

FACING REALITY

Ephesians 1:1-14

Paul writes this letter from prison (3:1; 4:1; 6:20) to the church in Ephesus, an important, and wealthy, Roman port in the Aegean Sea in modern-day Turkey. Ephesus was a centre of worship of the goddess Diana (Artemis) and was the home of her temple, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world (see Acts 18:19ff). It was also a centre of learning. There is no clear indication of which prison experience Paul is referring to so it is not possible to put an accurate date on when this letter was written, nor is does there seem to be a specific reason for writing. It covers a number of issues and may be thought of as a general letter of instruction and encouragement.

It starts as many letters of the classic Roman world did, with the writer's name, the intended recipient and a brief salutation or prayer (1f). From here Paul goes straight to a song of praise (3-14). He starts out with a simple declaration of praise (3), giving thanks to God for the blessings he has given us, but this is like a springboard, giving Paul a push into an outpouring of praise, as one thing leads to another.

First, we are told that God has blessed us for a purpose, to be holy and blameless (4). This, in turn, leads to a further outpouring (4-6) as Paul touches on God's saving and mysterious grace. Second, we are told about our salvation, about how it is achieved (7a) and why (7b). Third, we are told that God has made known his plan of salvation – and it is bigger than most people even begin to imagine, no less than to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ (10).

Paul then makes two further points. This great plan of universal redemption is not just an ultimate aim that will materialise out of nowhere. It starts with individuals, with Paul, with the Ephesians, with those who put their hope in Christ (12). Finally, it is more than a future hope, it is a present reality (13f). All of this is placed within a simple framework – that God, his glory and grace, may be praised (6, 12, 14).

This opening song of praise is full of Christian vocabulary, perhaps unfamiliar to many. Heavenly realms, spiritual blessings, holy, predestined, redemption, blood, mystery, and even glory are words and ideas not commonly shared. Many of these words we will return to as we work through this letter but it is worth remembering that we speak a different language to the rest of the world. Even when we use the same words they do not always mean the same thing. Sin and forgiveness are two common examples. When we share Paul's sentiments with our not-yet-Christian friends we will need to do some simultaneous translation. Perhaps you might do some homework and write out these verses in words an unchurched friend might use and understand.

So how might this song shape our lives? These verses do not contain any commands to obey. There is no example to follow, other than the good example of praise. However, what these verses do is confront us with reality. Not, to be sure, the reality the world in general imagines, but reality as God has ordained it – and it is a very different world from the one we often see around us.

First of all there is the reality of being in Christ (3, 4, 7, 9, 11, 12, 13). When we become Christians we get a new address. We now live 'in Christ'. We are accustomed to thinking of Jesus living in us. We often talk about conversion as inviting Jesus into our hearts, but while not forgetting these images have value they do not tell the whole, or even greater part, of the story. The reality is that when we follow Jesus we are called to be in him. This is an important distinction. If Jesus is in me he is no bigger than me, he is defined by what I am and you can learn no more about Jesus than you can from looking at me and the way I live. But if I am in Christ then he is more than me, indeed he is greater than all of us put together.

The reality of being in Christ also has practical implications. If I am in Christ then he is my natural environment. As I live and grow in him it should become more difficult for me to think, "I know I live in Christ, but I'm going to do the opposite of what Christ expects."

Also, the reality of being in Christ is much more than simply accepting certain things to be true. Being a Christian is being in Christ, and when we are in him all other allegiances, desires, plans, ambitions and

intentions must remain outside. As Jesus himself said, “If a house is divided against itself how can it stand?” (Luke 11:17)

Another reality that these verses points to is the reality of God at work. As Paul sets down his thoughts in these words there is no sign of contingency, no hint that God in merely doing his utmost to make the best of a bad job. Paul uses hard words like predestined, pleasure, will, fulfilment, guarantee. There is no ambiguity here. God is in control and his ultimate victory is secure. This is far removed from the ‘reality’ the world would have us accept, where all things are random and outside anyone’s control.

However, we must be careful here. We live in a world where good and bad things happen to both good and bad people alike. These verses do not tell us that God makes everything happen. In just a few more verses Paul refers to ‘the ruler of the kingdom of the air’ (2:2), a force that works against God. God does not cause everything to happen. He may allow bad things but he does not manipulate events to that they happen. The background here is not the God who makes everything happen but rather the one who is bringing unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ (10).

A third reality Paul calls us to face is the reality of being blessed. Here is a word for today. Our society (and, yes, there is such a thing) is often telling us we are of little or no value, unless we conform to their patterns of behaviour, or that we can only think of ourselves as ‘blessed’ (although they probably wouldn’t use that particular word) if we have certain possessions or a certain life-style. Paul is not talking about such things – this is not a health and wealth prosperity theology. One of the curious things about this particular letter is that it is a general letter (the only one Paul wrote). It is not addressed to any individuals or to any specific circumstances. There is reason to suppose that the church in the city of Ephesus was not the only recipient of this letter and it was intended to be circulated much wider. Paul had no idea if the people he was writing to were happy, healthy or wealthy, but he did know they were blessed.

God’s blessing does not depend on or reflect outward circumstances. The reality is that if we are in Christ we are blessed. This, as far as this part of Paul’s letter is concerned, has two ramifications. Firstly, we are valued. The cost of God’s bless, bought with blood and suffering (7), shows that God not only values us, but prizes us. Never forget, God thinks you are worth it.

Secondly, we have a purpose. We are not random events placed here by chance, we are here because God has a plan for us. That plan is that we should be 'holy and blameless' (4). Again, we need to be careful reading these words. They are not a declaration of sinless perfection which we know we do not experience and must therefore be failures of some sort. Nor are they a demand to do better, to try harder. Rather, they are a statement of God's intentions for us. This is what he wants for his children, that they should be the very best that they can be. The surprising thing is that God believes we can be holy and blameless. If God believes in me that much how am I going to respond?

When faced with this reality of being in Christ, that God is at work and that I am blessed, valued and have a purpose, how am I to respond? The answer to this, at least as far as these verses are concerned is found in the whole passage. It is worship. Above all these verses are a song of praise. Never far from the surface and often breaking through and stepping into the spotlight is Paul's sense of wonder at all God is and has done. Worship is remembering who God is and what he has done. It grows out of that sense of being 'in Christ'.

It has been pointed out that the church today has forgotten how to worship. The old forms of worship don't fit and the new forms don't convince. How can we share in Paul's spontaneous outpouring of worship? By sharing in Paul's experience of God. I'm not saying we need to repeat Paul's experience, we are not Paul, but unless we enter into life in Christ, keep our eyes open and see God at work, and know ourselves to be "blessed in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing" (3) we will not, cannot, worship, no matter what plans, programmes or procedures we put in place.

There is much more I would like to say about this passage, but I'll leave it here. Next time we'll pick up where we are leaving off, with Ephesians 1:15-23.

Amen

Kevin Dare

Beeston Baptist Church

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