

The 7th Sunday after Pentecost
July 11, 2021
Proper 10

The Lessons: Amos 7:7-15
 Psalm 85:8-13
 Ephesians 1:3-14
 Mark 6:14-29

The Hymns: # 904 *Blessed Jesus, at Your Word*
 # 686 *Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing*
 # 537 *Beautiful Savior*

The Collect: O Lord, You granted Your prophets strength to resist the temptations of the devil and courage to proclaim repentance. Give us pure hearts and minds to follow Your Son faithfully even into suffering and death; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Sermon:
 Ephesians 1:3-14
 Blessings in Christ

“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...”

Dear Friends in Christ,

Beginning today our Epistle readings for the next several Sundays are being taken from St. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. I think this gives us an excellent opportunity to explore this wonderful Epistle through a series of sermons based on the letter to the Ephesians. A good way to help prepare yourselves for these sermons would be to read and re-read the book of Ephesians at home over the coming weeks.

The ancient city of Ephesus was an important trading center near the coast of the Mediterranean Sea in Asia Minor – today, the country of Turkey. On his third missionary journey, St. Paul established a congregation of believers and lived among them for 3 years – working as a tent maker. About 5 years later, around the year 60 AD, he wrote the letter to the Ephesians to affirm the unity they have in Christ Jesus.

In today’s sermon we look at the Epistle lesson under the theme: “Blessings in Christ”. You might want to refer to the printed text in today’s bulletin as we look at the great blessings we have because of Jesus Christ.

I. In Christ

Our epistle is full of Good News as St. Paul bombards you with the proclamation of God's blessings for you. And as you work through this text from Ephesians 1, I would suggest that it is good to note two things. First note how many different times you hear of God working to save you; second, note how this work of salvation is always connected to Jesus over and over again.

Paul begins by declaring that God the Father has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. Every spiritual blessing is yours, and it is yours for Jesus' sake. God the Father is holding nothing back. Our text does not say that Jesus has won your entrance into heaven for you, but after that heavenly blessings are all based on your daily work and effort. No, they're all yours—every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places is yours in Jesus Christ.

That's because God the Father has chosen us in Christ before the foundation of the world. The Incarnation of Jesus was not an impulsive decision where the Lord looked upon the earth one day and said, "Salvation by works isn't going very well, so let's try something different." No, He has chosen you in Christ before the foundation of the world: it has been His plan from eternity to pour out on you every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places for Jesus' sake. This has another significant piece of good news for you: as the Father's choice has been **FROM** eternity, so it is **FOR** eternity. In other words, there will not be a day where God the Father says, "I'm done choosing you now. Yesterday I would have forgiven you and made you holy and blameless, but now, because you keep messing up, you've dropped off My list and I'm moving on."

NO! In love, God **has predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ.** For Jesus' sake you are part of His family: for Jesus' sake, He has gathered you in. Whether you're male or female, you have the standing of "sonship" in His family, because the sons are the heirs and you're an heir of His kingdom. This is His will, that He might be gracious to you for Jesus' sake. In Christ, **we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of trespasses according to the riches of His grace.** You are redeemed and adopted into God's family because Jesus Christ has shed His blood for you. The Passover Lamb, shed His blood so that the Lord passes over your sins and spares your life. He will be in the grave for three days. But then He will rise again. Why? So that you might have **redemption through His blood.** So that you might have the **forgiveness of your trespasses, according to the riches of His grace.**

The Lord has **lavished this upon us in all wisdom and insight, making known to us the mystery of His will, according to His purpose, which He set forth...in Christ.** Looking at the world throughout history, with all of its violence and bloodshed, it's difficult to discern what sort of God is there and what exactly He's up to; and apart from the Gospel, it's little wonder that non-Christians come up with all sorts of strange ideas about God as they try to read His mind from the world around them.

But His will and purpose is no mystery to you, because your faith beholds your Savior on the cross. That is God's will and purpose, to deliver you from sin by the death and resurrection of His Son. There's a lot of things you cannot know, but because of Jesus Christ you know this: **God predestined you before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before Him,** all for the sake of Jesus Christ. And this holiness and blamelessness is not something that YOU accomplish, not some work that YOU achieve, but is a holiness and blamelessness that has been placed upon you because of Jesus.

Furthermore, the Lord has **sealed you with the promised Holy Spirit**, guaranteeing that this inheritance is yours. How has He sealed you? By the Word of truth, the Gospel of your salvation, which gave you faith to believe. Why has the Lord **sealed you with the Holy Spirit, guaranteeing your inheritance**? Because Christ has died for you. All of this is yours “in Him.”

That sure explains a lot about our worship, doesn't it? If God does all of this for us in Christ, then our worship is going to be about Christ. Gathered by the Holy Spirit, we come to where Jesus promises to be. We gather to hear His Word, where He continues to seal us and give us forgiveness and all of those spiritual blessings, even as He sealed us with the Holy Spirit in Holy Baptism. We gather at His table for His Supper; for as He is present there with His body and blood, He lavishes grace upon us. And where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.

2. Blessings beyond Reason

So our text from Ephesians 1 is full of Good News, one glad announcement of salvation after another. It's all about the blessings that God pours out upon you, lavishes on you, in Christ.

However, wherever there is such Good News to be heard, you can bet that sinners will find a way of messing it up. And indeed, the pure Gospel set forth in this chapter has been obscured by sinners in a couple big ways for a simple reason: **the blessings God gives are beyond reason.**

They're illogical. They're so rich and free that they don't make sense, and even Christians often fall into the trap of believing that the Gospel has to make sense. Thus, we turn our attention to the two great errors which obscure these blessings beyond reason, which we could also subtitle, “How Christians unwittingly mess up the Gospel.”

The first error gets the fancy title of “double predestination,” and it goes like this: “Since the Bible says that God has predestined believers in Christ to go to heaven, He has also predestined unbelievers to go to hell.” In other words, human reason says: “before the foundation of the world, God chose some to be saved and some to be condemned. If you're one of those chosen to go to heaven, then Jesus died for you. If you're one of those chosen to go to hell, then Jesus didn't die for you.”

How does this error come about? Because Christians try to make the Gospel make sense according to human logic. See, we normally think that a choice involves two options. You can choose to do one thing or you can choose to do another. As a commercial for some product put it a while back, “one choice is no choice at all.” It makes sense. And if that makes sense, then this makes sense, too: if God chooses believers to be saved, then it only makes sense that He chooses unbelievers to be condemned. If a choice always has two options, then God must make both decisions. Seems logical enough.

But what does this reasoning do to the Gospel? What does it do to all of these blessings that God lavishes upon you? If you can't be 100% sure that God has chosen you, then you can't be sure that these tremendous blessings are really for you. You might just be fooling yourself, thinking that you're chosen for heaven; after all, you know better than everyone the miserable sins that are still going on inside of you. (Would those chosen by God really have some of the wicked thoughts floating in their minds that are floating in yours?) What does this reasoning do to Christ? It takes the focus off of Him

and puts it on the Father's sovereignty. In other words, a believer is saved because God chose him to be saved and used Jesus to get the transaction done. An unbeliever is lost—not because he doesn't believe in Jesus, but because God chose him to be lost. That's what this error does: it takes the focus off of the cross and says that all of God's blessings are yours—if you're chosen to be blessed.

In response to this error, we rejoice to declare that God's blessings are beyond our human reason. We don't make God submit to our logic, but we must submit to God's logic. The Bible never says that God chooses people to be condemned. In fact, it says just the opposite: Ezekiel 18 declares that God does not take pleasure in the death of anyone, and 1 Timothy 2:4 declares that God desires all to be saved; furthermore, 2 Corinthians 5 proclaims that Christ has died for all. God doesn't choose people to be condemned: He offers salvation to all through Christ. Those who reject Jesus are lost because they reject God, not because God rejects them.

Therefore, you can rejoice: you don't have to wonder if God has really chosen you to be saved or if Christ has died also for you. Instead, you have the certain hope that you are chosen from before the foundation of the world to have eternal life because Christ has died for you.

The other big error is the opposite ditch from double-predestination: it takes all of salvation out of God's hands and puts it all into man's. It's called semi-Pelagianism or Arminianism, and it goes like this: if man can choose to reject God, then man can also choose to believe in God. It only makes sense, because "one choice is no choice at all". If man can choose one, then he must be able to choose the other.

What does this do to the Good News of Ephesians 1—what does it do to Jesus and the blessings God lavishes upon you for Jesus' sake? As far as Jesus goes, it robs Him of glory: it says that He did His part to save you, and that you do your part to save yourself by choosing to believe in Him. It takes the focus off of Him, and puts it on your decision, your commitment, your dedication. As far as the blessings go, it makes them uncertain again: they're yours, if you really believe in Jesus enough. If you've truly chosen Him and made a decision for Him, then salvation and all those blessings are yours. But if your decision wasn't sincere enough—if you're only fooling yourself, then you're lost. You can't be sure if you're truly committed: after all, as Jeremiah 17:9 says, your heart is deceitful above all things. And what about those times when you really mess up and sin—what does that say about your sincere devotion? You can't be sure.

In response to this error, we rejoice to declare God's blessings beyond reason and do not force Him to submit His will to our human logic. The Bible never says that we can choose to follow God: instead, Ephesians 2 and Romans 5 make it quite clear that you were born dead in sin. By definition, dead men cannot do anything to make themselves alive. But Christ has died for you. He has redeemed you by His blood, forgiven your trespasses and lavished His grace upon you. He has done all the work necessary to save you—and there is no doubt about His commitment, His sincerity or His faithfulness to you.

You're like Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead in John 11. Four days in the tomb, Lazarus couldn't decide to be alive again. He was dead. Jesus came and spoke His life-giving Word, "Lazarus, come forth." He made Lazarus alive, and Lazarus had nothing to do with the process. Now, if Lazarus had decided later to reject Jesus' gift of life and kill himself, that would be his choice—not the Lord

condemning him. That is how salvation works: God makes us alive in Christ. That is His doing, not ours. If we reject it and are lost, that is our doing, not His.

These blessings beyond reason may not fit our requirements of logic, but they are faithful to the Word. And faithful to the Word, they keep the focus on Christ. Faithful to the Word, they proclaim that God's blessings are certain in Christ for you.

That's your joy today: from the foundation of the world, God's purpose was that His Son would come and redeem you by His blood, so that He might seal you with His Spirit and lavish His grace upon you today. There is no doubt that these blessings are beyond reason: for Christ's sake, most certainly, you are forgiven for all of your sins. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.