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EPHESIANS: The Calling Of The Saints

by Ray C. Stedman

The Epistle to the Ephesians is, in many ways, the crowning glory of the New Testament. But perhaps this letter ought not to be called "Ephesians" for we do not really know to whom it was written. The Christians at Ephesus were certainly among the recipients of this letter, but undoubtedly there were others. In many of the original Greek manuscripts there is a blank where the King James translation has the words *at Ephesus*; just a line where the names of other recipients were apparently to be filled in. That is why the Revised Standard Version does not say, "To the saints at Ephesus," but simply "To the saints who are also faithful in Christ Jesus..."

In Paul's letter to the Colossians there is a reference to a letter he wrote to the Laodiceans. Our Bible does not include an epistle called "A Letter to the Laodiceans," but many have felt that it is the same one we call "The Letter to the Ephesians." The reason is that the Revelation of John (the last book in the Bible) begins with letters to the seven churches of Asia, the first being to Ephesus and the last to Laodicea.

These cities were grouped in a rather rough circle in Asia Minor, and it evidently was customary for anyone who wrote to one of the churches to have the letter sent along to each of the others in turn, continuing around the circle until it came at last to the church at Laodicea. This may account for what would otherwise seem to be a lost letter from the Apostle Paul to the Laodiceans. At any rate, this letter sets forth, in a marvelous way, what no other book of the New Testament describes so

completely – the nature of the body of Christ, the true Church.

The first four letters of the New Testament – Romans, First and Second Corinthians, and Galatians – are the development of the phrase, "Christ in you," teaching us what the indwelling life of Christ is intended to do. But beginning with the letter to the church at Ephesus, we are to learn and understand what it means for us to be "in Christ" and to share the body life of the Lord Jesus Christ – "you in Christ." Here is the great theme of this letter – the believer in Christ, or the nature of the Church.

Verse 3 of the first chapter is in many ways the theme of the letter – in Christ – is the key:

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, {Eph 1:3 RSV}

There are many who take the phrase, "the heavenly places," which appears several times in this letter, as a reference to heaven after we die, but if you do this, you will miss the whole import of Paul's letter. While it does talk about going to heaven some day, it is talking primarily about the life you live right now. The heavenly places are not off in some distant reach of space or on some planet or star; they are simply the realm of invisible reality in which the Christian lives now, in contact with God, and in the conflict with the devil in which we are all daily engaged.

The heavenly places are the seat of Christ's power and glory. In Chapter 2, Verse 6 we are told,

[God] raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, {Eph 2:6 RSV}

But in Chapter 3 we learn that here also are the headquarters of the principalities and powers of evil:

... that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places. {Eph 3:10 RSV}

The conflict that occurs is set forth in Chapter 6:

For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. {Eph 6:10-12 RSV}

So you can see that this is not a reference to heaven at all, but to earth. It is to the invisible realm of earth – not to that which you can see, hear, taste, or feel – but to that spiritual kingdom which surrounds us on all sides and which constantly influences and affects us, whether for good or evil, depending upon our willful choice and our relationship to these invisible powers. Those are the heavenly places. In this realm, in which everyone of us lives, the apostle declares that God has already blessed us with every spiritual blessing; i.e., he has given us all that it takes to live in our present circumstances and relationships. Peter says the same thing in his second letter: “His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness,” {2 Pet 1:3a RSV}.

That means that when you receive Jesus Christ as your Lord, you have already received all that God ever intends to give you. Is that not remarkable? The weakest believer holds in his hands all that is ever possessed by the mightiest saint of God. We already have everything, because we have Christ, and in him is every spiritual blessing and all that pertains to life and godliness. Thus we have what it takes to live life as God intended. Any failure, therefore, is not because we are lacking any-

thing, but because we have not appropriated what is already ours.

This, of course, eliminates any foundation for the notion of a “second blessing,” or a third, or a fourth. It is all here, now! There will be blessing after blessing as you take them, one by one, moment by moment. That is the import of the hymn, “Jesus, I am resting, resting” – every moment receiving from him all that he is – resting in his power, resting in his life.

The apostle develops the theme of this epistle for us with six wonderful figures of speech, by which we learn that the Church is the whole body of Christ. But I find that when you approach the subject from that angle, it is difficult for people to grasp the significance of the truth in this letter. We all have the tendency to think of ourselves as somewhat remote from the Church. Every now and then someone comes to me and says, “The Church ought to do so-and-so.” I reply, “Well, you are the Church; go to it.” The fact that they are the Church seems to strike them with a degree of amazement. Someone said to me not long ago, “The Church ought to be more friendly.” I said, “All right, you and I are the Church, let's be more friendly.”

The Church is people. Every believer is a member of the body of Christ – the Church – so I would prefer to go through this letter using not the word “church,” but “Christian,” because every believer is a small replica of the whole Church. If we understand that God lives within the Church we see that he also lives within each believer. Each one of us, as a believer in Jesus Christ, is a microcosm of the whole body. We can, therefore, go through this whole epistle relating what Paul says not to the Church, but to each one of us, as individual believers.

In the first figure, the apostle refers to the Church as **a body**:

... and he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. {Eph 1:22-23 RSV}

The first chapter is entirely devoted to the wonder and amazement that we normal, ordinary, sin-possessed human beings should be called by

God in a most amazing way – reaching back even to before the foundation of the earth – to become members of that body. It is a tremendous declaration. The Apostle Paul never got over his amazement that he – bowlegged, baldheaded, despised by many, regarded with contempt in many circles – was nevertheless a member of the body of Jesus Christ, and was called of God before the foundation of the earth and given such tremendous blessings that he was equipped for everything that life could demand of him. That is what it means to belong to the body of Christ.

Now what is the purpose of the body? It is to be “the fulness of him who fills all in all” {Eph 1:23b RSV}. In other words, it is the expression of the head. That is what your body is for. It is intended to express and perform the desires of the head. The only time that a healthy human body does not do that is when some secondary nervous center is artificially stimulated.

You know, for instance, that if you hit your knee in the right place with a hammer, your leg will kick up in the air without your even willing it. Even if you choose not to kick, it will still react. I sometimes wonder if some of the activity of the Church can be ascribed to a sort of reflex movement – the body acting on its own without direction from the head.

At any rate, the function of the body is to express “the fulness of him who fills all in all.” What a mighty phrase that is! Do you ever think of yourself that way? Do you ever dare think of yourself the way God thinks of you – as a body to be wholly filled and flooded with God himself?

Next, Paul refers to the Church as **a temple**:

... in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. {Eph 2:21-22 RSV}

Here is a holy temple. One of the greatest things taking place in the world today is the growth of this building that God has been erecting through the ages. When all the worthless products of human endeavor have crumbled into dust; when all the institutions and organizations that we have built have long been forgotten, the temple which God is erecting will be the central focus of attention

through all eternity. That is what the passage implies. Furthermore, he is building it now, using human building-blocks; shaping them, edging them, sandpapering them, preparing them just as he desires, putting human beings into this temple where he wants them. Why? What is his purpose for you, and his purpose for the whole temple? It is as Paul says – to be the home of God, the dwelling place of God. That envisions and includes everything which we understand by the word home.

When my family and I come back from a long trip, as soon as we get home, we take off our coats, stretch out, and make ourselves at home. We all say how great it is to be home. But what is it about our home that makes us feel that way? Isn't it that at home we can relax and be ourselves? That does not mean that when we are away from home we are something other than ourselves, but we are always somewhat restrained. While at home, we can be all that we want to be – just relaxed and ourselves. That is what God is building the Church for – to be the place where he can be what he wants to be in you, fully relaxed and all that he is, in you. That is why he is calling you and building you.

The third chapter introduces the third figure. Here we learn that the Church is **a mystery**, a sacred secret:

To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make all men see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; [Here is the mystery:] that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places. {Eph 3:8-10 RSV}

There are wonderful intimations here – that God has had some secret plans at work through the centuries which he has never unfolded to anybody. But he has had a goal and a purpose in mind that he intends to fulfill, and the instrument by which he is doing it is the Church. This is something we can never fully grasp, but it involves the education of the whole universe. Paul is saying that through the Church the manifold wisdom of God – the multitudinous aspects and facets of God's wisdom – will now be made known to all the principalities and powers that inhabit the heavenly places, the invi-

ble realm of reality anywhere and everywhere, in all ages. The education of the universe is the purpose of the mystery.

In Chapter 4, now, the apostle uses still another figure:

... and put on the new nature [the King James Version says, “the new man”] **created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.** {Eph 4:24 RSV}

The Church is a **new man** because every Christian in it is a new man. This is linked with Paul’s word in Second Corinthians:

Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old had passed away, behold, the new has come. {2 Cor 5:17 RSV}

The present creation, which began at the beginning of the heavens and the earth, has long since grown old and is passing away. The world with all its wealth and its wisdom belongs to that which is passing. But gradually through the centuries God has been building up a new generation, a new race of beings, a new kind of man which the world has never seen before – better even than Adam. In Romans we learn that all we lost in Adam we have gained back in Christ and more, much more! {See Rom 5:15-17 RSV}. Here is revealed a race of beings of which the world has never before dreamed.

Also in Romans the Apostle Paul says that the whole creation is standing on tiptoe (that is the literal meaning), craning its neck to see the manifestation of the sons of God, the day of the unveiling of this new creation (Rom 8:19). But remember, this new creation is being made right now, and you are invited to put on this new man, moment by moment, day by day, in order that you might meet the pressures and problems of life in the world today.

That is why the Church is here. The Church is a new man, and the purpose of the new man is to exercise a new ministry. In this same chapter of Ephesians, we read,

But grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift. {Eph 4:7 RSV}

This new man in each of us has been given a gift that we never had before we became a Christian. Our job, our reason for existence – the reason Jesus Christ put us here on earth and leaves us here – is that we might discover and exercise that gift. I do not know of anything more important than this. The reason why the Church has flagged and faltered, failed and lost, is that Christians have lost this great truth which each one receives directly from the Lord. That includes us all, from the youngest to oldest, who know Jesus Christ. The risen Lord has given a gift to you, just as the man in the parable gave the talents to each of his servants, entrusting them with his property until his return. And when he comes back, his judgment will be based on what you did with the gift he gave to you. That is the exercise of the new man.

Chapter 5 introduces still a different figure for the Church; we learn here that the Church is a **bride**:

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. {Eph 5:25-27 RSV}

And then quotes the words of God in Genesis:

“For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one.” This is a great mystery, and I take it to mean Christ and the church. {Eph 5:31-32 RSV}

The Church is a bride. And it is to be a bride for the enjoyment of the bridegroom. Paul says Christ’s intention in preparing the Church as a bride is that he might present it to himself. Isn’t that what every bridegroom desires – that his bride shall be his? During their early days of courtship she may go out with some other fellows, but when they are engaged she is promised to be his and they are both waiting for the day when that can be realized. Then at last the day comes when they stand before the marriage altar and promise to love and honor and cherish one another until death shall part them. They then become each other’s – she his and

he hers – for the enjoyment of each other throughout their lifetime together. Now that is a picture both of the Church and the Christian.

The Christian is to be the bride of Christ, for the Lord's enjoyment. Do you ever think of yourself that way? That concept helped revolutionize my own devotional life when it dawned upon me that the Lord Jesus was looking forward to our time together, and that if I missed it, he was disappointed. I realized that not only was I receiving from him, but that he was receiving from me, and that he longed and yearned for me. When I met with the Lord after that it was with a new sense that he loved me and delighted in our time of fellowship.

The last picture of the Church in this epistle is as **a soldier**:

Therefore take the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. {Eph 6:13 RSV}

What is the purpose of a soldier? It is to fight battles, and that is what God is doing in us now. He has given us the great privilege of being the battlefield upon which his great victories are won.

That is the essence of the story of Job. This dear man was struck without warning by a series of tragedies. All in one day he lost his possessions one by one. Finally he lost his entire family, except his wife. He didn't understand what was happening, but God had chosen Job to be the battlefield of a conflict with Satan. God allowed Satan to go to the utmost limit in afflicting Job's physical body. In addition, his mind was troubled; he could not understand what was happening. But when the battle was over God greatly blessed Job, and has used him mightily to teach the people of God in all ages that trials and difficulties are not always for the sufferer alone, but are a means by which God wins mighty victories against the unseen powers. We are called to be soldiers who have learned how to fight.

In his first letter John writes to his young Christian friends,

I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one. {1 Jn 2:14 RSV}

That is, you have learned how to fight – how to move out, how to throw off the confusing restraints of the world, how not to be conformed to the age in which you live – and to move against the tide, against the current, thus greatly glorifying God.

I love the story of Daniel who, as a teenager, was a prisoner in a foreign land. He was exposed to a pagan environment and had to fight the battle day by day, counting time after time upon God's faithfulness to keep him when everything was against him. The pressures brought to bear upon him were almost incredible. But again and again Daniel and his friends met the tests and won the battles and carried on. Toward the close of the book Daniel was sent a visitor, the angel Michael, who told him some tremendous things. Daniel was allowed to see down the stream of time well beyond our own day. Yet when the angel first appeared to him, Daniel was greatly troubled. He fell upon his face, his knees shook, and he was fearful and afraid of his holy visitor. But the angel said to him, "O Daniel, man greatly beloved ..." {Dan 10:11b RSV}, "Fear not," {Dan 10:12b RSV}. Why was he beloved? Because he was a faithful soldier.

This is the privilege to which God is calling us in this day of world unrest and distress. God is calling us to be soldiers, to walk in the steps of those who have won the battle before us, having been faithful unto death if necessary.

This is the privilege of those who are called and equipped with every spiritual blessing, so that there might be

- a body,
- a temple,
- a mystery,
- a new man,
- a bride, and
- a soldier

for Jesus Christ. That is quite a calling!

The exhortation, then, of this letter is contained in just one verse, in which Paul says,

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, [writing this letter from prison] beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ... {Eph 4:1 RSV}

EPHESIANS: The Calling of the Saints

Do not lose sight of what God is doing. The world cannot see it. It has no idea what is taking place. But you know, and you can see it, so do not lose heart.

Prayer:

Thank you, our Father, for this reminder, from the pen of your faithful apostle, of the character of the world in which we live,

and the nature of the battle which we fight, and the glory of the calling which we have. We ask that you will make us faithful – faithful to the end, faithful unto death if need be. And may all the pressures be met by the answering power of the Lord Jesus himself, the Son of God, who dwells within us and makes his home in our hearts. What a precious fellowship this is. In Christ's name, Amen.

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