the Damascus vision had opened up before him, the world which the New Testament saints had learned to behold beyond the temporal world around them. "We look not at the things which are seen," he had written in an earlier letter, "but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal" (2 Cor. iv. 18).

To Paul the unseen world is centred in the Lord Jesus Christ. The heavenly places are the home of the crucified and risen Saviour (i. 20). Into that world He withdrew when He disappeared from the eyes of His disciples on the Mount of Olives. There He has been enthroned, and from His exalted Person in the heavenly places flows "every spiritual blessing". He is the source of all the power that operates in the whole Christian system. By His Holy Spirit the virtue of His own

life is poured throughout the whole body of the Church, filling every member of it with His own fulness (i. 23).

And every virtue we possess,  
And every conquest won,  
And every thought of holiness,  
Are His alone.

The unseen world is represented as the sphere of the Church's life. We too, the Apostle goes on to say, are seated with Christ in the heavenly places (ii. 6). It is the realm into which the Gospel has brought us, and to it we now really belong. "They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world," said Jesus in praying for His disciples when about to leave them (John xvii. 16). "Our citizenship is in heaven," wrote Paul to his converts in Philippi (Phil. iii. 20). Christian life is not ordinary human life lived on a higher moral plane than that of other men; it is a transcendent life lived in a higher world. Christian virtue is of an entirely different quality from ordinary human goodness. It springs from roots that go back behind the moral law into the spiritual and heavenly world "where Christ is, seated on the right hand of God" (Col. iii. 1).

The unseen world is occupied by other spiritual beings as well. Paul refers in another passage of the Epistle (iii. 10) to "the principalities and the powers in the heavenly places", who from these heights look down upon the Church on earth and learn of the manifold wisdom of God by seeing how His redeeming grace is able to save a lost and ruined race. These are the ordered ranks of the angelic hosts of God, the

"progeny of light,  
Thrones, dominations, principedoms, virtues, powers."

But in that world there are also principalities and powers of a very different kind. In a still later passage (vi. 12) the Apostle speaks of "the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places". These are the real foes of the Church, against whose marshalled mass and subtle attacks she must continually carry on her spiritual warfare.

Thus the unseen world is not only the sphere of our Christian life; it is also the arena of our Christian conflict. It is of supreme importance, therefore, that we should be sure of our position there and understand the nature of the spiritual endowments we possess there. Paul's Ephesian message is needed by

the Church in the conflict of to-day as much as in any other age of her history.

## II

The passage in which Paul sums up the spiritual blessings of the Church (i. 3-14) moves through three progressive stages. These stages are marked by the recurrence of similar phrases: "to the praise of the glory of his grace" in verse 6, and "unto the praise of his glory" in verses 12 and 14. The Apostle evidently has in mind the three Persons of the Godhead, for each stage seems to relate the process of salvation to a separate Person of the Trinity. In the first stage (verses 3-6) we see reflected the Father's purpose of love; in the second stage (verses 7-12) the Son's work of grace; and in the third stage (verses 13, 14) the Spirit's ministry of fellowship. In each of the three stages two special blessings are either explicitly described or simply indicated. There are thus six spiritual blessings in the chain.

1. *Election*: "Even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world." Paul goes back for the beginnings of redeeming grace beyond the first chapter of Genesis. Redemption is not an afterthought on God's part, a piece of patchwork in the universe. It is rooted in His eternal purpose. He had us in His mind before He made the world, and our salvation was provided for before the first movements of His creative activity began. Creation and redemption are parts of one system. The Creator of the world is also the Redeemer of men. The Word by Whom "all things were made" (John i. 3) is also "the Lamb that hath been slain from the foundation of the world" (Rev. xiii. 8). The bliss which the redeemed are to inherit, and for which they have been chosen, is a Kingdom prepared for them "from the foundation of the world" (Matt. xxv. 34).

Although our election was part of the original purpose of the sovereign God, Who foreordained us, as Paul goes on to add, "according to the good pleasure of his will" (verse 5), yet it is not represented as an arbitrary act of choice on God's part. "He chose us in him," says the Apostle. Christ is the supreme and all-inclusive object of the Divine choice. God's purpose of electing grace moves within the sphere of the redeemed race, of which Christ is the Head. And thus that purpose, which had its beginning in eternity "before the foundation of the world",

has its manifestation in time in the proclamation of the Gospel of Christ to all mankind ; for it is the purpose of Him Who is "not wishing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter iii. 9).

2. *Adoption* : "Having foreordained us unto adoption as sons through Jesus Christ unto himself." Those who are the objects of the Divine election were chosen out from the human race for high position and great privilege. Provision was made for their adoption into the Divine fellowship as sons of God. Paul resorts here to a peculiar practice in Roman law in order to illustrate the change made in a life by spiritual regeneration. By the law of adoption a mature man who had grown up in one family might be taken over into another family and become as fully a member of it as if he had been born and grown up in it. It was thus that Trajan came to wear the imperial purple, having been adopted by the aged Emperor Nerva, who desired a capable man to succeed him on the throne. Paul as a Roman citizen was familiar with this custom and knew that his Gentile readers would understand it. Through this metaphor he explained to them the spiritual blessing of the new birth.

Adoption, however, is not a mere figure of speech, for sonship is a genuine reality. The believer is born again, born from above by the Spirit of God, and thus adopted into the family of God. "As many as received him", writes the Apostle John, "to them gave he the right to become children of God, even to them that believe on his name" (John i. 12). It is "through Jesus Christ", the only begotten Son, that men become sons of God. It is "in the Beloved" that we are accepted into the Divine fellowship. Men are not sons of God by nature ; they become sons by adoption. Adoption is exclusive as well as inclusive. By it all mankind falls into two separate groups, two entirely distinct orders of existence, those who belong to the human family and are children of men alone, and those who share the Divine life, and have become children of God.

Sonship involves not only sharing the Divine life ; it carries with it the promise of sharing the Divine glory. "Beloved", writes John again (1 John iii. 2), "now are we children of God," even now in the midst of this present earthly existence, "and it is not yet made manifest what we shall be". The deep and radical difference between the two classes of mankind does not

yet appear. The profound significance of a life which has its springs in the unseen cannot yet be shown in this world. But the time is coming when the veil shall be drawn aside. "We know that, if he shall be manifested, we shall be like him ; for we shall see him even as he is." In their hope of the Lord's appearing the early Christians were looking into the unseen world of the heavenly places. The event to which they looked forward as the consummation of their salvation would be such a manifestation from that world as would be "the revealing of the sons of God" (Rom. viii. 19).

These two spiritual blessings have their seat in the silent thought of God the Father. They are timeless in their nature. They are aspects of His eternal purpose of love towards the world. They are manifested in time, however, on the field of human history, "to the praise of the glory of his grace", in the gift of His own Son. And thus the Apostle passes on to the blessings that are specially related to the Second Person of the Trinity.

3. *Reconciliation* : "In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses." This brings us to the one pivotal event upon which the whole movement of spiritual blessing turns. Those whom God chose and adopted must be redeemed and reconciled to Him. Redemption has been accomplished "through his blood". The Cross is the one point in the course of Christ's life on earth at which Paul links the chain of spiritual blessings that stretches between the eternities. Man's salvation is anchored, not at Bethlehem, but at Calvary. The Son of God came into the world not merely to reveal the Father through the incarnation, but especially to accomplish a great transaction through the atonement. His purpose in coming, as He Himself declared, was "to give his life a ransom for many" (Matt. xx. 28, Mark x. 45).

The death of Christ was not a martyrdom : it was a voluntary sacrifice in the absolute sense of the term. The Gospel records forbid the impression that Jesus was caught in a rising tide of opposition and helplessly carried along to the Cross. On the contrary we behold Him moving towards it with calm and deliberate intent. It was the "hour" towards which He set His face from the very beginning of His ministry. Paul's phrase here, "through his blood", marks the achievement of a great purpose accomplished by the Lord Jesus Christ, which he describes

elsewhere as making peace "through the blood of his cross" (Col. i. 20).

The Cross is both an historic event and an eternal fact. In its mysterious depths there is something which, although it perpetually baffles the human intellect, continually draws the human heart. By His voluntary sacrifice there the Lord Jesus Christ did something which removes God's resentment against man's sin and reconciles man to God. On the ground of what happened there God can pardon human sin. Because of what happened there we have "the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace".

And that forgiveness is not the mere ignoring of our trespasses, but their complete removal from the face of God. Christ's appearance on the stage of human history was "to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself" (Heb. ix. 26). Such is the eternal efficacy of that sacrifice, such the influence of the Cross over all time, antecedent as well as subsequent to the event, that even in the Old Testament days the Lord God could make such declarations as these to His people: "I, even I, am He that blotteth out thy transgressions for mine own sake; and I will not remember thy sins"; "I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, thy transgressions, and, as a cloud, thy sins: return unto me; for I have redeemed thee" (Isa. xliii. 25, xlv. 22).

4. *Illumination*: "Having made known unto us the mystery of His will . . . to sum up all things in Christ." It is through the Lord Jesus Christ that God's purpose for the world has been revealed. The Divine secret which lay behind the creation of the world has been brought to light by the presence of Jesus Christ in the world. The movement of the Divine will, which came out of the eternal past and has been manifested in the course of time upon the stage of human history, is to reach a consummation in what Paul calls "a dispensation of the fulness of the times". The redemptive purpose of the sovereign God is to have a triumphant issue ultimately. The sin and the sorrow of all the ages are to come to an end, and are to be eliminated from the moral universe. The heavens and the earth are to be brought into one harmonious system under the Lord Jesus Christ. There will be "new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness" (2 Peter iii. 13).

When Paul speaks of God's purpose "to sum up all things in Christ, the things in the heaven, and the things upon the

earth", he is not thinking of universal salvation. His first readers would not so misunderstand his meaning, for the Gospel which he carried out into the Gentile world was proclaimed against a dark background. It involved the announcement of a Divine judgment awaiting the human race. In Athens, the fountain head of speculative thought, Paul declared that God "hath appointed a day, in which he will judge the world in righteousness by the man whom he hath ordained" (Acts xvii. 31). To the Romans, in the very heart of the world's proudest empire, he gave a warning of "the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God" (Rom. ii. 5). The early Church understood the nature of salvation too well to be allured with the idea that the "restoration of all things", of which the Apostles occasionally spoke (Acts iii. 21), held out some kind of hope to those who rejected the mercy of God offered them in the Gospel.

What Paul meant by the phrase he used was that the whole operation of God's purpose through the ages had one ideal in view, the glorifying of Christ as the Head of all things in the universe, both in heaven and on earth. This was "the mystery of his will", the secret which the creation of the universe did not reveal; it had now been made clear in the revelation of redemption through Christ Jesus. This sublime thought seems to have been occupying the Apostle's mind at this time, for it is found in all the epistles of the Roman imprisonment. To the Colossians he writes: "It was the good pleasure of the Father that in him should all the fulness dwell" (Col. i. 19). The Son of God was to have the pre-eminence in all things, both as the Creator and as the Redeemer, both as "the firstborn of all creation" and as "the head of the body, the church". To the Philippians Paul declares that the purpose of Christ's exaltation was, "that in the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven and things on earth and things under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. ii. 10, 11).

Having reached this point in the unfolding of his thought, the Apostle picks up again the chain of spiritual blessings he has been tracing, and goes on to show how we are related to the final consummation. In Christ we have a share in that Divine event. We have been allotted a portion in the inheritance to be realized at that time. This comes to pass through our trust in Christ.

In the case of his Gentile readers, he proceeds to explain, it was brought about when they heard the word of truth, the gospel of their salvation, and believed it. This leads him to refer to the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of those who accept the Gospel, and he brings his lengthened account of the spiritual blessings in the heavenly places to an end with two blessings which are specially related to the Third Person of the Trinity. They are only briefly indicated and not described.

5. *Assurance of Salvation* : “Ye were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise.” The gracious gifts and powers of the Comforter, promised in the upper room, and poured out upon the Day of Pentecost, are the true evidences of salvation. The Holy Spirit is Christ’s one special gift to His Church. The work of the Spirit in the believer’s life is the hall-mark of Christianity. “If any man hath not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his” (Rom. viii. 9).

6. *Foretaste of Glory* : “Which is an earnest of our inheritance.” The sealing of the Spirit which we receive when we believe is only a partial gift ; it is limited by our present capacity. It is a pledge, however, of what awaits us in the future. The conscious sense of sonship which the presence of the Holy Spirit produces in the heart of the believer, is the earnest, or partial realization, of a far larger and richer sonship to be entered upon in the coming consummation of all things. The Church waits for that event. So does the creation too, for “the creation itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the liberty of the glory of the children of God” (Rom. viii. 21). Thus do creation and redemption blend in the one eternal purpose of God.

When we look back over this list of spiritual blessings, as Paul has described them, we find that every link in the chain is forged in Jesus Christ. It begins with our being chosen in Him and ends with our being sealed in Him. In the whole passage the phrase which means “in Christ” is used in one form or another no fewer than ten times. These blessings, then, are not separate and individual endowments bestowed upon the Christian ; they are but different aspects and manifestations of the one great gift of God which is Jesus Christ Himself. Paul had indicated this at the beginning in the way he announced them, as spiritual blessings “in the heavenly places in Christ”. Let the Christian Church or the Christian believer be fully occupied

with the Lord Jesus Christ, then every spiritual blessing will follow as a matter of course. It is thus that F. W. H. Myers has interpreted the spirit of Paul himself :

Christ ! I am Christ's ! and let the name suffice you,  
Ay, for me too He greatly hath sufficed ;  
Lo with no winning words I would entice you,  
Paul has no honour and no friend but Christ.

Yea, thro' life, death, thro' sorrow and thro' sinning  
He shall suffice me, for He hath sufficed :  
Christ is the end, for Christ was the beginning,  
Christ the beginning, for the end is Christ.

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