

GOD'S WEALTHY CHURCH

Ephesians 1:1–14

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Paul's letter to the Ephesians. I called the message today "God's Wealthy Church," because this letter speaks to us of the riches we have in Christ Jesus.

If you were to visit Ephesus today, you would find a dead city. But the letter lives. The whole Book of Ephesians has been called—by someone else—"The wealth, the walk, and the warfare of the Christian." That's a good subdivision for the book, because in the first three chapters, Paul is speaking to us about our wealth in Christ. In chapters 4 and 5, and 6:1–9, he speaks to us of our walk in the Lord. Then he closes the letter, verses 10–24 of chapter 6, speaking of our warfare.

We really need to understand our wealth before we talk about our walk and our warfare, for if we try to live the Christian life or fight the Christian battle without appreciating, first of all, what we really are in Christ, our walk and our warfare won't go very well. The enemy's strategy is to spoil us of our wealth so that we live poorly rather than richly. His strategy is to decoy us in our walk, so we don't keep the line of God's righteousness. His strategy is to defeat us in our warfare, so that we're ineffective.

This book tells us how to live in God's wealth, to walk in the Lord's steps, and to fight as the Lord would have us. These verses before us, today, indicate to us that we're called to be a wealthy church. Not wealthy, necessarily, in the sense of finances. But when we are wealthy, we have something to give away. And Paul envisions that individual Christians and the church are to be wealthy in love, wealthy in the grace of God, wealthy in forgiveness, wealthy in healing, wealthy in compassion, wealthy in serving. Wealthy in God.

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Paul begins with a few brief words of introduction, then quickly passes beyond them. “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Ephesians 1:1-2, NIV).

Once he has said these elemental words of greeting, he plunges—in verses 3–14—into an introduction. In these eleven verses, he is caught up in a hymn of praise to God. We read them in our New International Version as belonging to two paragraphs. There are many sentences in the English. But actually in the Greek, in which Paul writes, these twelve verses are one sentence.

One unending sentence of nouns and pronouns, verbs and adjectives and adverbs...two hundred and three words all together in one sentence.

I defy you English majors to diagram a sentence like that. It's as though Paul, in these words, is stepping from the beach of earth into the trackless ocean of God's grace. You can no more diagram this sentence than you can fathom God. Paul, lost in the wonder of praise and glory to God, is out on the ocean of God's greatness. There are times, I think, in our lives when it's appropriate for us to become so caught up with the person of God that we really get lost in a torrent of words and praise to Him.

This whole sentence of praise to God actually has three divisions to it. You can note the divisions by watching how Paul comes to a familiar refrain, as he catches his breath and plunges into the next phrase.

In verse 6, he says, “to the praise of his glorious grace”; in verse 12, he says, “for the praise of his glory”; and in verse 14, he says again, “to the praise of his glory” (NIV). Each of these statements—“to the praise of his glory”—winds up one of the facets of wealth in God that Paul is speaking of concerning our wealth in Christ. Then he speaks of our presence of our wealth in Christ and finally he speaks of our future, of our wealth in Christ.

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What does he says about our past? Verses 3–6 say, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

For he chose us in him 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—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves” (NIV).

Paul had these things to say about the past, about wealth in Christ. He says, first of all, in verse 3, that you and I already have every blessing that God can give, because we are in Christ. Notice that the verb is in the past tense. God *has* blessed us. Not “*is* blessing us,” not “*shall* bless us,” but “has blessed us.” And the key to that blessing is that we are in Christ.

When you become a Christian, you are placed into Christ. Just as a fish lives in the ocean, and just as a plant has its roots in the soil, so you are placed in Christ and God sees us as being in Christ. And since you and I are in Christ, we have already received every spiritual blessing.

That’s a theological truth. You may say, “I haven’t experienced that yet. There’s some blessings I want from God that I have not yet encountered.” God has withheld nothing from Christ. And, therefore, since you are in Christ, you have received all that He has received. And if you have not yet received the fruit of all the blessings, know that, because you are in Christ, the seed of the blessing is already there. And your life is not just a matter of this moment, it is on a continuum of time, and before it is all said and done, you will have come to the full experiential realization of this tremendous truth that Paul speaks of. We have received every blessing in Christ.

Another thing that Paul says here is that the past of our wealth in Christ is that God chose us. In fact, God chose us before the creation of the world. Some people really get hung up on the words

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“God chose” or “God elected” or “God predestined.” And, in fact, theologians in the church—as you know—have been divided on this matter for a number of centuries.

I'd like to share with you what God's election doesn't mean, and then look more positively on what it does mean.

The election of God does not mean that God choose you and not someone else. That's what theologians have gone astray in saying, “God has chosen some people for salvation and others for damnation.” Scriptures only speak of His choice for salvation. And what did He choose us for? He chose us to be holy or to be separate, to be blameless, to be adopted sons.

Election also does not mean that God's free will to choose violates your free will to decide.

Somehow, those two truths go hand in hand. We may not be able, with our limited human intelligence, to reconcile those matters. God is free and we are free. I like, best of all, what D. L. Moody said about election, “The ‘whosoever will's’ are the elect and the ‘whosoever won'ts’ are the non-elect.” The Lord voted for my salvation, the devil voted for my damnation, and I voted with the Lord and we got a majority.

What does “election” mean on the positive side? What does God's choice mean in terms of a personal application for your life and mine? It means that the Lord has never varied in His feeling towards you or towards me. He is not as up and down in His relationship with you and me as we are with Him.

Aren't there moments in your life when you feel closer to the Lord? There aren't moments with God when He necessarily feels closer to you, because His attitude toward you is always one of constant, steady love. You are not a momentary person, after all. God has had a feeling of love toward you, before you ever came into existence, before the creation. This is a view of God and His permanency toward us.

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I don't know how you feel about this, but I suspect, somewhat like me. I love this area of the world. If I had the choice of anywhere I wanted to live, it would not be in some meadow in Oregon, it'd be right here, in Southern California. I like to take a look at the hills. The development that man has put on those hills is rather recent. The hills have an older origin. But sometimes when I look at those hills and that development, I think of the hymn, "Before the hills in order stood or earth received her frame...before that ever happened, God was planning to save me." God had already thought of me. God had already loved me. His ancient love toward me is older than the hills and mountains. God has a purpose and a plan for you and me that is older than the ocean, older than the sky, older than the cosmos. He had been planning to save us. Someone has said that Ephesians 1 is Paul's Genesis which reads, "In the beginning was the election of grace, while yet the world was not, and the immensity of space stretched landless and unpeopled as we were in the mind of God." We have the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world.

The love of God is ancient. It involves no impulsive feeling. The strength of His love for us is measured by His permanency, by the difficulties that He surmounts for our sake. We need to know, again and again, that God is not varied in His feeling toward us. That He isn't voting for our salvation one day, and changing His mind, and voting against it the next day.

Another thing that election means is that, because we were elected, we were chosen to be like Christ. It's not a Russian roulette kind of election that has no meaning or purpose to it. But the meaning and purpose of election tells me that since I have believed in the Lord it is my destiny to become like Jesus Christ. And another thing that election means is that God loves you and He loves me.

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We are adopted. Paul is writing at a time when Rome governed the world and adoption had a special legal significance in that day. When you adopted under Roman law, all legal rights of your old family were lost. All rights in the new family were gained. That's the same way when we're adopted into God's family. All the old legal rights are gone. All new legal rights have come. You become an adopted person and heir to the father's estate. And best of all, the old life and the old debts are all canceled out.

Wouldn't it be kind of neat, when a person comes to the Lord, to issue an adoption form? A certificate, which you hang up somewhere, which says something like this, "I hereby declare that I have chosen [and then fill in your name] with the resources of heaven and earth at My command, I promise to love you, protect you, provide for you, plan for you, hear you, claim you, correct you, honor you as My son or daughter." Signed "God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit."

That's what adoption is all about.

We've not only been adopted, but we have been given grace freely. "Freely bestowed," Paul says. God has given His grace freely in the one He loves. Jesus, in fact, prays in John 17:23 to the Father, "That the world may know that You have sent Me and have loved them even as You have loved me."

I was reading that one day, and it struck me with fresh poignancy. Somehow, I never thought of God loving me that intensely. I have no doubt at all that God the Father loved the Son. But Jesus prays that we, as His disciples, will know this same love of the Father toward us as He himself experienced of the love of the Father toward Him. That's the past of our wealth in Christ.

But what about the present?

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Verses 7–12 speak of it, “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding. And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ. In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory” (Ephesians 1:7–12, NIV). What is our present wealth in the Lord?

I. The first is that we have redemption through His blood.

The Old Testament had a device called the “Year of Jubilee.” Every fiftieth year, all the debts that you’d run into, the mortgages you had on your property, would suddenly be wiped out and a whole new beginning was arrived at. Isn’t that wonderful? I’d like to declare a Year of Jubilee! The Old Testament provided for a redemption of land in the Year of Jubilee; it passed from the present owner back to the original owner. The Lord has declared a Year of Jubilee, a perpetual Year of Jubilee, for the lives of His people, in that He has allowed the title of our life, which passed through the hands of another, to now pass back to Him.

II. We not only have redemption through His blood, we’ve been bought back. But we have the forgiveness of sins.

And it’s not a paltry forgiveness. It’s not a skimpy forgiveness. It is forgiveness according to the richness of His grace.

Coming back from vacation, I took the kids by a little town I lived in for nine months, Bristow, Oklahoma, about forty miles west of Tulsa. In that little church, I received my call to the

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ministry at about the age of ten or eleven, and I was also converted in that town. So it had a lot of special memories, and the kids had never seen it. It's interesting how you look at a town when you're a kid and how you look at it now. I remember that the wealthiest man in town lived about a block down from our house. He had a big two-story, red brick house. It was the biggest thing I'd ever seen. When I went back a couple weeks ago, it wasn't all that much.

Trick or Treat night came and we kids thought we'd make a good cleaning—he was the wealthiest man in town. We knocked on the door and the maid came out. Her first words to me were, "Have you been here before?" It almost frightened me. I sort of jumped back. I wasn't really welcome there. I said very timidly, "No, I haven't," and I stuck out my paper sack. She went back and found a little piece of gum and put it in my sack. I went away feeling contempt toward that house. He had all the money in the world. He was a millionaire—he could have given me at least a nickel. That has helped me be more generous when kids come around Trick or Treating.

But God treats us better than saying to us, "Have you been here before?" when we show up, having committed a sin, asking for forgiveness. He doesn't snap at us as though He wasn't going to give us forgiveness. Forgiveness is according to the riches of His grace.

Not only do we have that present wealth, but another wealth is that we know God's will for the ages. That's a distinction from all of those who do not know Christ and don't really know what's going to happen in the age to come. We already know His will for the ages. And what is that will? That the Father has a plan to unite all things in Christ. That plan is the law of His house. And, in the fullness of times, God is going to bring everything together in Christ. He's going to take the tension caused by the fall out of nature. The lion is going to lay down with the lamb. Man is going to be at peace within himself and within his family. Man is going to be at union

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with the angels and with God. The temple of creation is broken and dilapidated by the fall. Sin has marred the beauty of that temple and ran it to its foundation. But the office of Christ as the head of the church is to reorganize the ruins and to bring them to a whole glorious new form. We know. We simple, ordinary people know what God's will for the ages really is.

What's the future of our wealth in Christ? Verses 13–14 speak of this, “And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory” (NIV). Our wealth in Christ is first, that we are to receive an inheritance. Someone has said “all this, and heaven too.” Not only our past wealth, not only our present wealth, Luther said, “He who has Christ, has all things. He who has not Christ, has nothing.”

III. Paul further says that the future of our wealth in Christ is that the guarantee of that future inheritance has already been given.

We have the deposit of the Spirit. Or the seal of the Spirit. He uses a real estate term here which, nowadays, for putting down a deposit, is to go into escrow. Paul uses the same kind of terminology in respect to our future inheritance. God has put His Spirit within us as a deposit, our whole life is in a transaction which began when we surrendered our life to Christ, and will culminate in our standing before God's throne, and the transaction is sure from beginning to end because of the deposit that God has placed. Not only a deposit, but a seal as well.

In A.D. 29 or thereabouts, God's Son issued a pardon and He issued an inheritance signed with the ink of His own blood. He proceeded to give us a share in the kingdom of God. And that share is better than anything. The share that we own is backed by the resources of God, and its value is increasing everyday, and its value will not diminish through all eternity. We have wealth in God.

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When we seek to talk about living the Christian life, we must never simply begin with a set of regulations. We must begin by reflecting on what God has already done for us.

Closing Prayer

Our Father, on this beautiful Sunday morning, we give You praise that we have been in Your heart and mind for eternity past. And we'll be in Your heart and mind, and in Your presence, into eternity. Your love is somehow something greater than we can even get a hold of and understand. There are persons in this fellowship today who have known the shortcomings of human love. Who, for one moment in their life, felt the strength and the power of another human being loving them, and then were stunned and astounded in their own human experience to find that love did not have permanency to it. And it became something far different than love.

Knowing what it is like for love to fail, we especially appreciate a love that never fails and never gives up, that always believes, always hopes, always endures. It believes in us, trusts us, and calls us to become. Surely, Lord, there are those here today who are in doubt of their own personal experience, they're wondering whether or not You love them or continue to love them in spite of their failures. Let Your Word come today, as healing oil, upon the wounds of our lives, that we may know again, of certainty from Your Word, how much You care, how much we are in Your plan, how very graced we are by You. We ask this, Lord Jesus, in Your name. Amen.